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## ARCHEOLOGY AND TEXTUAL SOURCE STUDIES FOR KHAZAR HISTORICAL RESEARCH: SCHOLARLY INTERACTION IN THE 20th CENTURY AND PROSPECTS OF COOPERATION

*The article examines the interaction of archaeologists and researchers of written sources on the history of the Khazar Khaganate based on the publications of the second half of the twentieth century. The controversy in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian-language literature is traced about the reliability of the data provided by written monuments, as well as about how much the data of archaeological science may be preferable for further study of the socio-political and religious situation in the Khazar Khaganate in 9th - 10th centuries. The possibilities and prospects of archaeological work to replenish information on the history of the Khazars are determined. The tendencies for strengthening the cooperation between archaeologists and researchers of written sources are characterized. The diversity of the concepts of history and the historical significance of the Khazar Khaganate are explained with reference to specifics of the Khazar studies in contemporary world. The episodes of international cooperation in programs and projects of Khazar archeology and Khazar historiography are highlighted. The information of written sources about the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism is placed in the context of contradictions between archaeological data and evidence from written monuments about the change of the official faith in the Khazar Khaganate. With references to the fundamental publications on the methodology of studying the history of the Khazars and on the tasks of Khazar archeology, the most optimal line of delimitation of the sphere of Khazar archeology and Khazar historiography is presented.*

**Key words:** *Khazars, Khazar Judaism, Khazar archeology, written sources about the Khazars, Saltov-Mayatsk culture*

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**A**VAILABILITY of written evidence is an immense advantage for a researcher investigating the history of nations and states. Archeology in former territories of states no longer in existence, the ethnography of the peoples currently inhabiting those former lands, and linguistic analysis can provide artifacts and considerations that may specify and clarify the painted picture from applicable written sources. However, even a thoroughly and logically reasoned interpretation of the available data from these auxiliary sources cannot serve as a totally adequate foundation for historical research. As L. N. Gumilev acknowledged, even in written sources, “not everything has been said” (*Gumilev* 1989: 124).

It is better to write at length on the significance and interaction of these fundamental historical disciplines using case studies and examining the history

of a specific problem, providing a candid multifaceted history of a people or a state. In this article, such an attempt is proposed in the context of researching Khazar history and specifically the Khazar Khaganate. For the early Middle Ages, the period marking the rise and decline of the Khazar, the main sources, of course, are the relevant written sources.

The study of the Kazar’s history is associated with debates over early forms of statehood among various Eurasian peoples which include the Eastern Slavs, Bulgarians, and Hungarians. Additionally, is the history of statehood among the Turkic peoples of the Volga region: the Oghuz Turks, the Kipchaks, and the peoples of modern North and South Caucasus. Evidence from written sources provides opportunities for various historiographical interpretations.

Written source information concerning the

Khazar elite's adoption of Judaism adds religious and political motives to this discussion about their role in the history of early statehood among the Eurasian peoples, particularly the Eastern Slavs. For these reasons, during the Soviet period, the Khazar theme was both unpopular and an acutely sensitive area of historiography.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, interest in the Khazar history multiplied. The topic expanding slightly in conjunction with the national historiographies of the Turkic peoples. In post-Soviet Russian historical science, the issues of Khazar studies focused on new approaches and motivated discussions with colleagues from various countries creating conditions for a fruitful exchange of views and cooperation.

A major event on this topic occurred in 1999 at the International Colloquium in Jerusalem organized by American and Israeli Asian scholars in close cooperation with their Russian counterparts. This large-scale Khazar studies forum gathered specialists from various fields of historical science, archaeology, and epigraphy. This colloquium began a process of close cooperation among Khazar studies experts from a variety of countries with initial projects concentrating on discovery and site preservation at locations with Khazar material culture. Israeli, Russian, and Ukrainian scholars cooperated along two main streams: scholarly publications on the Jewish history in Russia; and the historical and archaeological "Khazar project." The largest expeditions financed by the Khazar Project include excavations at Samosdekha, a site near Astrakhan where archaeologists suspect they discovered the Khazar capital, Itil; and archaeological work at the Alanian archaeological site of Gornoe Ekho. The Alans are known to have allied themselves with the Khazars as rather reliable confederates of the Khaganate (*Satanovsky* 2010).

However, this should not lead one to assume that a complete transformation has occurred in the development of formerly Soviet, now Russian, Asian studies, from politically charged attitudes to a free scientific cooperation with mutual understanding with colleagues from abroad. To understand the atmosphere prevailing in the current Russian Khazar studies, one should return to the central figure of Russian scholarship in the field, the remarkable archaeologist and historian, M. I. Artamonov. This scholar entered Khazar studies via two different routes: the acquisition and systematization of archaeological finds; and the interpretation of written source data. Along this first route, Artamonov made a sizeable contribution in discovering new data as he led various Soviet archaeological expeditions in the Cis-Don region, in particular, the unique left-bank Saltovo-Mayatskoye archaeological site, reliably identified as the Khazar fortress, Sarkel.<sup>1</sup> His publications on Sarkel, a site now

lost for archaeology, remain unsurpassed, and serve as a primary source for all researchers who investigate the archaeological evidence of Khazaria (*Artamonov* 1935; *Artamonov* 1956).

Thus, Artamonov's personality and work encompass all the main trends toward the further development of Russian Khazar studies in the following ways: First, was his continued archaeological work in discovering sites containing Khazar material culture, determining their location, systematization, and then providing analysis. This contribution is a most important prerogative for Russian scholars, since almost all promising areas of Khazar archaeology are located in the Russian Federation. Artamonov led in all areas through his discoveries and publications of new artifacts and his analysis and synthesis of his finds into the context of written historical sources by means of his dedicated research. The archaeological heritage found on the territory of the Khazar Khaganate dating to the 8th and 9th centuries served as a scientific strand in the development of Russian archaeology during the early 20th century. In 1900, a teacher of a Verkhny Saltov settlement school, Mr. V.A. Babenko, discovered the now widely known Sarada or Salt catacomb burial on the right bank of the Seversky Donets River. Although Artamonov was not the first archaeologist to raise the issue of the cultural material's common characteristics during the period of Khazar dominance in southern Eastern Europe; he did especially contribute to the scholarship by examining the archaeological culture of the Volga-Don and Caucasian steppes. This was further developed by his students through their focus upon the Saltov-Mayatskoye archaeological culture during the Khazar period (*Pletneva* 1967: 3-10; *Pletneva* 1999: 21-39; *Flerov* 1983: 103-108). Thus, the world's understanding of Khazar archaeology is dependent upon the work of Russian scholars in this field.

Second, Artamonov recognized the Khazar Khaganate's significance as the first state in the European part of Russian territory. This greatly influenced the statehood creation for many of the region's modern nations. This tradition is characterized by the consistent work on the collection, study, and publication of written evidence obtained from various sources. This strand of Russian scholars have been and remain an integral part of the international scientific community of Khazar research. Artamonov's contribution consisted of a systematized analysis of the scholarly community's available evidence. However, he admittedly did not consider himself sufficiently prepared

<sup>1</sup> In 1952, the territory of Sarkel was flooded during the construction and filling of the Tsimlyansk reservoir. Exhibits of these archaeological expeditions are kept in the Hermitage and in the local museum of Novocherkassk.

for the critical study of written sources (*Artamonov* 1936: vii). According to S. A. Pletneva, Artamonov, however, worked very hard analyzing the available translations, and interacted with his fellow-orientalists to clarify meanings found in the original sources. As a result, his book included a very useful overview on the historical sources of the Khazars with an informative evaluation of the evidence from medieval authors (*Pletneva* 2002: 17-18). A detailed review and evaluation of the Khazar state's written sources is found at the beginning of the Artamonov's monograph (*Artamonov* 2002: 36-53).

Since Artamonov, no figure in Russian Khazar historiography has been capable of combining the abovementioned strands of research into their work. For this reason, the work of Russian scholars concerning Khazar history can be traced along these lines. First, it can be assumed there was no direct administrative pressure, and Russian scholars determined their attitude toward the topic by means of their own choice and, one can say, freely reacted to the dominant moods or priorities of Russian politics and politicians.

In any case, Russian archaeology continued its work in freer conditions and, as indicated, in cooperation with Israeli colleagues and private sector companies. In the meantime, the position of the archaeological research gradually diverged among Russian Khazar scholars. After the publication of Artamonov's book, virtually no Russian researcher sought to synthesize the achievements of archaeology with written source analysis on the Khazars. Perhaps the book by S. A. Pletneva's pupil, Dagestani archaeologist M. G. Magomedov, could be purporting to attempt such a task. However, once familiar with Magomedov's work, one could conclude that the core of his research centered on results from archaeological excavation, while work with textual sources was subordinate to his study (*Magomedov* 1983).

The largest Russian book on Khazar history in the wake of Artamonov's work, is found in the monograph of the Asian scholar A. P. Novoseltsev, *The Khazar State and Its Role in the History of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus*. He emphasized that, after the 1930s, most work on the Khazars was done by archaeologists. However, if Artamonov's book labored to support and develop the tradition of research and generalization of written evidence; archaeologists of the 1970s-1980s, according to Novoseltsev, lost these traditions. While describing and introducing their valuable finds to the scientific community, as a rule, they did not consider the data from written sources of which they had little familiarity. Therefore, they committed serious interpretive errors. Novoseltsev was especially concerned that, starting in the 1970s, the local peripheral archaeology schools appeared

whose theoretical and textual source training often proved insufficient. Besides, the archaeological work among local scientific circles was territorially limited by the boundaries of their respective municipalities, which could produce a negative effect. They sought to discover archaeological material in the autonomous republics as arguments to "link the past of these republics to the ancient civilizations known from the written sources" (*Novoseltsev* 1990: 3, 59). This emerging view concerning the natural interest in Khazar history among representatives of the national historiographic schools in the various republics resulted in indignation by Dagestani archaeologist, Magomedov, who referred to this approach by Russian scholars as chauvinistic (*Magomedov*: 1994: 4).

Yet, the reason for this unsatisfactory research by archaeologists was not so much the amateur level of the local archaeological schools or their distance from the center (a view expressed by A. P. Novoseltsev) but rather, the fundamental problem of archaeology's role in studying the history of peoples in general. Soviet archaeology largely followed the cultural-historical approach of pre-war German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna (1858–1931), who clearly established boundaries of archaeological culture as coinciding with an area of residence and activity of certain peoples and tribes. Thus, the temptation was to determine a settlement's antiquity using local (or an even more extensive) territory by one's own ancestors as evidence of the boundaries for the previous archaeological cultures as well. This phenomenon was characteristic not only of Russian and Soviet archaeology, but also of archaeological schools from Eastern Europe (*Curta* 2005: 6-7).

Nevertheless, Novoseltsev criticized Russian archaeologists too harshly for their complacency. A pupil of Artamonov, L. S. Klejn,—who, in 1971, unearthed the first so-called "mound with a little ditch," subsequently identified by archaeologists as Khazar burials (*Pletneva* 2002: 29)—quite responsibly approached the limits of archaeology's capabilities. Archaeology's task, he believed, is the location and presentation of material culture, artifacts, and their relationship with each other. In other words, the archaeologist must translate a material object's discovered connection into the language of historians, that is, into thoughts and words. Also, the historian deals with a written source, which is the location of words and thoughts, just like narratives of historiography. The historian's task, but not the archaeologist's, is to synthesize data obtained from all the sources. If an archaeologist impatiently argues with historians and wants to translate artifacts or collected archaeological material into a historiographical product, then the archaeologist needs to master the new field on a truly professional level (*Klejn* 1993: 341-342). When

evidence from written sources is scarce, the value of the archaeological material increases, then history writing based solely on written sources is no longer adequate (Curta 2005: 7). In other words, historians will inevitably face the necessity of mastering the archaeological material which is presented in words and thoughts by archaeologists.

A. P. Novoseltsev openly declared in his book that his research was built exclusively on written sources, but did not deny the need to involve archeological data into Khazar historiography. Yet, he reasonably doubted the veracity and reliability of the material culture's transformation into thoughts and words by the archaeologists, and especially if they took on the historiography rather than exclusively focusing on the archaeology as well. Therefore, his book contains a rather critical evaluation of the archaeological publications. Novoseltsev recognized the need to synthesize data from various branches of source studies, however, as pointed out, he was critical of the contemporary state of Khazar archaeology when his book was published (Novoseltsev 1990: 60-61).

S. A. Pletneva (1926–2008), as Artamonov's pupil and a leading Khazar archaeologist in Russia, reacted to Novoseltsev's work by delineating that only archaeology provides "living material" for Khazar history and that written sources "skim over the surface of history, touching upon only those events that rise above the mundane." She referred to Novoseltsev's book as "a shadow of the work of M. I. Artamonov" and, in general, was even more critical of all the other great works on Khazar history, which "purport to interpret and re-interpret the evidence from the written sources." These works, Pletneva believed, "can provide nothing new, except for individual clarifications in translations, they cannot give any bright discoveries..." (Pletneva 2002: 34).

The works of scholars mentioned by Pletneva (Pletneva 1967; Pletneva 1976; Pletneva 1999), in particular those by Magomedov (Magomedov 1983), and V. K. Mikheev (Mikheev 1985) constitute the late classics of Russian Khazar archaeology, whose development was especially rapid over recent decades. Pletneva presented the situation and achievements embarked during the new century in her book entitled *Writings on Khazar Archaeology (Ocherki Khazar-skoy arkheologii)*. The reader is encouraged to refer to periodicals for the latest developments in this area.

Three years following the colloquium in Jerusalem, the Second International Colloquium on Khazar Studies took place in Moscow in 2002. About forty percent of the presented reports were archaeological. The predominance of archaeological topics was acknowledged by the colloquium's organizers. The analysis of topics and participants' list confirmed the extent of activity by local archaeological schools and

archaeologists from Ukraine and southern Russia. It is clear that archaeology annually expands and updates the foundation for Khazar studies. It was also clarified that the history of the Khazar Khaganate as a large "nomadic empire" should be considered within the broader context of archaeological material and written evidence on Eurasian history (*Khazars: Second International Colloquium. Theses 2002: 6*).

The virtual absence of the Dagestani archaeological school among the participants appeared rather obvious, since this school has great traditions in the study of Khazar period sites. The participants noticeably imparted that archaeologists with a long record of work on Khazar sites – A. I. Aybabin, S. A. Pletneva, V. S. Flerov, V. E. Flerova, M. V. Gorelik and others – posed major questions about archaeological evidence regarding the limits of Khazar political domination; the prevalence of Judaism; and the possibility of identifying the Khazar ethnos proper on the basis of material culture sites. Yet, presenters also expressed a wary approach as to whether enough archaeological evidence exists to reconstruct the migration and political processes during the period of Khazar domination.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, a textual researcher cannot invade the field of archaeology and interpret archaeological finds. However, he or she must account for the cultural material's significance and the main conclusions by archaeologists concerning their interconnection and origin. It seems that archeological data could help establish chronological and geographical boundaries of the Khazar Khaganate; clarify the Khazarian population's ethnic and religious composition; their daily home life; and, in general, the culture's economy. Such material could also assist in comprehending the relationship between the urban sedentary and nomadic population of Khazaria, and provide an educated judgment on the possible existence of a Khazar ethnic and imperial identity.

In closing, one should remind the scholarly community concerning prospects of new proceedings on Khazar history as set forth by the master of modern Khazar studies internationally, Peter Golden, in his classic work. Along with his hope expressed for the discovery of new manuscripts which could lead to new interpretations of written evidence on the Khazars, there is also special hope in obtaining new archaeological data that could affirm or discard assumptions and conjectures by the historians. Linguistic and ethnographic studies in the location where the Khazars directly interacted with the ancestors of modern Cau-

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: V. E. Flerova, "Sub-mound Burials and the Early History of Khazaria: Some Negative Issues of Historiography." *The Khazars: Second International Colloquium. Theses 2002, 98*.

casian and other Eurasian peoples could also lead to new inferences on the history of the Khazars (*Golden* 1980: 24).

Hopes placed on archaeology during the last decades were justified following the publication of Peter Golden's book. It is impossible to enumerate all the achievements of the Khazar archaeology during this period, although, along with resounding successes, were also disappointments. Expectations of archaeologists that excavations at Samosdelka, 40 km from Astrakhan, would lead to the discovery of

the Khazhar capital city of Itil failed to fully justify more than twelve years of work. However, last year, yet another contender for Itil's location appeared – the excavations undertaken near the rural locality of Semibugry on the Volga River delta (*Soloviev* 2020). What lies ahead, a new disappointment or a grand discovery? It is difficult to say. It is obvious that a rapid accumulation of archaeological data on the Khazars and the former Khazarian territory is underway. Such data might provide much food for thought and possible groundbreaking conclusions.

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