

A VISIT TO BOLGAR ON THE VOLGA: TRAVEL NOTES AND IMAGES

by
Daniel C. Waugh

In March of this year I was fortunate to be able to participate in the 5th International Golden Horde Forum in Kazan, organized by the Usmanov Center for Research on the Golden Horde and Tatar Khanates that is part of the Sh. Marjani Institute of History of the Tatarstan Academy of Sciences. In a brief posting to H-EarlySlavic on my return, I provided a link to the impressive program and still plan separately

to post notices about some of the Center's valuable publications.

One of the highlights of the trip for me was the excursion arranged for conference participants to the historic town of Bolgar on the Volga, which took place on 17 March 2017. This is a UNESCO World Heritage site [Fig. 1]. What follows here are some notes on



Fig. 1. Museum model of the Bolgar reserve as one sees it today, roughly covering the area of former settlement within the walls. The main part of the town (see lower image) with the important buildings is on the right on the bank above the Volga.

the trip and a lot of pictures, which I hope will be of some interest to many EarlySlavic readers, few of whom, I would guess, have ever had the opportunity to visit Bolgar. Anyone interested in Rus relations with their Eastern neighbors presumably appreciates how important Bolgar was both prior to and after its incorporation into the Ulus Jöchi (The Golden Horde). It was a major medieval center of international trade whose history may be consulted in some of the books I annotate at the end of this essay. My purpose here is not to write on that history but rather to provide what I hope will be an enticing glimpse of Bolgar, which, I would argue, is well worth the effort to visit.

Given the somewhat circuitous route one drives to Bolgar from Kazan, the excursion made for a long day with somewhat limited time once we had actually arrived at the site. It was late winter, with snowy landscapes and, somewhat to my surprise when we crossed it en route, a Kama river still so solidly frozen that people were ice fishing on it.

The remains of Bolgar spread over a large area that the early settlers chose for several obvious reasons. It is situated on a defensible elevation overlooking a large bend of the Volga [Figs. 2, 3] and located



Fig. 2. The bend of the frozen Volga as seen from the khan's "palace."

in a region that not only was well connected to trade routes but also tapped relatively productive agricultural land. Indeed, among the artifacts left by the early inhabitants are agricultural tools, including many iron plowshares, and a newly created museum adjoining the reserve celebrates the grain production of the region.



Our first stop on the visit was an impressive on-site museum where to learn the history the visitor is invited to work upward from the lowest floor (the earliest strata), culminating with the history of the discovery and study of the site in modern times. Many of my photos here are from that museum's exhibits; others are from the National Museum of Tatarstan in Kazan [Fig. 4, starting on next page]]. The exhibits include captioning in Russian, Tatar and English, with some substantial explanatory paragraphs. Certain exhibits specify the find location of the objects; many do not. The emphasis is on material excavated in or near Bolgar itself, but some material comes from farther afield in the Kama River region and in the wider Bolgar and Golden Horde territories. There are a good many artistically drawn schematic maps introducing various periods (generally accompanying short summaries of the relevant history). For me, one of the highlights is the use of reconstruction models of key buildings and the physical appearance of the ethnic groups in the population (the kind of thing pioneered by M. M. Gerasimov back in early Soviet times). Material generally is grouped thematically. So one finds sections on religious affiliation, on crafts, on trade, etc. Of particular interest are the extensive

collections of coins, including local imitations of standard issues of the Caliphate, and such objects as bronze mirrors and ceramics from as far away as China and from Islamic lands to the south. Even if the initial Mongol invasion inflicted serious damage to Bolgar, its quick recovery is evidenced by the fact

(continued on p. 9)

Fig. 3. The natural and manmade defenses of Bolgar: on the left a ravine and on the right a modern replica of gate towers and palisade.





Fig.4. Museum collections pertaining to Bolgar.



Model of interior of an 11th-early 12th-century Bolgar house (in National Museum).



(above) Iron horse bit and cheek pieces from southern Siberia.

(right) Ceramic object from Biliar.

(below). Mannequin of armored Bulgar warrior of 9th-10th century (National Museum).



(left) iron objects from Biliar, the earlier Bulgar capital.

(below) Iron axe heads, Volga Bulgaria, 10th-12th c..



(left) Xiongnu (?) cauldrons.

(below left) Bone objects including row-heads, Bulgar, 11th-14th centuries.

(below right) Mannequin of armored Bulgar soldier, 12-13th c.





Schematic maps in the Bolgar museum, illustrating steppe polities of the mid-1st millennium and the territory of the Khazar khaganate.



(right) Iron objects including padlocks.



(below center and right) Volga Bulgaria silver jewelry, the chain with pendants in center 12th-13th century (National Museum).

(below) Bronze idol, Volga Bulgaria, 11th-12th century (National Museum).



Limestone casting molds 11th-12th c.





(left) Beads found in Volga Bulgaria, 10th-13th centuries, some glass, some amber.
 (center) Fragments of glass objects, Bolgar.
 (right) Beads, Golden Horde period, possibly from Iran.



(left and right) Bronze mirrors, Golden Horde, 13th-beginning of 15th centuries.
 (center) Bone and ivory objects, Bolgar.



Parts of scales.

Weights and pieces of silver dirhams, Volga Bulgaria..

Lead and bronze seals for trade goods, Bolgar, late 13th-early 14th century



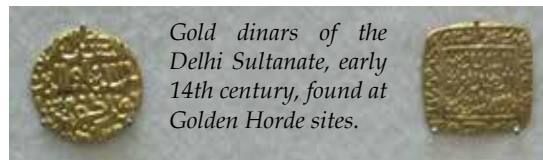
Sasanian coins, 5th-7th centuries



Byzantine coins, 10th-12th centuries



Gold florin (from Florence), issued in 1329, found at Bolgar in 1803,



Gold dinars of the Delhi Sultanate, early 14th century, found at Golden Horde sites.

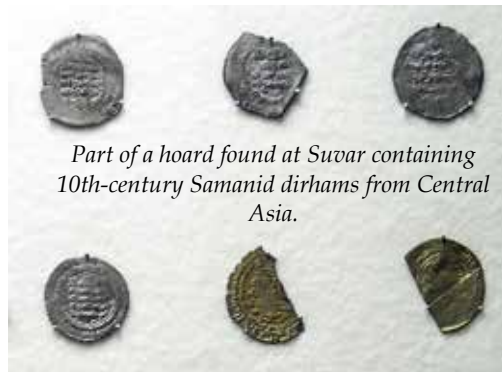


(left) Coin hoard, Volga Bulgaria.

(right) Silver grivny (Novgorodian?) and hoard of 14th-century Jochid coins.



(left) Volga Bulgaria 10th century silver dirhams, below which are a 10th-century die used to produce imitation dirhams such as that to its right.



Part of a hoard found at Suvar containing 10th-century Samanid dirhams from Central Asia.

Silver dirhams, Arab caliphate, 8th-early 9th centuries.



Note: Images are not in a uniform scale that would illustrate relative sizes of the coins.



(left to right) Various imports into Volga Bulgaria, including a Carolingian sword and mounts; ladles from Iran, 11th-12th centuries; bronze lamps and bronze mortars from the Middle East.

Imported ceramics: (left) Persian lustreware; (right) Chinese celadon.



(below) Golden Horde ceramics.

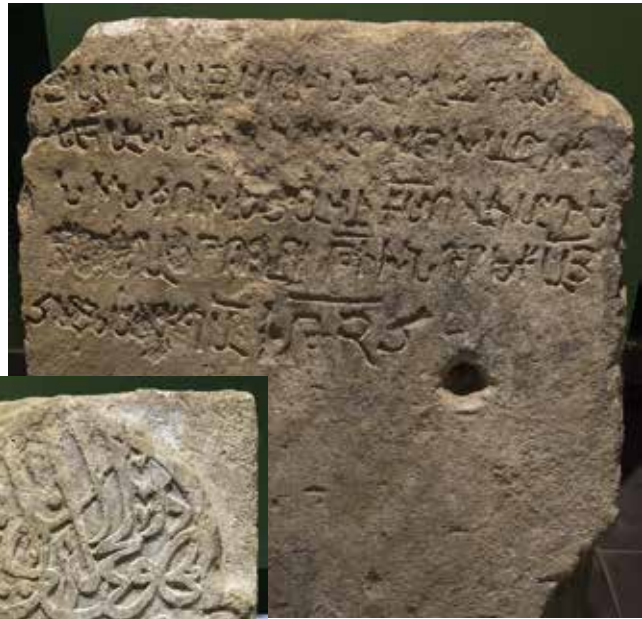




(above) Burial assumed to be that of a priest, excavation photo in Bolgar museum.

(below) Reconstruction from skeletal remains of the appearance of one of the women of multi-ethnic Bolgar.

(below center) Mannequin of 16th-century soldier of the Kazan' Khanate (National Museum of Tatarstan).



Grave markers from Bolgar: (above) Armenian tombstone for a "princess" Sara, 1321; (left) poetic tribute in Arabic to the memory of Musa, son of a goldsmith, 1317.



Modern statue of Ulu Magmet Khan, founder of the Kazan' Khanate in the 15th century (National Museum).



that the earliest issues of Golden Horde coins were minted there, not in Saray lower on the Volga.

Collections of numerous artifacts within some of these thematic groups (e.g., on crafts) generally do not include as much information on provenance as one might wish. That said, my documentation of what I photographed is incomplete, since the amount of material in the museum begs for a lot more attention than time allowed in the tight schedule for our visit. What I selected was based to a considerable degree on instinct for what could be of particular interest for teaching purposes and/or related to my previous knowledge of similar materials and the archaeology of Bolgar.

In visiting the site and museum, one can appreciate the seriousness of the research that underlies what the museum presents, at the same time that one needs to be aware of how a kind of “Bolgar nationalist discourse” has resulted in publication of popularizing works that may make a bit too much of that remote past. Not only in the museum itself but also in the descriptive plaques at the various building remains, one can appreciate the care taken to provide meaningful historical context and illustrations. The ongoing publication of the excavations of recent decades is truly impressive (see my bibliographic notes). If the casual visitor were to wonder whether in this serious documentation of the past there might not be a bit of exaggeration, I would counter that such an impression may merely reflect the fact that the site has been under the radar in all too many familiar narratives of the history of northeastern Europe and western Asia. After all, the Bolgar polity ultimately disappeared; historians of Rus tend to think of the Golden Horde less for its presence in the middle Volga region and more for its towns further south. With the rise of Kazan, our attention shifts quickly to the successor states of the Golden Horde; Kazan replaces Bolgar as the major town in the region.

Outside the museum, there is much to be seen, scattered over a rather large physical area. The first building that catches the eye is a modern one, imitating the architecture of the Bulgar Islamic mausolea and containing exhibits about the Qur’an and a copy of what purports to be the largest printed Qur’an in existence (it was printed in Italy) [Fig. 5]. The building was inaugurated in 2012 to celebrate the anniversary of the Islamization of Bolgar in 922, though one might note that when Ibn Fadlan, the representative of the Arab caliphate, visited Bolgar in the early 920s, he reported that the local inhabitants already professed Islam, even if perhaps they did not fully understand what that meant. Specialists on early Rus generally have made the acquaintance of Ibn Fadlan thanks to his dramatic description of a Rus (read: Viking)

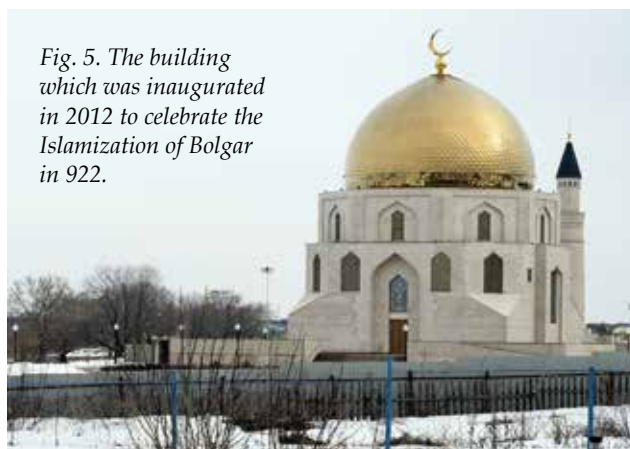


Fig. 5. The building which was inaugurated in 2012 to celebrate the Islamization of Bolgar in 922.

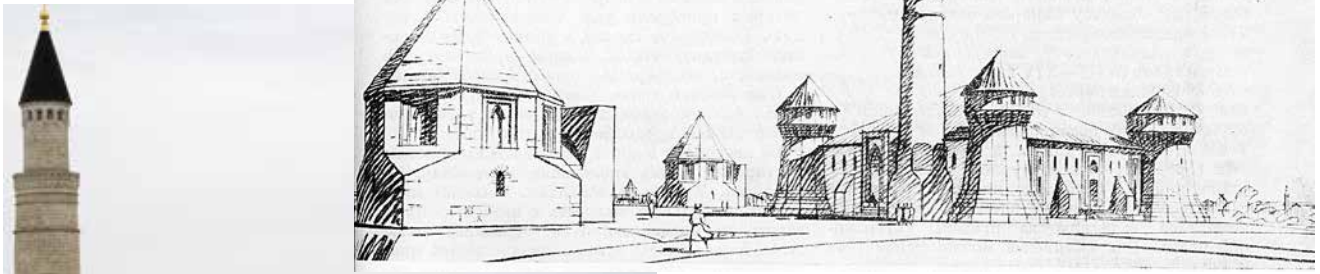
funeral on the Volga near Bolgar, which served as the inspiration for Michael Crichton’s lurid account in his *Eaters of the Dead*. Unlike others in our group, I did not spend time inside the memorial building, as I was preoccupied with what was outside.

Leaving this building, one approaches what arguably is the most interesting of the remains of the earlier architecture, those from the 14th-century mosque built to replace an earlier and smaller one on the same location, one that likely replaced an even earlier wooden structure [Figs. 6, 7]. The mosque is interesting for its architecture, with fortress-like corner towers; the inspiration likely was Islamic architecture from the Caucasus. Reconstruction drawings of the mosque in books often give the impression that it is larger than in fact is the case; in size it seems quite modest if placed in a comparative context of mosques elsewhere in the Islamic world. The minaret next to the mosque preserves only in its lowest parts the earlier structure, the rest being modern reconstruction [Fig. 8]. See my short video of the mosque and its minaret (the link is at the end in my bibliographic note). There is a smaller



Fig. 6. Approaching the remains of the 14th-century mosque, the sign in the foreground depicting a reconstruction drawing of its original appearance.

Fig. 7. The Congregational Mosque, Bolgar, 14th century. Views of present remains and reconstructions in drawing on right and in three views of the model in the Bolgar museum.



One of the original capitals.



Fig. 7, ctd.

Relief-carved limestone from portals of Bolgar mosque (National Museum).



Glazed architectural tile from major buildings at Bolgar and analogous examples from Golden Horde Saray (National Museum).



(above and below right) from Bolgar;
(below left and center) from Saray.



and better-preserved minaret, located next to another of the tombs, which we saw from the bus [Fig. 9].

With the Russian conquest of Kazan and thereby the incorporation of Bolgar and its territories into the Empire, Christianization in the region proceeded in fits and starts (often accompanied by oppressive policies toward those who still professed Islam). Evidence of Orthodoxy at Bolgar can be seen in the 18th-century church situated next to the remains of the main mosque [Fig. 10]. The preservation of some of the Islamic mausolea (to a greater or lesser degree)

was in part due to their having been put to use by the Church, one in fact converted into a chapel [Fig. 11]. Now part of the museum complex, its graves have been excavated. Another of the former mausolea now contains an exhibition of Muslim grave markers. Much of the epigraphy from Bolgar has been catalogued and published. Other mausolea at Bolgar merit closer examination than we could give them, though they have all been carefully studied by archaeologists. The most impressive architecturally of these other

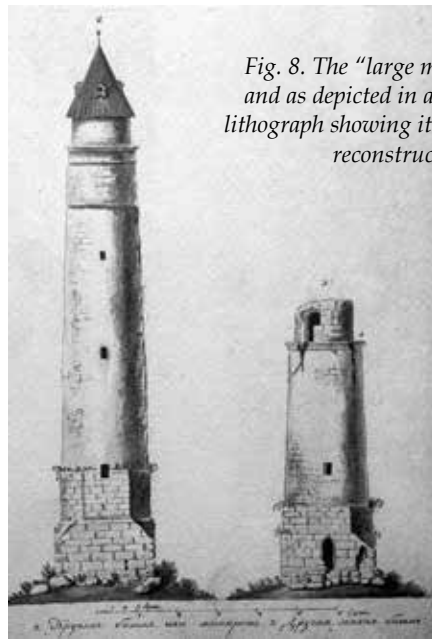


Fig. 8. The "large minaret" today and as depicted in a 19th-century lithograph showing its remains before reconstruction.



Fig. 9. The "small minaret" and its adjoining tomb.

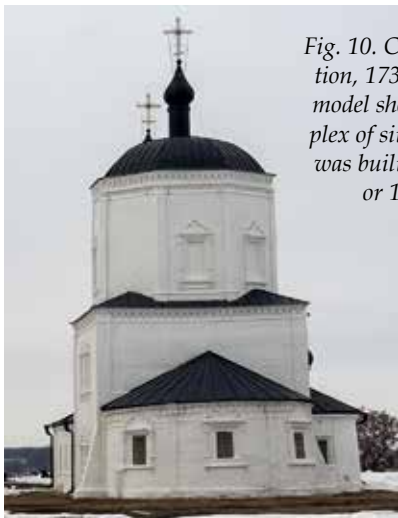
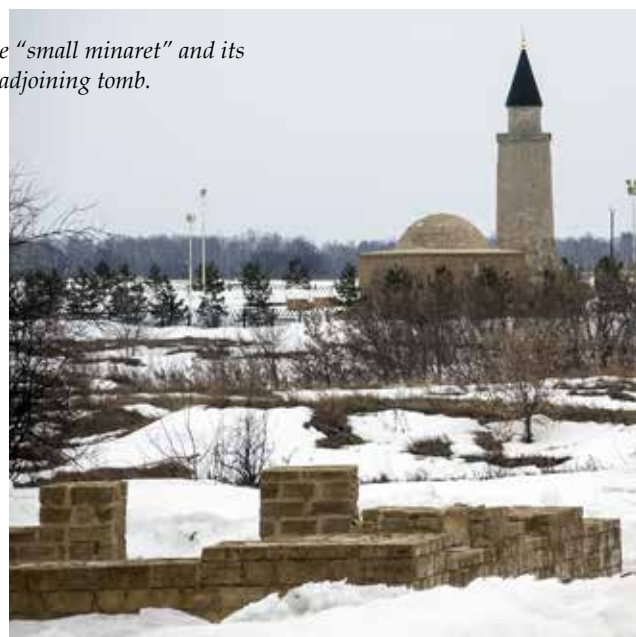


Fig. 10. Church of the Dormition, 1732-34, and museum model showing central complex of site some time after it was built, in either the 18th or 19th centuries.





Fig. 11a. The 14th-century Eastern Mausoleum and the museum model showing it being used as the Church of St. Nicholas in the 18th century. View of the excavated grave area under the floor and of one grave marker found there.



Fig. 11b. The 14th-century Northern Mausoleum and its display of tombstones in different calligraphic styles.

Fig. 12. The Chernaia palata and the museum model of its original appearance.



structures is the so-called “Chernaia palata” (Black chamber) [Fig. 12], probably a mausoleum, though its original designation has been a matter of controversy. Its design resembles that of other 14th-century mausolea and thus undoubtedly dates it to the period of the Golden Horde..

Little remains of what is generally considered to have been the “Khan’s palace.” As with what one sees at a great many archaeological sites around the world where only foundations of earlier buildings remain, the modern visitor can see the outline of the walls, generally topped for preservation by modern masonry [Fig. 13]. It seems that within the “palace” there was at

Fig. 13. Remains of the khan’s palace (begun in the mid-13th century), under its modern protective roof, and a museum model reconstructing its original appearance.



least one section heated by hypocaust channels under the floor. See my short video for a low-resolution pan of the building and of the view from it over the Volga.

Bolgar in Islamic times included baths, several of whose remains have been studied. Unfortunately, we did not have time to wander the ruins, but one can get a sense of the design of one of the most important ones from the model in the local museum [Fig. 14]. The archaeologists have uncovered evidence of relatively sophisticated plumbing—ceramic water pipes, stone basins, and, as with the palace, hypocaust heating.

We lunched in the museum celebrating local grain production, a log structure that alleges to copy the traditional architecture of the region and is situated in a “museum village” with both wind and water mills and typical peasant houses with well sweeps in their yards [Fig. 15].



Fig. 14. The so-called Belaia palata, an Islamic bath, its ruins shown in a lithograph from 1868, in situ today, and a reconstruction museum model, with the remains of a cistern and some of the ceramic water pipes.

Our final stop was the nearby impressive new white mosque [Fig. 16] just outside the Bolgar preserve, in which, even though it was not the appointed time for daily worship, there was ongoing recitation from the Qur'an. The mosque contains a reliquary displaying what is believed to be a hair from the beard of the Prophet Muhammad. I have seen analogous relics of the Prophet in other places, notably in the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul.

We then left on the drive back to Kazan as wet snow had begun to fall.



Fig. 15. The Museum of Grain.





Fig. 16. The White Mosque

Bibliographic notes

My supplementary video from Bolgar can be accessed at (you need to copy and paste the URL into your browser):

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/jc7xm2xavwlp9tn/AADLI4Pw1CmRbgXLDn66zh4Ja?dl=0>

This links to a Dropbox folder “Bolgar” which has open access (no password or Dropbox membership needed), in which you will find both this pdf illustrated essay and the short video in .mp4 format.

Visitors to the Bolgar museum can obtain there a slim, large format and nicely illustrated booklet that introduces the buildings and collections: Ministerstvo kul'tury Respubliki Tatarstan. *Bolgarskii gosudarstvennyi istoriko-arkhitekturnyi muzei-zapovednik Velikii Bolgar* (n.d.). One can read Ibn Fadlan's account of his visit to the middle Volga in the new edition and translation by James E. Montgomery, published in *Two Arabic Travel Books...*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy and Shawkat M. Toorawa (NY and London: NYU Press, 2014). In the older secondary literature, one standard work, now largely outdated, is A. P. Smirnov. *Volzhskie bolgary* (M., 1951). A very substantial treatment of the region's history and archaeology is F. Sh. Khuzin. *Bulgarskii gorod v X-nachale XIII vv.* (Kazan', 2001). It contains an extensive bibliography. Bolgar is the focus of one volume in the encyclopedic treatment of Tatar history published by the Marjani Institute: *Istoriia tatar s drevneishikh vremen: V 7 t. T. II. Volzhskaia Bulgariia i Velikai Step'* (Kazan', 2006). For the early ethnic

history of the region, see E. P. Kazakov. *Kul'tura rannei Volzhskoi Bulgarii* (M.: Nauka, 1992). On Biliar, which preceded Bolgar as the main town in the region, see *Issledovaniia velikogo goroda* (M.: Nauka, 1976) and *Kul'tura Biliara*, ed. A. Kh. Khalikov (M.: Nauka, 1985). Reports on the archaeology of Bolgar, in which the late G. A. Fedorov-Davydov played a prominent role, are the subject of ongoing publications. See, for starters, *Gorod Bolgar. Ocherki istorii i kul'tury*, ed. G. A. Fedorov-Davydov (M.: Nauka, 1987). Subsequent volumes include *Gorod Bolgar. Monumental'noe stroitel'stvo, arkhitektura, blagoustroistvo* (M.: Nauka, 2001); *Gorod Bolgar. Kul'tura, iskusstvo, torgovlia* (M.: Nauka, 2008); *Gorod Bolgar. Zhilishcha i zhilaia zastroika*. Ed. A. G. Sitdikov (M.: Nauka, 2016). For a somewhat cursory treatment of the arts at Bolgar, see Dina Valeeva, *Iskusstvo volzhskikh bulgar perioda Zolotoi Ordy (XIII-XV vv.)* (Kazan', 2003). The authority on architecture of the Golden Horde is E. D. Zilivinskaia, who has recently published the first magnificent volume of an ongoing study: *Arkhitektura Zolotoi Ordy. Ch. I. Kul'tovoe zodchestvo. Monografiia*. Kazan', 2014). It includes a substantial treatment of the buildings in Bolgar and places them in a larger comparative context. The book contains a long summary in English and high-quality plates. An earlier volume of hers (with poorly reproduced images), containing a section on Islamic baths, is *Ocherki kul'tovogo i grazhdanskogo zodchestva Zolotoi Ordy. Monografiia* (Astrakhan', 2011), which one assumes will be superseded by the new multi-volume set when it is complete.