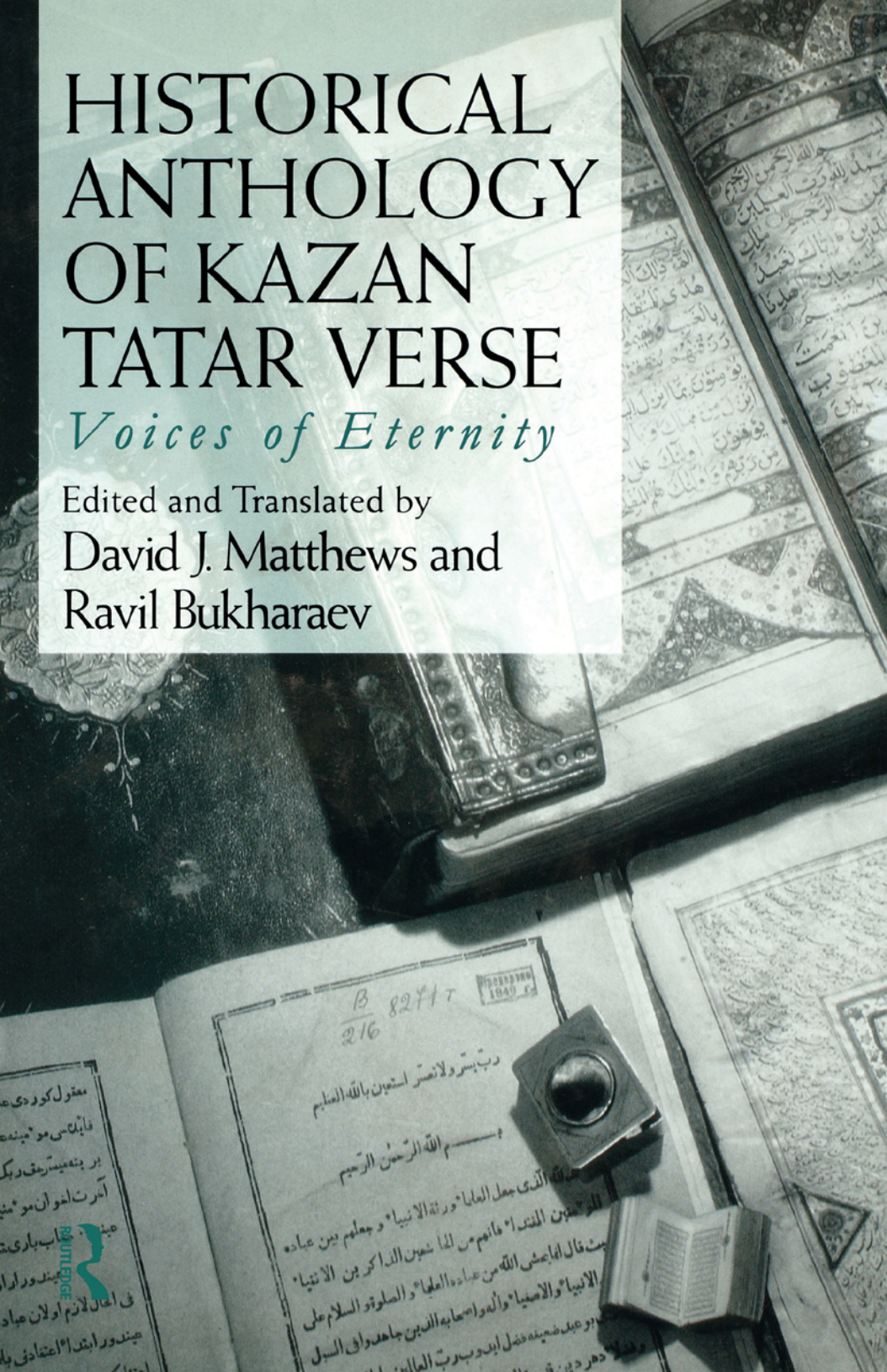
HISTORICAL ANTHOLOGY OF KAZAN TATAR VERSE

Voices of Eternity

Edited and Translated by

David J. Matthews and

Ravil Bukharaev



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Preface

My path is narrow, but my way is straight;
My people are Tatars; I shall not fear.
G. Tukai

I am Tatar and the son of a Tatar.
If you say otherwise my friend, beware!
Derdmend

For many people the former Soviet Union was always something of an enigma. From time immemorial this vast area of the world has been inhabited by hundreds of larger and smaller nations, all of them having their own native tongues, folklore and literature. Yet few people have been aware of the considerable variety of the cultures and languages which have existed and indeed still exist in what was termed the USSR. Whatever emerged from the country was usually thought of merely as 'Russian'. Little attention was paid to the non-Slavonic communities, which made up a very large part of its population.

This Anthology aims at providing an illustrated account of the largely unknown verse of just one of these nations, the Kazan Tatars, a people who have inhabited the regions along the Volga for over a thousand years. Their language, which belongs to the Uralian or Kipchak-Bulgar division of the modern Turkic languages, has been written since at least the middle of the 13th century AD, and its literature, mainly in the form of verse, has continued to flourish often against all odds to the present day. According to the population census of 1979, 6.3 million Soviet citizens recorded their nationality as 'Tatar', making them the third largest Turkic group and the sixth in the rank order of Soviet nationalities. Their historical home, Tatarstan, is now a Presidential Republic within the framework of the

Russian Federation, with which it maintains a bilateral treaty of association. Its capital city, Kazan, has for a long time been its main political and cultural centre, and like its inhabitants it has miraculously survived the destruction periodically inflicted upon it by its attackers.

The earliest major text, the language of which we can feel justified in calling 'Tatar', is a lengthy and ornate adaptation of the Quranic story of Joseph, versions of which are also found in Persian and other languages. The *Kitāb-i Yūsuf*, 'The Book of Joseph', was written during the 13th century by a certain Kol Gali (Qul 'Alī) who probably died during the attack on the Volga city of Bolgar by the armies of Chingīz Khān in 1236. From the point of view of style and versification the work is quite remarkable, and as the first substantial work of Tatar literature holds a special place in the affections of its people. Like much of the Tatar literature which followed it, the 'Book of Joseph' survived mainly by chance. The Mongol invasions of the Volga regions dispersed the indigenous population, which only with the greatest difficulty managed to preserve at least a part of its culture.

During the period of the Golden Horde, which lasted for almost two centuries, other Tatar poets emerged, producing versions of well-known tales such as the 'Skull King' and the 'Severed Head'. In these stories, the skull and the disembodied head deliver grave warnings to the reader about the folly of pride and the trials that await sinners in the life to come. These moralistic legends, which have often been retold, though naive, and in parts quite amusing, provide us with almost the only written evidence we possess for the reaction of the Tatars to life under the Mongol Yoke. The verse literature of this long and harrowing period reached its climax with the lyric poetry of Saif-i Sarai, who was forced to flee before his country was once more overrun, this time by the ruthless onslaught of Tamerlane in 1388. Yet again the cities of the Tatars along with their libraries and places of learning were destroyed.

History often repeated itself. In 1552, the Tatar capital, Kazan, fell to Ivan the Terrible, and much of its culture, which had temporarily revived, was erased. During the reigns of Peter the Great and Catherine, enforced conversion to Orthodoxy and the policy of 'Russification' not only robbed the Tatars of the right to practise their religion, Islam, but almost succeeded in eradicating their language. The literature we have from the 18th century was largely the product of village *madrasas*, traditional Islamic schools which were

practically the only source of education for the majority of the people. Tatars were forbidden to settle in their former towns, and, unless they became Christian, were also deprived of their land. From this time onwards, exile and alienation from what the people viewed as a glorious past became one of the major themes of their poetry.

Even in the more liberal atmosphere of the 19th century, Tatar writers had to struggle for their cultural survival, and so many of them died prematurely in poverty. No sooner had the first printing-press been established in Kazan than the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 plunged the land once more into chaos. The Stalinist repression of minorities was so harsh that it is remarkable that their spirit survived. The script of the language was changed twice – from Arabic to Roman, and then to Cyrillic. Censorship was, of course, harshly imposed. During the first decades of the 20th century, Tatar poets, like their Russian contemporaries, spoke much of the devastation and futility of war, the glory of the motherland and the natural beauty of their own forests and fields.

Poetry still remains one of the most popular means of self-expression among the Tatars, and modern newspapers frequently contain whole pages devoted to it. With the recent formation of Tatarstan, writers have begun to feel that after many centuries of deprivation they at last have a land in which they will be able to give free rein to their thoughts and talents.

In this book, we have tried to present through English translation a picture of what Tatar poets have contributed to the world over the last eight centuries. Because of the ravages of history much of what was written has been lost, and indeed a great deal more research remains to be done. We are sadly aware that our selection represents little more than a fragment of what might have existed.

This book was originally conceived by Ravil Bukharaev, who contributed much of the historical information contained in the Introduction, and selected the poems included in the Anthology. Ravil Bukharaev also made a word-for-word translation of the anthology from Tatar into English. The final editing and the rendering of the Tatar poems into English verse were the responsibility of David Matthews.

We wish to express our gratitude to President Mintimer Shaimiev and to the Government of the Republic of Tatarstan for the generous support they gave in making this work possible.

David J. Matthews
Ravil Bukharaev

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A Note on Transcription

Until the first decades of the 20th century, Tatar was written in an adapted version of the Arabic alphabet. In the 1920s, the script was romanized by government order, but subsequently was brought into line with the other Turkic languages of the Soviet Union by being written in an augmented version of the Cyrillic (i.e. Russian) script. The latter is still used for writing Tatar. None of these scripts or orthographic systems are totally adequate for representing the sounds of the language, and further reforms, inclining in favour of a new Roman script, are at present under review. Transcription therefore presents some problems.

The Arabic alphabet for the most part consists only of consonants, some of which are also used to represent long vowels. (This inadequacy led to Mustafa Kemal's reform of Turkish orthography in the early part of this century.) The signs for three of the short vowels, /a/, /i/, /u/ are rarely used. This is naturally a great disadvantage when writing Turkic languages, which possess a far wider range of vowels than Arabic. Moreover, the pronunciation of certain Arabic consonants, which are of common occurrence in Tatar and other Turkic languages, also differs considerably from that of Arabic. For example, the Arabic pharyngeal fricative *'ain*, which we transcribe as /ᶜ/, in Tatar is pronounce as /g/. Thus the name, commonly transcribed from Arabic as *'Alī*, is pronounced roughly as *Gali* in Tatar.

In Cyrillic, the sound /h/, which is represented by two different letters in the Arabic alphabet (as in Hasan, Hārūn etc,) is written as /x/, which in Russian is pronounced as the /ch/ in the Scottish *loch*. We prefer *Hasan* to the commonly transcribed *Khasan*.

When transliterating proper names, we have given them first in the form which represents contemporary Tatar pronunciation. This

is followed by the form of name as it is written in the Arabic alphabet, and the one which will be more familiar to the western reader. Thus the name *Kol Gali* is followed in brackets by its Arabic-alphabet version *Qul 'Alī* . Similarly *Gabdeljabbar* is followed by *'Abdul-Jabbār,* etc.

The following conventions are followed in this book:

(i) vowels marked with a macron are pronounced long:

/ā/ as in English 'father'	e.g. *Kātib*
/ī/ as in English 'seem'	e.g. *Chingīz*
/ū/ as in English 'soon'	e.g. *Rūmī*

(ii) the transcription of the following consonants should also be noted:

/j/ as in English 'judge'	e.g. *Jochi*
/kh/ as in Scottish 'loch'	e.g. *Khān*
/q/ as in English 'king'	e.g. *Qāzi*
/ᶜ/ Arabic *'ain*	ignored in pronunciation, e.g. *'Alī*
/gh/ is a 'voiced' *kh*	e.g. *ghazal*

Double consonants are given their full force as in Italian *giubba, ecco,* etc., e.g. *Jabbār.*

The above remarks apply mainly to names cited in the Introduction, the short biographical notices which precede each selection, and the footnotes. Names in the text of the poems are given without diacritics. When place-names have commonly accepted English spellings, such as Mecca, Medina, Kerbala etc., these have been retained.

The Persian (and indeed Tatar) spellings *Chingīz Khān* and *Timur* are used throughout for the common English variants: 'Genghis Khan' and 'Taimur' or 'Tamerlane'.

Finally it should be noted that the spelling *Bolgar* is used for the name of the city, while *Bulgar* denotes the region and its people.

A Note on the Translation

From the earliest period, Tatar verse, like that of Arabic and Persian, and indeed later of Russian, has for the most part been rhymed and written in accordance with strict rules of prosody and metre. 'Blank verse', composed with no detectable or regular rhythm and rhyme, even among modern writers, is a rare exception. When translating Tatar verse into English, therefore, we have done our best to reflect this tradition.

Poets who wrote before, during and immediately after the time of the Golden Horde used either traditional Turkish rhythms, such as the popular hendecasyllable (i.e. lines containing eleven syllables), or metres closely based on the quantitive system employed in Arabic and Persian. Like the metres of Ancient Greek and Latin verse those of Arabic and Persian conform to patterns of long and short syllables, and not as in English to those involving stress. Such metres were codified by using various forms of the basic Arabic verb *fi'l* 'to do'. Thus the popular metre ¯ ∪ ¯ ¯ | ¯ ∪ ¯ ¯ | ¯ ∪ ¯ ¯ | ¯ ∪ ¯ ¯, known technically by the name *ramal* (three feet with the pattern: long, long, short, long , and the fourth foot: long, short, long), would be noted by the formula: *fā'ilātun, fā'ilātun, fā'ilātun, fā'ilun.* This is in fact the metre of the poem *Kisek-bash* 'The Severed Head' and reference to the somewhat cumbersome system of notation is made jokingly by Tukai in the last verse of his poem *The Haymarket.* Once such a metrical pattern is established in the first verse of the poem, no variation can be admitted.

These traditional metres persisted long after the collapse of the Golden Horde and can still be found in the verse of modern poets by whom they have been revived. During the 18th and 19th centuries, however, the influence of Russian prosody is obvious and the rhythms become a combination of both stress and quantity.

Rhyme also plays a large part in Tatar verse. Many of the long narrative poems, like classical Persian *masnavīs*, are composed in rhyming couplets. Some like the *Qissa-e Yūsuf* have the rhyme scheme AAAX, BBBX etc., with the last words of the fourth line being repeated in each stanza. The *qasīda* (like the *Dawn Ode* of Saif-i Sarai) and the *ghazal* (the short lyric), a favourite genre of many poets, have the rhyme scheme AA, BA, CA etc. Later Tatar poetry is rhymed in much the same way as its contemporary Russian verse, a popular pattern being ABAB etc.

It is, of course, impossible to imitate rhythm and rhyme exactly, since most of the traditional patterns are quite alien to the English ear. We have, therefore, often been obliged to compromise, and, while retaining rhythm and rhyme, have chosen forms which fit more naturally into English verse.

In translating the Tatar texts we have tried to reflect the original as faithfully and accurately as possible, but have made no attempt to imitate archaisms and *recherché* vocabulary, in which much of the earlier verse abounds. Our preference has been for modern, poetic English, which does justice to the original without becoming unnecessarily quaint.

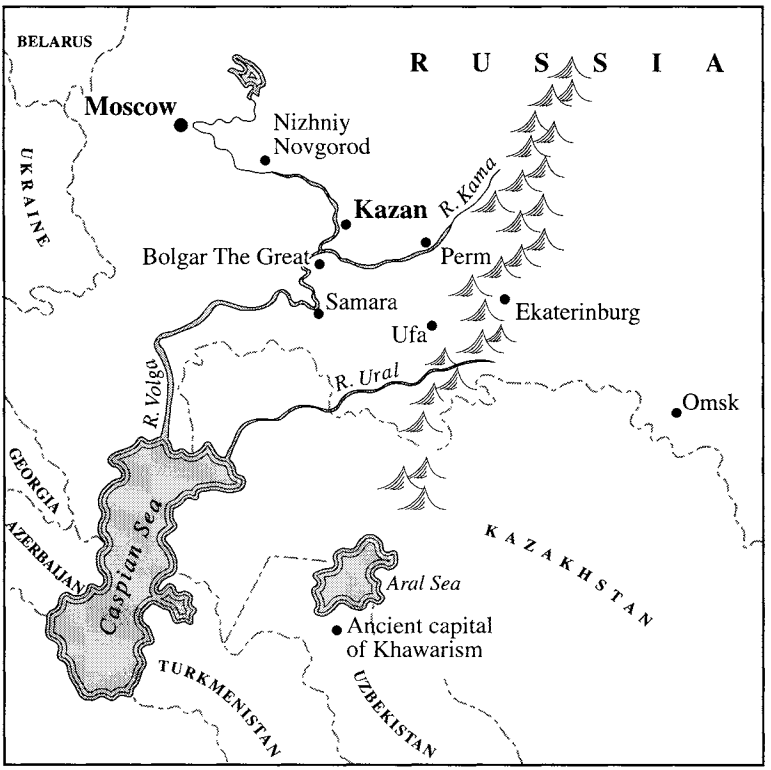
The vast majority of the poems we have selected speak for themselves, and except for occasional footnotes, which for the most part gloss proper names or technical terms, we have added no learned or dreary commentary.

While preparing this Anthology, we became acutely aware that little background material on Tatar literature exists elsewhere. The majority of the texts we have chosen exist only in small volumes which are now out of print. A certain amount of excellent research has been conducted by modern Tatar scholars, and such work is now proceeding apace. Translations of some of the works of the best known writers are available in Russian, but the availability of such books is severely limited. Little mention of the poets who flourished in Volga-Bulgaria is made even in the best histories of Turkish literature, whose authors are presumably unaware of their existence. The epic poem of *Edighey* and the *Suhail-Geldersen* romance of Saif-i Sarai, for example, are surely worthy of much deeper study.

By offering this small selection of Tatar verse in English translation we hope to have done some justice to a largely unknown literature which certainly deserves its rightful place in the world.

In the selection, the poets have been introduced in chronological order. Four major divisions have been made: (1) poets who lived

before and during the Golden Horde; (2) poets of the Kazan Khanate; (3) poets of the Russian Empire which came to an end with the Revolution of 1917 and (4) contemporary poets, all of whom were born and/or worked during the Soviet period. Brief biographies have been given for those poets who have gained a lasting national reputation. Contemporary writers are referred to only by their dates.



Map of the Region

Historical Introduction: Volga-Bulgaria (before 1236)

Your every stone, fit for a precious ring,
Will fill my soul with pride for its true art.
Ah, Bolgar! You are not a simple song;
You are the very centre of my heart
Renat Haris

If we look at a map of the area which extends from the Volga to the Urals and consider the movements throughout history of the peoples who have traversed it and brought to it their various cultures, we begin to appreciate that this region, in spite of its apparent remoteness from the better studied centres of human civilization, was never, as some have imagined, 'a God-forsaken and miserable land'. It was crossed from east to west by the White and Black Huns who emerged from the depths of Siberia, and by traders who sought both goods and knowledge. From the most ancient times trade routes extended from north to south facilitating access to fur, silver and gold which abounded in the region. In his account of Heracles and Gelonos, Herodotus mentions a wooden city[1], which was situated somewhere on the southern frontier of the Hyperborean lands. By some it is thought that this city stood near the mouth of the river Kama, which flows into the Volga where the city of Bolgar was later constructed. If this is correct, the territory of Volga-Bulgaria, the centre of Tatar civilization and literature, would have been exposed to Greek culture as early as the fifth century B.C.

In Turkic languages the Volga is variously called *Itil* (Old Turkish), *Idel* (Kazan Tatar) and *Atil* (Chuvash), and the name is popularly connected with that of Attila. The Russian name Volga has a number of popular etymologies ranging from Turkic *elga* 'river' to

'Valhalla', the paradise of the gods of the Vikings who sailed along its stream.

Whatever the truth of the many fanciful or even possible accounts and hypotheses, we can say with certainty that the present day Republic of Tatarstan, which roughly covers the central area of the once illustrious Volga-Bulgaria, has always been a meeting place for various cultures and civilisations of the world. Fur from the Urals was worn by the rulers of ancient Greece, Babylon, Persia and India as well as by the monarchs of Byzantium. Traders not only exchanged goods, but brought with them the cultural traditions of their own lands, and such memories were preserved and reflected in the legends which grew up in the Volga-Ural area. Traces of these legends can be found in literatures as far apart as those of Finland, Hungary, Northern China and Siberia. The myth of the Eternal Tree, which extends its branches to the heavenly abode of the gods is found in the folklore of both Tatarstan and Scandinavia.

Volga-Tatar, or Kazan Tatar, as the language of our poetry is often called, belongs to the group of Turkic languages, the earliest written evidence for which dates from the sixth to eighth centuries AD. The first phases of 'Turkic' literature are usually regarded as the common property of all the Turks; later phases, which reflect the ethnic and cultural peculiarities of the various national groups, form separate literatures. Turkish, however, is noted for its 'conservatism' and the modern branches of the language have remained very close to each other. Those who know contemporary Turkish, therefore, will have little difficulty in coming to terms with Tatar, Uzbek or Kazakh, though it would be a gross exaggeration to say that these languages are mutually comprehensible[2].

When we search for the earliest traces of Kazan Tatar poetry, we should base our observations on geographical and cultural distinctions rather than linguistic factors. In as much as it is difficult to separate the various Turkic languages in the earliest stages of their development, it will be reasonable to define Tatar writing as that which was composed in the region where those who thought of themselves as Tatars actually lived and worked. This means the area that was usually known as Volga-Bulgaria.

Few ancient geographical names have survived since the first appearance of the 'Bulgars' in the region between the Volga and Kama rivers. The names *Bolgar* and *Idel*, however, are found on the oldest maps, such as the Roger Map of Al-Idrīsī, which was made in Sicily in 1154 AD. These maps were based on the accounts of early

travellers who visited Bolgar in the 9th and 10th centuries. The narratives of Ibn-Fadlan, Ibn Haukal and Al-Masᶜūdī were followed by the account of the Andalusian traveller, Al-Gharnāti who visited the city of Bolgar several times between 1135 and 1151. Al-Gharnāti made extensive use of local historical sources, one of them being a history of Bolgar by Ibn Nogman (Ibn Nuᶜmān), the former Qāzi of the city. From this book, which is now lost, he quotes:

> *Once a Muslim merchant, well versed in medical studies, came to Bolgar from Bukhara. At the time, the king of Bolgar and his wife were very ill and had lost all hope of recovery. In spite of employing the local remedies, they were deteriorating and already feared imminent death. The holy-man asked them if they would accept his faith. Both agreed, saying "Yes we shall." After the holy-man had given them the appropriate cure, the King and his wife recovered and embraced the faith of Islam*[3].

It is known that Islam came to the Volga-Kama region towards the middle of the ninth century. Ibn Rusta in his 'Book of Noble Treasures' which was compiled between 903 and 907 AD records that the King of Bolgar and his family and courtiers were Muslim. He also mentions the existence in local townships and villages of mosques, schools, *mullahs* and *muezzins*, and states that the King wages 'holy wars' on his pagan neighbours.

The date 922 AD is commonly accepted for the 'official' arrival of Islam on the banks of the middle Volga. Along with the introduction of Islamic tenets came a sharp increase in literacy, and these factors greatly improved the trade relations of Volga-Bulgaria with the rest of the Islamic world. The region now became part of the cultural sphere embraced by the more advanced civilisations of Khwarezm, Persia, the Arab Middle East and Spain. So far the Turks had played a minor role in the Islamic world, and Volga-Bulgaria might be considered one of the first Turkic states having all the components and potential of a highly developed urban culture. The population of the area was made up not only of the ancient Bulgar and Kipchak tribes, but also inhabited by people of Finno-Ugric origin[4]. Slav tribes, fleeing from the compulsory baptism which they were forced to undergo in Rus', added to the ethnic mosaic. A seventeenth century Russian treatise, which describes the conquered Tatar territories clearly states:

> *'There live Khazars, Balyms (?) and Bulgars as well as some fugitives from lands of Rostov, who, having rejected Holy Baptism for their paganism, have*

taken refuge in Tatar territory and embraced Islam along with their nomadic way of life[5].'

The predominant component of the Volga-Bulgar population, however, remained Turkic, and their language remained their own branch of Turkish. In 'The Collection of the Languages of the Turks', compiled by Mahmūd Kāshgarī around 1170 AD, we find the first poetic reference to the river *Itil*, the Volga:

The Itil's stream will ever flow;
Against the cliffs will ever blow
And fish and frogs will live and grow
And water-meadows overflow.

This simple poem, which may be ascribed to the tenth century or even earlier, perhaps a remnant of ancient folk literature, is written in a metre still used by Kazan Tatars. Although there are no real grounds for claiming it to be the very first piece of Tatar verse we possess, and indeed other Turkic-speaking people might be justified in making the same claim for themselves, the mention of the Volga has led some to conclude that it is indeed Tatar!

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, before the Mongol invasion, which began in earnest in 1236 AD, Volga-Bulgaria appears to have been prosperous in both material and cultural terms. In his work *Islam and the Soviet Union*, Alexandre Bennigsen refers to the Tatars of the Volga as 'possessors of an ancient and splendid civilisation'[6]. We may judge the achievements of that period on both archaeological finds and written works composed in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Although accounts mentioning the Tatars contain no examples of any verse that might have been written at the time, the mention of the names of certain authors suggest that a literature may have existed.

We have already mentioned Yaqūb ibn Nuᶜmān (1022–1086), the Qāzi of Bolgar, and his history from which al-Gharnāti quoted. In addition we know of the existence of a certain Hoja Ahmed Bolgari, who according to some sources, was employed as a teacher by Mahmud Ghaznavī (907–1030)[7]. Other names include Abul 'Alā Hamīd bin Idrīs al Bolgari, who flourished at the beginning of the twelfth century, the scholars and poets Sulaimān bin Daud, Borhanetdin Ibrahim Bolgari (d.1204), and Tajetdin bin Yunus al-Bolgari. All of them lived and worked in the cities of Volga-Bulgaria, such as Bolgar the Great, Suwar, Saksin and Juketau,