

Eastern Europe and the international trade in the eighth–tenth centuries (on the basis of written sources)

SZABOLCS POLGÁR



The aim of the dissertation was to collect and analyze the written sources on the Eastern European trade contacts in the eighth-tenth centuries. The chapters of this work are: 1) Introduction; 2) Sources; 3) Europe and the international trade in the early Middle Ages; 4) Merchants, tradesmen, mediators and the peoples of Eastern Europe in the early Middle Ages; 5) Wares; 6) Trade routes; 7) The forms of trade, transport, markets; 8) Towns, religious, political and cultural connections between Eastern Europe and the neighboring civilizations; 9) Trade contacts of the Carpathian basin after the Hungarian conquest; 10) Summary; 11) Bibliography and maps.

Eastern Europe is a large territory from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Caucasian mountains and from the Carpathian mountains to the Volga and Kama rivers. The political history of Eastern Europe from the defeat of the Huns (469) to the end of the seventh century is characterized by great migrations. The Oghurs, Onoghurs, Saraghurs, Kutrighurs, Utighurs, Avars, the Turks and perhaps the Protobulghars came from the East, the Slavic tribes came from the North. In the first half of the seventh century Kuvrat khan's Bulgharia emerged, which was conquered by the Khazars after the death of Kuvrat (665). The dominant power of Eastern Europe became the Khazar Kaghanate from the end of the seventh century to the end of the tenth century.

The Eastern European nomadic empires had multilateral relations with the neighboring civilizations such as the Roman and later the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanide Persia and later the Caliphate. The Arab conquest radically changed the political situation in Persia, Central Asia and the Transcaucasian region in the second half of the seventh century and at the beginning of the eighth century. In the first half of the eighth century the Khazars were at war with the Caliphate. The Byzantine Empire tried to have friendly relations with the Khazars. At the end of the seventh century the Khazars conquered a few Byzantine towns in the Eastern part of the Crimea, but the danger from the Caliphate helped on the alliance between them.

From the end of the eighth century a new period began in trade contacts of Eastern Europe. It was a period of booming trade. In the ninth and tenth centuries Eastern Europe took part more considerably in world trade than in the earlier centuries. The Khazars played a key role in the international trade since they controlled the main routes. One of them was the north-south route system, the Fur Road which led from the eastern European forest zone to Byzantium and the Caliphate (The Volga-Kama route and the Dnieper route). The other route was the north western part of the Silk Road. The Volga route and the Silk Road intersected in the Lower Volga region. It is no accident that the new capital of the Khazars was set up there after the Arab-Khazar wars.

The lands and peoples of Eastern Europe which took part in the international trade were: Khazaria, Volga Bulgharia, the Rus state, the Hungarians, the Pechenegs (after 894), Eastern Slavic tribes (Viatichians, Radimichians, Severians etc.), the Burtas people, the inhabitants of the forest zone: the Chuds, Livs, Letgals, Zengals, Merias, Muromas, Mordvins, Cheremis people, the tribes of Wisū (Ves'), Yugra (Yūra), Ar (land) and Bjarmaland (Biarmlia, Perm). There were professional tradesmen who played an important role in the trade: Muslims (especially the Khwarizmians), Rus (Russians), Jews (Rahdanites) and Greeks (Byzantines). As for the Muslims and Jews, some came from Western Europe, or the Caliphate, but others lived in Khazaria, Volga Bulgharia or the Rus. The Muslim Khwarazmians lived in Khazaria, Volga Bulgharia, the Rus, among the Hungarians and the Pechenegs.

The export wares were furs, slaves, honey, wax, yellow amber, weapons, horses, sheep, fish-glue, wood, salt, tusks of walrus or mammoth. The import wares were: textile materials, silk, clothes, silver dirhams, gold, glass beads, precious stones, jewels, cowrie, teak (wood), spices, wine, and fruits.

The main routes were: 1) The route "from the Varangians to the Greeks" that is the Dnieper route system (from the Baltic sea to Constantinople). 2) The Volga route which connected the Baltic zone with the Caspian sea. 3) The Don route (between the upper Volga and the Black sea). 4) The Silk road, and the routes between Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Khwarizm, Transoxania, Khorasan). 5) The land routes between Eastern Europe (Khazaria, Rus and Volga Bulgharia) and Central (and Western) Europe. 6) The sea routes of the Black sea.

There were markets in the trade centers. There are sources on the so called silent trade and on the "gift trade". The Russian translations of the two (or three) commercial treaties have been preserved. They provide important pieces of information on the trade of the Byzantine Empire with the northern "barbarian" neighbors. A Hungarian scholar, Charles (Károly) Polányi and others elaborated a theoretical model on the "archaic" or preindustrial commercial system between the developed civilizations and the undeveloped societies. According to Polányi's model, the "backwards" developed special foreign trade connections with the developed civilizations, which were under state control. The tradesmen coming from the developed countries were required to be in business on the special markets, the ports of trade. There were ports of trade in Eastern Europe in the eighth-

tenth centuries: e.g., Tamatarcha on the Taman-peninsula, town Etil on the lower Volga, port Bulghar in Volga Bulgharia.

The incomes of the Khazars derived from three sources: 1) Taxes or rates; 2) Customs duties; 3) Services. How large incomes could the Khazars have from the trade? The Khazars could have a share in the profit of the trade in two ways: 1) Direct commercial duties of the merchants coming from foreign countries (commercial tithe); 2) The merchants living among the Khazars took part in the commerce, they presumably exported furs and other goods to the Islamic countries. In the ninth century the fur trade was controlled by the Khazars. It was a very favorable position for the Khazars, but it did not last for long. At the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century two new states emerged which became rivals of the Khazars: the Rus and the Volga Bulgars. The origins of Rus were in connection with the migrations of Scandinavians into Northern Russia. The different groups of Scandinavians began to settle in the forest zone of North Western Russia from the eighth century. In the ninth century their earliest center was beside the Lake Ladoga. The commercial boom in Eastern Europe had an attraction for the commercial activity of the Rus. The Rus merchants travelled frequently into Kherson city (in the south western part of the Crimean Peninsula) and Constantinople. Their other main direction was the Volga Bulgharia and Khazaria. They mostly sold the wares in the towns of Bulgharia and Khazaria but occasionally reached the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and Iraq. The eastern trade connections of the Rus were under the control of the Volga Bulgars and the Khazars, the Rus merchants had to pay commercial tithe.

The other new state, the Volga Bulgharia was one of the vassals of Khazaria up to 922. The Volga Bulgars were formed from different tribes migrating from the South Russian steppes to the region of the confluence the Volga and Kama rivers. The earliest reports on the Volga Bulgars were recorded in the second half of the ninth century by Muslim geographers.

From the end of the ninth century there were a few events which contributed to the decline of the Khazar power over Eastern Europe. The first of them was the migration of the Pechenegs in the middle of the 890s. The Pechenegs entered by force into the South Russian steppes and expelled the Hungarians who were allies of the Khazars. The Khazars lost the control over the steppe region between the Don and Danube rivers. The Pechenegs did not become the vassals of the Khazars. The withdrawal of the Hungarians from the Dnieper region helped on the political activity of the Rus. A Russian prince Oleg conquered the forest steppe zone in the Dnieper region and Kiev which became the capital of the Rus state. There are reports in the Russian Primary Chronicle that Prince Oleg imposed tax on the Slavic tribes of the middle Dnieper and Oka region such as the Drevlians, Severians and Radimiches. It meant that the Khazars lost the control in the forest zone and forest steppe zone, between the Dnieper and the Upper Volga, that is the western region of the home of furs. The next shock for the Khazars was the secession of the Volga Bulgharia from the Khazar Kaghanate. The Bulghar king Almush officially converted into the Islam in 922 and issued his own silver coins. It was a symbolic act of independence. The main problem for

the Khazars was that they lost control over the peoples of the Upper Volga region, that is the forest zone, the home of furs.

The reduction of the lands of furs caused the reduction of the commercial incomes of the Khazar Empire. Muslim authors mentioned that the Khazar mercenary troops did not get enough salary in the middle of the tenth century. The expansive ambition of the Kievan Rus increased in the 960's under the reign of prince Sviatoslav. The Khazar-Rus relations were peaceful up to this time. At the beginning of the tenth century the Khazars let the Russian troops pass through to Khazaria to attack the South Caspian region. Around 960 the military marches across the Kaghanate were already prohibited by the Khazar kings. In 964 prince Sviatoslav conquered a Slavic people, the Viatichians who paid tribute to the Khazars. The Rus dealt the Khazars a heavy blow in 965 and 969. The Khazars lost their role in the intermediary trade. The Volga Bulgars could continue the trade with the East, but the volume of the trade was a bit reduced at the beginning of the eleventh century. Neither the Bulgars nor the Rus could control the whole Volga route, because the new nomadic tribe confederation the Oghuzes migrating from the Kazakh steppe prevented them.

As all over the world, the cultural and religious contacts between different societies, civilizations were facilitated by the trade. The first wave of the spread of Islam in Eastern Europe was in the Khazar period. The Islam took roots in the Volga and Caucasus regions in the ninth-tenth centuries. In the towns of Khazaria and Volga Bulgaria Muslim communities existed. In addition, Jews, Christians, and believers of other religions lived there. In this region the elements of urban culture of the Islamic civilization appeared (market-places, mosques, baths, Koran-schools). The Caucasus-Volga-Don zone had contacts with the Islamic world and the Byzantine civilization alike. The western part, the Dnieper region was even more under the influence of the Byzantine civilization. It could be concluded that this peripheral zone north of the Black sea and the Caucasus had many cultural and religious impulses from the neighboring developed cultural centers during this period.

As for the Hungarians before the conquest of the Carpathian basin, they joined in the international trade, sold Slave captives in the Crimean Peninsula. There were foreign traders among the Hungarians. After the conquest the Hungarians reorganized the commercial connections of the Carpathian basin. In the tenth century this area was incorporated into the international trade, partly in the Eastern European trade.