

Reviews of Books

Антон К. Салмин. *Савиры, болгары и тюрко-монголы в истории чувашей*. Санкт-Петербург, 'Нестор-История', 2019. 296 с.
(Anton K. Salmin. *Savirs, Bulgarians and Turko-Mongols in the History of the Chuvash*. St. Petersburg, 'Nestor-History', 2019. 296 p.)

This book is the work of Anton Salmin, Doctor of Historical Sciences and a leading research associate at the Russian Academy of Sciences, who has been dealing with the peoples of the Volga region for many decades. His perspective is ethnographic and at the same time historical and this fact makes his research especially valuable for us, the Bulgarians south of the Danube. The study aims to “stratify” the most important ethnic components of the former Volga-Kama Bulgaria and its “extensions”, which came as a result of its conquest by the Mongols in the 13th century, and subsequently of the Russian (Moscow) domination, trying to outline some of the modern topographic dimensions of these “layers”. And behind them, as can be seen from the title of the book, are the Suvars, the Bulgarians, and respectively the Turko-Mongols (sic). The order in the title, as well as in the content – placing the Suvars first, betrays the intention and deep conviction of the author that the Suvar population of the Volga region played a significant role in the local development of cultural and historical processes in the Middle Ages and later. It is no coincidence that Salmin, like other authors, connects today’s Chuvash with the heritage of the Suvar/Savir

ethnic group, once part of the Bulgarian state along the Volga and Kama (see, for example, p. 86, as well as Conclusion, p. 246). However, the author quite correctly analyzes in this study the other two most common hypotheses about the ancestors of modern Chuvash – the Bulgarians (*българи*, in Russian transliteration) and the Turko-Mongols.

The structure of the book is pre-conceived as a set of common for all three ethnic groups “parameters” in which the following sustainable cores are analyzed: ethnonyms, history, geography, genogeography (sic), anthropology, archaeology, religion, language, ethnography, art and folklore. It is evident that purposefully repeating structural units are sought to give homogeneity to the analysis. It is noteworthy that in the chapter on the Bulgarians (Chapter 2: “Bulgarians”, pp. 117–186) the core “folklore” is missing, and in the chapter on the Turks and Mongols (Chapter 3, pp. 187–245) is added a core “Tatarization” (sic), but instead the core “art” is missing there.

In addition to these three chapters, the study includes an Introduction (pp. 3–16), which discusses issues of methodology and historiography on the topic. The book ends with a very short Con-

clusion (with a volume of just over one page!), which is also translated into English, followed by archival sources, used literature and accepted abbreviations. Such a structure contributes to the clarity of the study, and the isolation of identical cores makes it easy to find significant comparisons and relevant conclusions of the author.

Anton Salmin is particularly fond of his method of “exceptions and approximations”, which he finds quite correct in the study of the Chuvash, as it allows him to study “their relations with neighbouring municipalities” (p. 4). He also insists on the need for a complex or interdisciplinary approach in the study of ethnogenetic processes (p. 4), something quite natural for what he calls a historical-ethnographic direction. Again in view of the methodology, Salmin emphasizes (1) a specific phenomenon typical of antiquity and the Middle Ages – the existence of „neutral bands” between individual countries (and even between ethnic groups within a country) (p. 7), which can be associated, for example, with medieval terms such as *terrae desertae*, or with the now-established term ‘no man’s land’, and (2) the author emphasizes the difference between the term ‘tribe’ (fundamental in his study) and the term ‘people’. Based on this distinction, he also notes the existence of two separate terms in the Turkic languages – *el* (“tribe”, “tribal union”) and *bodun* (“people”) (pp. 9–10). I must point out, however, that *el* is something much larger than an ordinary “tribe” and rather denotes “politically organized imperial confederations” in the so-called Steppe empire, led by the Hagan (source of the law – ‘*törü*’, and with power sanc-

tioned by Heaven, i.e. of divine origin), spreading imperial order/Pax (cf. Pax Romana, Pax Turcica, Pax Khazarica and the like).

The author traces not only the old history of the Savirs/Suvars in the Caucasus (and especially in present-day Dagestan), which he considers to be the most probable ancestors of today’s Chuvash, but also marks the first appearances of the term Chuvash/Chyuvash in official Russian documents from the 15th century onwards. For him, the formation of the Chuvash people took place in the south of Volga Bulgaria, and this process was realized on the right bank of the Volga in the period from the 10th to the 15th century (p. 23 et seq., 32). Subsequently, mainly in the 18th – 19th centuries, within the Russian monarchy at certain moments the Chuvash together with the local Tatar population were placed under pressure from Christian missionaries. The latter also explains why the local Tatar Islamic clerics seek to strengthen and mass the adoption of Islam among the peasants along the Volga, incl. among the local Chuvash – as a counterpoint to the Orthodox Russian Empire. The author adequately presents with examples how the baptized Tatars still maintained some closeness with the local Chuvash, as both communities have preserved a number of ancient beliefs and ideas (pp. 208–211).

Of course, as with any book, critical remarks can be made here on some of A. Salmin’s terms or conclusions. For example, he accepts the existence of “early feudal relations” in the Caucasus, on the basis of which the Suvar state was formed (pp. 20, 46, 48) as early as the middle of the 7th century. The claim is quite im-

plausible, because feudalism – as far as it existed, as this term is subject to dispute even for Western Europe, which is its “homeland” – cannot be sought as a reality before the end of the 8th century. Another inaccuracy is the author’s use of the “southern Russian steppes” around 895 and the Pecheneg attacks (p. 48), as the possessions of Kievan Rus at that time did not extend to the Northern Black Sea coast, where the Pechenegs operated. It is also strange that A. Salmin devotes less than one page to the archaeological artefacts from the era of domination of the Turks and the Mongols along the Volga and Kama (p. 203), against the background of 6–7 pages devoted to the same topic discussed in connection with the Suvars and the Bulgarians. However, the main finds in today’s Tatarstan are precisely from the time after the Mongols imposed their power here after the 1230s, incl. the largest number of buildings made of stone. Another important critical remark can be made to A. Salmin’s book: it seems to me that such an ambitious study should end with a far broader conclusion that could define (or at least set as future goals) other analysis-and-synthesis options.

The author of this review fully shares the opinion of A. Salmin that in the 10th century Suvars and Volga Bulgarians were still not one, as the centralization of Volga-Kama Bulgaria had not yet taken place. At the same time, to me it seems inaccurate to state (p. 57; see also p. 133) that at that time the Suvars were both politically and territorially independent (sic) from the Bulgarians. Based on the specifics of power and political ideology of the Steppe Empire, it is rather per-

missible to assume that the Suvars were subordinated to the supreme power of the “king” of the Volga Bulgarians, without this meaning that the Suvar ruler was deprived of any administrative and judicial rights over their own subjects.

Another opinion of the author is quite correct, namely that in the Early Middle Ages the Savirs/Suvars were much closer to the Khazars than to the Bulgarians (p. 86). This conclusion is important from the point of view of both the details of the study of the steppe belt of Western Eurasia between the 6th and 8th centuries and the finer distinctions between the two most important ethnopolitical formations in the region north of the Caucasus in that era, known as Kubrat’s “Greater Bulgaria” and Khazaria. On this basis, Salmin also maintains the view of the transition from Savirs through Suvars to Chuvash (p. 107). His statement about the gradual Kipchakization (Kumanization) of the language of the Volga Bulgarians after the 11th century is also convincing, as is his statement (p. 216) that the language of the Chuvash in ancient times was a “pre-Turkic phenomenon” (see also p. 226).

Finally, it would be especially interesting for the Bulgarian reader to make comparisons of the conclusions of A. K. Salmin with the researches of some Bulgarian authors (G. Vladimirov, I. Mechkov, P. Pavlov, V. Stoyanov, etc.) and especially of the late researcher (ethnographer, folklorist and musicologist) Ruzha Neykova (“Ethnocultural parallels on the way of the Bulgarians in the Balkans – Caucasian space and the Volga region” (Sofia, 2015; especially pp. 144–165, 304–384), who paid a lot of atten-

tion not only to the Volga Bulgarians, but also to the Chuvash. After all, the common “denominator” of both the Danube and the Volga-Kama Bulgarians, incl. and the Savirs (Suvars) is the Caucasian ethno-political space. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the Danube Bulgarians of Asparuh inherited in South-eastern Europe the so-called late antique (Roman) population and its traditions, while those on the Volga and Kama faced the heritage of the substrate population of Hungarian and Finnish origin, which was far less developed than the Bulgarians. And secondly, it is necessary to take into account that in addition to the different substrates, the Bulgarians from the above

two geographical areas professed different monotheistic religions – Christianity among the Danube Bulgarians (after the 860s) and Islam among the Volga-Kama population. These region-specific aspects will undoubtedly be reflected at least in the folklore data we have today.

This book, arguing and persuading, will deserve the attention of Bulgarian researchers and especially of those who seek to gain a deeper knowledge of the processes in which a certain factor recognizable in the destinies of both Danube and Volga Bulgaria manifests itself – the Cumans/Kipchaks.

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