

# VARIA EURASIATICA

FESTSCHRIFT FÜR PROFESSOR  
ANDRÁS RÓNA-TAS



SZEGED

1991

# The End of Volga Bulgarian<sup>1</sup>

by

U. SCHAMILOGLU (Madison)

The history of the Volga Bulgarian language is just one of the many branches of Altaic studies to which András Róna-Tas has made significant contributions. In this essay to honor Prof. Róna-Tas, I would like to offer some thoughts on the final chapter in the history of Volga Bulgarian, namely the end of Volga Bulgarian as a written language.

Volga Bulgarian is known as a written language solely on the basis of numerous Arabic-script funerary inscriptions found at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers.<sup>2</sup> While Arabic-script inscriptions on coins minted in the Volga region go back as far as the 10th century C.E., the earliest funerary inscriptions in Volga Bulgarian date only from the 13th century.<sup>3</sup> In the city of Bulġar itself, the earliest tombstone dates from 1271, while the last ones date from 1356.<sup>4</sup> Volga Bulgarian was not, however, the only language in which such inscriptions were written in the Volga region from the mid-13th to the mid-14th centuries: in addition to Volga Bulgarian (a language whose closest modern relative is Chuvash)<sup>5</sup> there are also funerary inscriptions in a

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), which awarded me a fellowship to study under Professor Róna-Tas and his students in the Department of Altaistics at the József Attila Tudományegyetem in Szeged, Hungary during the fall semester 1982. I would also like to acknowledge that many of the ideas in this paper came about through discussions with F.S. Xakimzjanov in Istanbul and Ankara (September 1988) and through our personal communications.

<sup>2</sup> On these inscriptions see Róna-Tas, A. and Fodor, S. (1973). *Epigraphica Bulgarica*. Studia Uralo—Altaica 1. Szeged; and Hakimzjanov, F. S. (1978). *Jazyk ěpitařij Volġskih Bulgar*. Moskva. On the history of Volga Bulgaria see most recently Fahrutdinov, R. G. (1984). *Očerki po istorii Volġskoj Bulgarii*. Moskva.

<sup>3</sup> See Róna-Tas and Fodor 1973, 38—40, on the dating of Arabic-script inscriptions in this area. See also Muhamadiev, A. G. (1983). *Bulgaro—tatraskaja monetnaja sistema XII—XV vv.* Moskva, 22—40, for further information on Volga Bulgarian coinage, which was written in the Arabic language.

<sup>4</sup> Muhametšin, D. G. and Hakimzjanov, F. S. (1987). *Ēpigrافیčeskie pamjatniki goroda Bulgara*. Kazan, 120.

<sup>5</sup> Róna-Tas and Fodor 1973, 38—40; and Hakimzjanov 1978, 5—24. On the relationship between Volga Bulgarian and Chuvash see also Róna-Tas A. (1978). *Bevezetés*

Standard Turkic dialect which may be considered an ancestor of modern Kazan Tatar.<sup>6</sup>

During the final two years for which there are inscriptions in Volga Bulgarian, 1357 and 1358, there is an unusually large number of tombstones erected written in both Volga Bulgarian and in Standard Turkic. The total of six tombstones in 1357 alone is higher than that for any previous one year, with an additional two tombstones dated 1358.<sup>7</sup> There are no further funerary inscriptions nor other datable written monuments of the Volga Bulgarian language after this date. The few Turkic funerary inscriptions found in the Middle Volga region after 1357—1358 are written in Standard Turkic.<sup>8</sup> Although I have yet to examine in closer detail the subsequent history of funerary inscriptions in this region, it seems that there is a general decline in the variety and number of tombstones in this area over the next few centuries.<sup>9</sup>

One interpretation that has been offered is that the sudden end of Volga Bulgarian is to be associated with the "time of troubles" in the Golden Horde, when there is a sudden and inexplicable disintegration in centralized political authority following the death of Berdibek.<sup>10</sup> Although the sudden end of Volga Bulgarian coincides chronologically with the "time of troubles", it is not likely that there is a cause and effect relationship between the two. I believe instead that there is one significant historical event, the major watershed event of the 14th century, which played a leading role in the end of Volga Bulgarian as a written language in the 14th century. This major event was the infamous Black Death. Even though the effects of this most famous outbreak of bubonic

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*a csuvas nyelv ismeretébe*. Budapest 13—123; and — (1982). *The Periodization and Sources of Chuvash Linguistic History*: Chuvash Studies. Ed. Róna-Tas, A. Budapest, 113—169.

<sup>6</sup> See Hakimzjanov, F. S. (1987). *Ėpigrafičeskie pamjatniki Volžskoj Bulgarii i ih jazyk*. Moskva. 5—15. (For a map of the distribution of both kinds of inscriptions see Hakimzjanov, 1978, 21.)

<sup>7</sup> These eight inscriptions are: Róna-Tas and Fodor 1973: 1357: nos. 24, 25, 52; Hakimzjanov 1978, 1357: no. 23, and 1358: nos. 24, 25; and Hakimzjanov 1987, 1357: nos. 16, 17. (Cf. Hakimzjanov 1978, in which no. 26 is read as "1361?", while the same inscription is read by Róna-Tas and Fodor 1973, no. 26, as "1353-4?".)

<sup>8</sup> See for example the two inscriptions dated 1382 and 1399 in Hakimzjanov 1978, nos. 18, 19.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Muhametšin and Hakimzjanov 1987, 120—126.

<sup>10</sup> See Muhametšin and Hakimzjanov 1987, 120—121.

plague have been well documented for Western and Eastern Europe<sup>11</sup>, Russia<sup>12</sup>, and the Middle East<sup>13</sup>, its effects on the territories of the Golden Horde and elsewhere in Central and Inner Asia have not been considered until recently.<sup>14</sup>

The outbreak of bubonic plague which later came to be known as the Black Death is first recorded in China in 1331, after which it spread to Inner and Central Asia. Although much work remains to be done on the course of the Black Death through this region, there are sufficient sources to trace its course in broadest terms through the territories of the Golden Horde. According to well-known accounts bubonic plague appeared among the Mongol army during its siege of Caffa in 1345—1346; it was from here that the plague reached Egypt and Italy in 1347. Although other urban centers of the Golden Horde came to be afflicted as well, we do not have accounts as detailed as the those offered by the Russian sources for their own territories to the west of the Golden Horde. The sources for these territories reveal that waves

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<sup>11</sup> On the Black Death in Western and Eastern Europe as a historical problem see Ziegler, P. (1969). *The Black Death*. New York; McNeill, W. (1976). *Plagues and Peoples*. Garden City, NY; Gottfried, R. S. (1983). *Black Death: Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Ed. Strayer, J. R. New York, 257—267; and (1983). *The Black Death. Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*. New York; and the bibliographical essay in Carmichael, A. G. (1986). *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence*. Cambridge History of Medicine. Cambridge, 166—175.

<sup>12</sup> See Derbek, F. A. (1905). *Istorija čumnyh epehemij v Rosii s osnovanija gosudarstva do nastojaščago vremeni*. Serija doktorskih dissertacij dopuščennyh k zaščite v Imperatorskoj voenno—medicinskoj akademii v 1904—1905 učebnom godu 14. St. Petersburg; Alef, G. (1970). *The Crisis of the Muscovite Aristocracy: A Factor in the Growth of Monarchical Power*. *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 15, 15—58, especially p. 36 ff. [reprinted in *Rulers and Nobles in Fifteenth-Century Muscovy*, (1983), London, V]; Langer, L. N. (1975). *The Black Death in Russia: Its Effects Upon Urban Labor*. *Russian History* 2, 53—67; and — (1976). *Plague and the Russian Countryside: Monastic Estates in the Late Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. *Canadian—American Slavic Studies* 10, 351—368; and Alexander, J. T. (1980). *Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia*. *Public Health & Urban Disaster*. Baltimore.

<sup>13</sup> Dols, M. W. (1977). *The Black Death in the Middle East*. Princeton.

<sup>14</sup> I have outlined some of my ideas in *Preliminary Remarks on the Role of Disease in the History of the Golden Horde* to appear in the proceedings of the Third International Conference on Central Asia held at the University of Wisconsin—Madison (April 1988), to which I refer the reader for additional details and bibliography. This topic deserves a lengthier treatment, to which I hope to return in the future.

of plague swept through most of Russia in 1349, 1352—1353, 1360, and 1364—1366 and kept on recurring in many additional waves over the following decades and centuries.<sup>15</sup> It is also known on the basis of the Russian sources that some of these waves of plague may have originated in the southern territories of the Golden Horde.<sup>16</sup> They indicate, for example, that the wave of 1364 affected the Golden Horde with Saray as a point of origin,<sup>17</sup> while the wave of 1374 is said to have struck not only the "entire Russian land", but the Golden Horde as well.<sup>18</sup> The final wave of the 14th century is said to have struck the Golden Horde in 1396.<sup>19</sup>

In order to fully appreciate what the impact of recurring waves of bubonic plague and related phenomena must have meant for the territories of the Golden Horde, one should consider the general results as known from studies on Europe and the Middle East. Aside from the massive disruption of political, social, and economic life as a result of catastrophic and widespread depopulation,<sup>20</sup> there were other, more subtle consequences also associated with this event. It has been argued that one such result in Western Europe was the decline of Latin as a literary language. This was a direct result of the decimation of the learned class, which in the medieval period was usually associated with the urban religious class. Another significant consequence of the Black Death in Western Europe was technological regression.<sup>21</sup> Just as reading and writing were acquired skills affected by a rapid and large-scale decline in the learned class, artisans' skills were similarly affected by a parallel decline in the artisan class.

Given the results of studies on the effects of the Black Death in Western Europe and elsewhere (to which I have only alluded briefly), it is a reasonable to propose that Volga Bulgarian should be seen as another example of a written language which declines upon a sudden drop in the learned class. After all,

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<sup>15</sup> See Derbek 1905, 14—25; Alef 1970, 37—38; Langer 1975, 55—61; and the map in *Plague and the Russian Countryside*, 368; and Alexander 1980, 12—15.

<sup>16</sup> See Langer 1975, 56—57; and Alexander 1980, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Langer 1975, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Derbek 1905, 23; and Langer 1975, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Derbek, 1905, 25; and Alexander 1980, 15.

<sup>20</sup> See my *Preliminary Remarks on the Role of Disease in the History of the Golden Horde*.

<sup>21</sup> See for example McNeill 1983, 107; and Gottfried 1976, 152—156 (but cf. pp. 141—142).

it is within a decade of the earliest attested occurrence of the Black Death in the territories of the Golden Horde that there is a sudden end to the practice of writing funerary inscriptions in the Volga Bulgarian language. Similarly, the apparent decline in the carving of both Volga Bulgarian and Standard Turkic inscriptions should be seen as another example of technological regression occurring after a large-scale drop in the artisan class.<sup>22</sup> Such indirect evidence, coupled with the physical evidence of an unusually high number of tombstones erected for 1357, may remain the only body of evidence that can be assembled to argue that a catastrophic wave of epidemic passed through the territories of Volga Bulgaria around this time.<sup>23</sup>

This phenomenon which I describe for the Volga Bulgarian inscriptions has a contemporary parallel in another corner of Eurasia, namely the fate of the Syriac and Turkic funerary inscriptions written in Syriac script near Issiq Kōl.<sup>24</sup> It is well known that these inscriptions belonging to Nestorian Christian gravesites are an important source on the outbreak of bubonic plague in this community in 1338—1339.<sup>25</sup> In fact, there is an unusually high number of tombstones during these two years numbering in the dozens, some of which record in Syriac that the deceased died of *plaguae*.<sup>26</sup> It is usually not taken

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<sup>22</sup> One could presumably relate this to economic consequences as well.

<sup>23</sup> One can also note the high number of tombstones erected for 1349, which closely coincides with other information on a major wave of plague passing through Russia in the same year. If additional supporting evidence can be found for multiple waves of plague in Volga Bulgaria, this is all the more significant because it is precisely the recurring waves of the epidemic and its related illnesses which made the Black Death so particularly devastating. See Gottfried 1976, XVI—XVII and 130—135.

<sup>24</sup> For a description of these inscriptions and further bibliography see Thacker, T. W. (1967). *A Nestorian Gravestone from Central Asia in the Gulbenkian Museum, Durham University*. *The Durham University Journal* 59, 94—107. According to Thacker (p. 99), the earliest of these inscriptions dates from 1186 and the last from 1345.

<sup>25</sup> McNeill 1983, 145—146; and Dols 1977, 48—50; but cf. Norris, J. (1977). *East or West? The Geographic Origin of the Black Death*. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 51, 1—24, especially p. 10, and the ensuing polemic in subsequent issues of the same journal.

<sup>26</sup> See Hvol'son, D. (1886). *Predvariatel'nyja zametki o najdenykh v Semirečenskoj oblasti sirijskih nadgrobnykh nadpisjah*. *Zapiski Vostočnogo Otdelenija Imperatorskogo Russkogo Arheologičeskogo Obščestva* 1, 84—109, table (following p. 160), 217—221, and 303—308, especially pp. 305—306; Chwolson, D. (1890). *Syrisch—nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie*. *Mémoires de l'Académie*

into consideration that yet another wave seems to have struck in 1341, as there is again an unusually high number of tombstones erected for this year, though this time without a specific mention of plague.<sup>27</sup> I would argue that it is not a coincidence that the Nestorian tombstones in Syriac script cease to exist shortly after this time. For example, Xvol'son describes a corpus of inscriptions dating 1226—1373 of which at least 37 inscriptions were recorded for the period 1338—1339, while for the period 1342—1373 there was only one recorded for 1374, after which the next and final date comes only 26 years later.<sup>28</sup> Clearly the fate of the Nestorian inscriptions in Syriac script near Issiq Köl should be considered directly parallel to and in support of the interpretation offered regarding the fate of the Volga Bulgarian inscriptions in the Volga region.

To go even one step further, there is good reason to believe that this same phenomenon played a role in the development of much of Middle Turkic. It appears that most of the classical Islamic literary works of Middle Turkic are clustered around the first six decades of the 14th century, after which there is a sudden hiatus. Decades later, a new style emerges, less steeped in the style and archaic orthography of the pre-15th century literary tradition.<sup>29</sup> I would argue that the works of the 14th century represented a style and orthography which were archaic for the 14th century. Following a sudden large-scale decline in the learned class most familiar with these archaic traditions, there emerged new literary traditions much closer to the Turkic vernaculars of the time.<sup>30</sup> For this reason we should probably divide Middle

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*Impériale des sciences de St.-Petersburg*, VII 37:8, 129—130; and — (1897). *Syrisch—nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie. Neue Folge*. St. Petersburg, 31—38.

<sup>27</sup> This is pointed out by Chwolson 1897, 39—40.

<sup>28</sup> *Predvaritel'nyja zametki o najdenykh v Semirečenskoj oblasti sirijskih nadgrobnih nadpisjah*, 306. Of course, another large portion of the corpus is undated.

<sup>29</sup> I only need refer the reader to any of the standard handbooks such as Togan, Z. V. (1963). *Zentralasiatische türkische Literatur. II: Die islamische Zeit: Turkologie*, Handbuch der Orientalistik. Ed. Spuler, B. I, v/1. Leiden—Köln, 229—249; and Eckmann, J. (1964). *Die kiptschakische Literatur. I: Die Literatur von Chwarezm und der Goldenen Horde: Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta II*. Ed. Boratov, P. N. Wiesbaden, 275—296.

<sup>30</sup> Clearly this argument would require a much lengthier and much more detailed presentation than is possible here.

Turkic, usually considered as the period 1200—1600, into two distinct periods: Early Middle Turkic (1200—1400) and Late Middle Turkic (1400—1600).<sup>31</sup>

To return to the case of Volga Bulgarian, one final question remains: Why did Volga Bulgarian cease to be a written language after 1358 while a Standard Turkic dialect continued to be written after this date in more or less the same place? The answer to this question is very complicated, and some fascinating observations and theories have already been offered.<sup>32</sup> Clearly this Standard Turkic dialect survived in the inscriptions of the Volga region because by this time it must have represented the vernacular of that community continuing a tradition of literacy in the Volga region. Could it be, then, that Volga Bulgarian did not survive as a written language past 1358 precisely because it was no longer spoken as a vernacular — at least not by that linguistic community erecting funerary inscriptions! — by 1358? If that is the case, this would be further evidence to support Xakimzyanov's argument regarding the use of Volga Bulgarian by this time as a *svjaščennyj jazyk*, a language of religious and ritual practices, comparable in some ways to the role played by Arabic and Latin.<sup>33</sup> If it was exclusively the religious class that preserved this written language, then in Volga Bulgaria, as in the rest of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the language of this urban class suffered as greatly from the ravages of the Black Death as did the urban class itself.

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<sup>31</sup> I must admit that I find my inspiration for this periodization in Róna-Tas 1982, especially pp. 119 and 125, though my division of Early Middle Turkic from Late Middle Turkic (and consequently any division of Early Middle Bulgarian from Late Middle Bulgarian) is obviously based on consideration which differ from those of his learned judgement.

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in Muhametšin and Hakimzjanov 1987, 120—126, especially p. 123; and Hakimzjanov 1978, 7—15.

<sup>33</sup> Hakimzjanov 1978, 5—15, especially p. 14.