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## Исследования и публикации

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### 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF BILYAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION: RESULTS AND ISSUES OF GREAT TOWN INVESTIGATION

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The article outlines the main results of the investigation of Bilyar fortified settlement – a unique monument of medieval East-European archaeology located in Alexeyevsky District of the Tatarstan Republic. A small amount of information on Bilyar has remained in Ancient Russian chronicles (in which it is referred to as Great Town) and the works by 10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century Arabic and Persian authors. The monument has been known to historians since 18<sup>th</sup> century, but its archaeological excavations only started in 1967. For 20 years researchers studied its fortifications, five urban burial grounds (including a necropolis of nobility in the centre of the town), discovered the ruined remains of three brick buildings and a white-stone Cathedral Mosque with a free-standing minaret, craft workshops (pottery, glass-making, blacksmithing and metallurgical), as well as tens and hundreds of common dwellings, utility structures and wells. The discoveries made by Bilyar expedition received a positive reaction from the archaeological community of the country. Since late 1980s the activity of the expedition gradually decreased due to the absence of adequate financing. Minor protective excavations were generally performed in the neighbouring villages. Investigation of the settlement itself continued in 2015. The necessity of continuing systematic excavations in Bilyar and the surrounding monuments is evident from both the scientific and practical viewpoints – application of investigation results for the purposes of tourism.

**Keywords:** archaeology, Volga Bulgaria, Bilyar fortified settlement and its surrounding areas, investigation history, major achievements, research issues and perspectives.

Bilyar is a unique monument of medieval East-European archaeology and one of the few historically known towns of Volga Bulgaria dating back to 10<sup>th</sup> – first third of 13<sup>th</sup> centuries originally mentioned by the so-called Hungarian Anonymus who wrote about the arrival of Muslim Bulgars (bilers) coming from Bular lands (terra Bular) to Hungary during the rule of Takshon circa 970 (Chwolson, 1869, pp. 108–109; Tardy, 1982, p. 237). Ancient Russian chronicles referred to it by the name of the Great Town. Laurentian Codex dated 1164 contains a narrative concerning a successful campaign of prince Andrey

Bogolyubsky against Volga Bulgaria during which Bolgar khan's forces had to retreat to the Great Town on the Cheremshan river (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 1, 1962, columns 352–353. Bilyar the Great Town is mentioned for the second time under year 1183 in the description of a great campaign by joined forces of Russian princes against the capital of the state. Vsevolod and his allies besieged the town for ten days, but when it became certain that it could not be taken by storm, concluded peace on the conditions proposed by the Bolgar emir (Complete Collection of Russian



Chronicles, vol. 1, 1962, column 390). According to chronicles, the Russians went on a military campaign against Oshel in 1220, but its defenders were with a certain delay supported by the Great Town (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 9–10, 1965, p. 84). Year 1229 is related in Laurentian Codex with a narrative on Bolgar citizens of the Great Town who murdered a certain Abraham of Christian faith, who was later consecrated a saint (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 1, 1962, column 452). Further references to Bilyar in written sources are related to 13<sup>th</sup> century campaigns of Mongol-Tatar forces who repeatedly attempted to conquer the Bolgar land. According to one of the chroniclers, in 1232 Mongol troops were forced to pass the winter “on the way to the Great Town of Bolgar” (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 1, 1962, column 459). In 1235 the neighbourhood of the Great Town (or perhaps the town itself) was visited by a Hungarian monk Julian searching for his countrymen (Anninsky, 1940, p. 80–81). The last mention of the Great Town is related to the tragic events of 1236 which resulted in a complete devastation of the Bolgar capital after which it no longer existed as a town (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles, vol. 1, 1962, column 460). Bilyar is also mentioned by 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century authors, but they refer to it in connection with the events related to Mongol conquests (ref. Khalikov, Khuzin, 1991, p. 43–45).

The archaeological remains of the town – Bilyar settlement – are located in the western Trans-Kama region within the basin of the Maly Cheremshan river in Alexeyevsky District of the Republic of Tatarstan approximately 100 km east

of Bolgar town on the Volga river. The settlement located on flat terrain with a low slope stretching from the north-east to the south-west is encircled by concentrically inscribed earth ramparts and moats subdividing in into the inner and outer towns. They are sub-rectangular in plan and feature rounded corners oriented in cardinal directions. The inner town is encircled by two rows of ramparts and moats: the length of the main inner line is approximately 4800 m, and the second auxiliary line with a number of unfinished sections – 5400 m. The habitable area of the inner town amounts to 116 ha (130.6 ha including fortifications). The outer town is encircled by three fortification lines. The length of the inner line is about 9125 m, the middle line with several unfinished sections – 9400 m, and the outer line located 80–100 m away from the first two lines – 10,200 m. The habitable area of the outer town is 374 ha (490 ha including fortifications). Thus, the total habitable area of the settlement amounts to 490 ha, and over 620 ha including fortifications. Suburban settlements are located outside of the urban territory virtually adjoining outer city walls. The overall area of the Bilyar complex approaches 800 ha (8,000,000 sq. m) including the non-fortified suburbs. There is every reason to consider it one of the largest cities of the medieval world.

*Archaeological research of the site prior to the establishment of Bilyar expedition.* Bilyar settlement has been known to researchers since 18<sup>th</sup> c. It was mentioned in the works of a prominent state figure V.N. Tatischev written on the basis on contemporary information provided in written documents. He was familiar with drawings and sketches of



Рис. 1. Снимок Билярского городища из космоса.

Fig. 1. Satellite photograph of Bilyar fortified settlement.

“several ancient buildings and a portal or gate of a great temple”, the ruins of which were still present in the central part of the settlement (Tatischev. 1962, p. 269).

The first available reliable information on visual examinations performed at Bilyar settlement and investigation of archaeological sites in its neighbourhood are related to the activities of a renowned academic expedition of 1768–1774 – the Orenburg expedition conducted by professor P.S. Pallas, which comprised a group

headed by captain N.P. Rychkov. His group performed an examination and provided a report with a description of the general topography and fortifications of the site. He also compiled the first layout of the settlement “by the name of Bulyar accommodating ruins of stone buildings, earth ramparts, and remains of cemeteries.” The research conducted by N.P. Rychkov revealed a number of noteworthy archaeological sites in the vicinity Bilyar settlement, the most notable of them being the vast Balynguz settlement with ruins of

a stone mosque and a cemetery with numerous tombstones inscribed with Arabic letters, which according to the traveller “have preserved a token of the former splendour and bear traces of the art of the ancient people” (Rychkov, 1770, p. 11–22).

After the work of N.P. Rychkov and prior to thorough a investigation by V.A. Kazarinov in 1880s, Bilyar settlement was out of the view of researchers for almost a century. One can only note the activities of individual local historians and collectors, such as M.S. Rybushkin, A. Vtorov, A. Artemiev and others, who visited the site in order to collect antiquities and occasionally wrote short notes on their visits (Rybushkin, 1833; Vtorov, 1840; Artemiev, 1851).

The initial stage of Bilyar research, which generally had a nature of archaeological investigations and collection of antiquities was concluded by publishing of a fundamental work by a professor of Kazan University S.M. Shpilevsky “Ancient towns and other Bolgar-Tatar sites in Kazan governorate” (1877) representing a significant event in the historiography of Volga Bulgaria. An analysis of currently available written sources and scarce archaeological materials allowed the author to conclude that since the second half of 12<sup>th</sup> century Bilyar was the capital of the Bolgar state and remained a capital town until the Mongol-Tatar conquest of 1236 (Shpilevsky, 1877, p. 124–126, 137–139). This hypothesis was further supported by the central figure of Soviet Bolgar studies A.P. Smirnov who established systematic excavations of Bolgar settlement in 1938 (Smirnov, 1951, p. 229), and eventually became an official narrative. It should be

noted that such renowned archaeologists as A.A. Spitsyn, P.A. Ponomarev, M.G. Khudyakov and V.F. Smolin, criticising the concept introduced by Shpilevsky, supported the opinion initially advanced by V.V. Grigoriev on the existence of a single capital in the Bolgar state during the pre-Mongol period – Bilyar-Bolgar on the Cheremshan river (Grigoriev, 1836, p. 291–293; Spitsyn, 1916, p. 73, etc.; Ponomarev, 1919, p. 45, 48; Smolin, 1925, p. 34, 52, 56).

The next stage of Bolgar research (1878–1928) is related to the activities of the Society for Archaeology, History and Ethnography (OAIE) established under Kazan University by the decision of the 4<sup>th</sup> Russian Archaeological Congress held in Kazan in 1877 (Shakirov, 2014). The most thorough archaeological investigation of Bilyar and its neighbourhood was conducted in 19<sup>th</sup> century by V.A. Kazarinov, an active member of OAIE who also performed the first minor excavations of the site. In 1881 he thoroughly investigated ruins of the settlement and sites of the Bolgar period located north of Bilyarsk village – Balynguz and Nikolaev-Baranskoye I and II settlements, and Balynguz cemetery with its tombstones. He discovered the remains of a stone structure beyond the eastern corner of the inner town, plotted the locations of individual handicraft districts on the layout of the settlement, such as Kuznechny Mar in the inner town, a pottery quarter on the right bank of the Bilyarka river in the outer town, two town cemeteries and the ruins of several stone buildings (Kazarinov, 1983, p. 89, etc.).

No work was conducted at the settlement for over 30 years after V.A. Kazarinov. One can only note

the activities of numerous collectors who bought vast collections of Bilyar antiquities from local citizens during their short visits to the settlement. A portion of these antiquities were published in various sources (Tolmachev, 1884; Likhachev, 1891; Vysotsky, 1908; Aspelin, 1877; Tallgren, 1918). Among the noteworthy findings are Cufic and Juchid coins discovered in the neighbouring settlements (Schpilevsky, 1877, p. 359–360, 363, 551; Markov, 1910, p. 10, No.52).

Archaeological research of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is related to the names of P.A. Ponomarev and his student M.G. Khudyakov. “Considering that scientific excavations have never been conducted at the site of Bilyar, the most ancient monument of Bolgar antiquity, and that 7 years from now there will be a millennial anniversary of the first visit of our region by cultured Arabs – Ibn Fadlan and his associates who arrived in June of 922, laid the foundation of local education and founded the first local town” (Ponomarev, 1919, p. 45), they undertook exploratory surveys in the vicinity of Bilyar and excavations of the inner town in 1915–1916. A cruciform trench of a “stone pillar” founded in the area as early as in the Tatishchev period revealed traces of a thick foundation of a large stone building and several Muslim burials in its eastern section (the remains of the Cathedral Mosque and a necropolis for the nobility according to the investigations of 1970s). Besides, approximately 75 metres to the south-west of the revealed structure the researchers discovered ruins of a stone building with flue channels and pipes classified by researchers as remains of a public bathhouse. They completely excavated a wooden well with a well-

preserved log house and a substantial number of findings in the filling material (Ponomarev, 1919, p. 49). Research results demonstrated the “practicability and relevance of further works not only within the limits of the city, but also in its outskirts” (Ponomarev, 1919, p. 57). Unfortunately, amidst the ongoing World War I and the outbreak of revolutionary events in the country the researchers could not thoroughly process the obtained materials or publish more detailed research results.

The first excavations in the new conditions of the Soviet period were conducted at Bilyar settlement in 1928 by an expedition dedicated to the research of Bolgar-Tatar culture supervised by professor A.S. Bashkirov. A geodetic party headed by professor V.N. Sementovsky compiled an instrumental topographic plan of the site (Sementovsky, 1939). A.S. Bashkirov excavated a section of the outer line of ramparts in the north-eastern section of the outer town. At a depth of about 2 meters he discovered the foundation of a rampart overlying a cultural layer 25–30 cm in thickness. The inner line of ramparts located in the outer town was investigated using the archaeological test pits method. It was determined that the ramparts were erected in several stages and repeatedly reconstructed over the period of their operation (Bashkirov, 1929, p. 30–31). A total of 43 test pits were made in the eastern corner of the inner town for the purpose of studying the rampart and moat, which revealed a portion of a Muslim burial mound and the remains of a brick building “with monumental dimensions, complex design, and an advanced heating system.” The structure and composition of the cultural layer within the territory of the

inner town were studied using the test pits method as well (a total of 91 test pits were made, spaced at intervals of 25 m). The average thickness of the layer with a large number of findings amounted to 60–70 cm outside of the structures, occasionally approaching 150–170 cm.

Hasty excavations performed by A.S. Bashkirov in the course of 10 days using an imperfect technique provided scarce material for research of the major stages of the town's history and the peculiarities of the material culture of its population. In his analysis of ceramics discovered in the openings of the inner town A.S. Bashkirov highlighted “three major periods of its cultural life: early Bolgar, later Bolgar and Bolgar-Tatar periods” (Bashkirov, 1929, p. 36). He discovered counterparts for the ceramic complex of the “Bolgar-Tatar” period in Golden Horde sites of the Volga, Kuban and Crimea regions. Unfortunately, the materials obtained by the expedition have never been published, but the conclusions made by A.S. Bashkirov regarding the chronological framework of the town's existence were nevertheless accepted by subsequent researchers with no substantial criticism. Thus, A.P. Smirnov wrote about the Golden Horde town of Bilyar which restored its defensive system after the departure of the Mongol-Tatars (Smirnov, 1951, p. 230), and in the works by G.A. Fedorov-Davydov and A.G. Mukhamadiev, Bilyar is mentioned among towns which minted their own coins in 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fedorov-Davydov, 1963, p. 182, 198, № 445; Mukhamadiev, 1983, p. 49).

After the excavations performed by A.S. Bashkirov, Bilyar settlement was out of the view of archaeologists for almost forty years. Bilyar has only been sporadically mentioned in

encyclopaedias and summarizing works on the history and archaeology of Tatarstan.

#### *Investigations of Bilyar expedition.*

Systematic routine excavations of Bilyar settlement were started in 1967 by a joint archaeological expedition of the Institute of Language, Literature and History named after G. Ibragimov of the Kazan Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences and Kazan State University. The expedition was established and headed by a prominent Soviet archaeologist professor A.Kh. Khalikov (1929–1994). Since its onset, the work was primarily dedicated to the issues of the inner structure and original layout, as well as historical and social topography of the town. The researchers were faced with a task of using new and scientifically documented materials in order to investigate the issue of the origin and general stages of historical development of the town, determine the time of its foundation and final collapse, i.e. answer the questions which for obvious reasons remained unanswered by the preceding researchers. Therefore, the continuation of archaeological investigations at the site marked an entirely new stage in the history of Bolgar settlement research.

Fifty years have passed since the onset of the work of Bilyar archaeological expedition. Over 40 excavation trenches with a total area of approximately 30,000 square meters have been conducted in various topographical areas of the settlement. Monuments located in the vicinity of Bilyar were also subjected to research. Activities of the expedition were actively supported by archaeologists E.A. Begovatov, S.I. Valiulina, G.I. Drozdova, S.M. Iovkov, M.M. Kaveev, N.A. Kokorina, A.F. Kochkina,



E.A. Khalikova, A.V. Khudyakov, F.Sh. Khuzin, Z.G. Shakirov, R.F. Sharifullin, archaeozoologists A.G. Petrenko, G.Sh. Asylgaraeva, anthropologists S.G. Efimova, R.M. Fattakhov, paleobotanists V.V. Tuganaev, V.I. Frolova, architectural historians S.S. Aidarov, F.M. Zabirowa, an expert in the history of Turkic-Tatar spiritual culture G.M. Davletshin, and others. As a result of their investigations reflected in collective works “Investigations of the Great Town” (Moscow, 1976), “New information on the archaeology of the Volga Region” (Kazan, 1979), “Culture of Bilyar” (Kazan, 1985), “Bilyar dishware” (Kazan, 1986), “Bilyar – the capital of pre-Mongol Bolgaria” (Kazan, 1991), original monographs and a large number of other publications, Bilyar has become a reference monument of the pre-Mongol Volga Bolgaria. The achievements of Bilyar expedition are commonly known, and the most important of them are as follows:

An aerial photographic survey and aerial observation of Bilyar settlement and the neighbouring sites were performed for the first time in the central (forest-steppe) area of Eastern Europe together with ground surveying and topographic observations. The researchers managed to compile an accurate layout of the site and trace a total of 1200 marks of various structures (585 in the inner town and 622 in the outer town, over 30 of which are traces of brick buildings) on the excavated surface, reveal traces of unfortified suburban settlements, ancient water bodies, street and road lines (Khalikov, Igonin, 1974; Igonin, Khalikov, 1975).

One of the priorities of the expedition was the investigation of the Bilyar fortification system. Sections of all

five defensive fortification lines of the town were excavated. The researchers managed to determine that they were erected in several stages, reveal traces of ground wooden structures and define the phases of their reconstruction. According to stratigraphic information and findings discovered in various construction horizons, the most ancient ones are the inner lines of ramparts and moats in the inner and outer towns, and the latest ones are the outer lines (Khuzin, Kaveev, 1985; Khuzin, 1985; Gubaidullin, Khuzin, Shakirov, 2016).

The ruins of an ancient Cathedral Mosque located in the centre of the inner town were investigated in 1973–1977. It consisted of two sections, made of wood and white stone, and a large free-standing minaret at the north-eastern corner. The total area of its prayer halls amounted to approximately 2500 square meters. According to Muslim canons, the building was oriented towards Mecca in the south-western direction. The remains of 24 columns symmetrically located in 6 rows were traced inside the white stone section of the mosque. The north-eastern facade of the building was richly decorated with pilaster protrusions, or semi-columns (Khalikov, Sharifullin, 1979; Aidarov, Zabirowa, 1979). According to researchers, the mosque was presumably erected in 922 in connection to the visit of the Bolgar land by the Baghdad embassy. A.Kh. Khalikov admitted the possibility of its construction in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century (Khalikov, 1991, p. 55).

Excavations of a two-storey brick building with central heating were conducted in close vicinity to the Cathedral Mosque in 1971–1972 (Khalikov, 1979). The major portion of the building was square in plan,

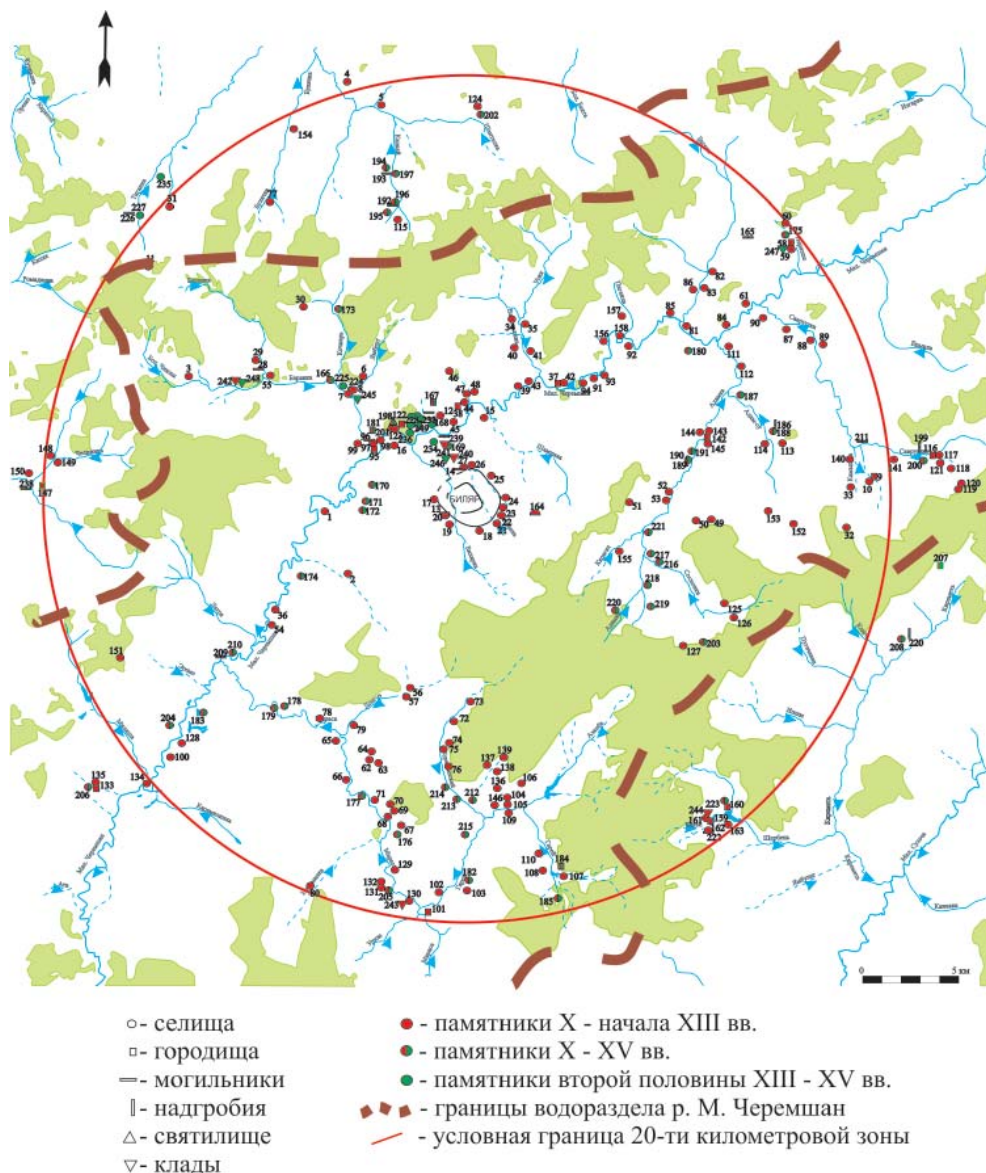


Рис.2. Сводная карта археологических памятников Билярской округи X–XV вв. (по З.Г. Шакирову)

Fig. 2. Generalized map of the archaeological monuments in Bilyar neighbourhood of the 10–15 centuries (according Z.G. Shakirov).

dimensioned 11×11 m and subdivided with a cruciform partition wall into four parts – rooms on the lower storey with an area of 16 square meters each. The brickwork is composed of standard square bricks (26×26×5 cm). The remains of an anti-seismic bedding composed of

two rows of semi-earth bricks have been revealed in the foundation base, which is characteristic of the architectural traditions of the Middle East and Central Asia. According to experts, this construction technique represents a clear evidence of the activity of Oriental

(Central Asian?) master builders in Bolgar towns, including Bilyar, who arrived in the country in 922 together with the embassy of caliph Al-Muktadir. This is also signified by the remains of braced clay dwellings and tandoor stoves with closest counterparts in Western and Central Asia (Khuzin, 2001, p. 262). According to A.Kh. Khalikov, the structure belonged to a representative of spiritual nobility and was used as a residential building (Khalikov, 1979, p. 18; Aidarov, Zabirova, 1979, p. 55). According to another substantiated assumption made by E.D. Zilivinskaya, it was presumably used as a public bathhouse (Zilivinskaya, 1989, p. 228–230).

A small Muslim cemetery emerged at the eastern walls of the Cathedral Mosque in the first half of 10<sup>th</sup> century, where about 50 Muslim burials were discovered, some of which were located in special ground burial structures composed of thoroughly burnt square bricks. Undoubtedly, it was a necropolis for the nobility where the ruler of the state was buried together with his family and other close relatives, as well as senior government officials of the state (Khalikova, 1979; Sharifullin, 1984).

A.Kh. Khalikov and R.F. Sharifullin studied the ruined remains of other two brick structures. One of them was located in the outer town (by the eastern gate of the inner town), and presumably constituted a part of a caravanserai complex, and the other one was situated in the inner town approximately 200 meters to the north-east of the Cathedral Mosque. The first of them was considered by A.Kh. Khalikov as a building of the hotel type within a caravanserai complex (Khalikov, Sharifullin, 1976). More substantiated

is the opinion of E.D. Zilivinskaya who classified the building as a public bathhouse (Zilivinskaya, 1989). The same purpose was shared by the second brick building in the inner town erected in 12<sup>th</sup> century. R.F. Sharifullin considers it the first monument of the authentic Bolgar architectural school (Sharifullin, 1999).

Researchers have obtained valuable information on the history of the urban construction and reconstruction of the architectural appearance of the medieval Bolgar town, as well as the materials on its public services and amenities. In view of the above, of special interest are the excavations of common dwellings, utility structures and about two dozens of wells investigated in the central portion of the inner town (Khuzin, 1979; Sharifullin, 1979). The most outstanding of them are the workshops and dwellings of Russian craftsmen engaged in the production of amber adornments (Khuzin, Valiullina, 1986). Over 8 kilograms of raw amber was discovered inside the building together with a lead pendent seal belonging to Vsevolod Yuryevich, grandson of Vsevolod III the Big Nest (Yanin, 1979, p. 101), or, even more likely, Vsevolod the Big Nest himself (Sedova, 1985, p. 358–359). Of special interest among the findings discovered in these dwellings are the fragments of ancient Russian dishware, painted clay Easter eggs, slate spindle whorls and shards of glass bracelets manufactured in Kiev (Khuzin, Valiullina, 1986, p. 102, etc.).

A unique asset of Bolgar archaeology are the remains of a yurt-shaped dwelling dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century discovered in the north-eastern area of the outer town (Khuzin, 1989, p. 65, etc.). This



type of yurts has been discovered at the sites of Saltovo-Mayaki culture dated 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Flerov, 1996).

One of the most important research directions of Bilyar expedition was research of the trade and craft activities of town population. As early as during the first years of the expedition in 1967–1968 an estate belonging to metallurgists was researched by A.Kh. Khalikov together with the remains of two log houses and outbuildings. It was located in the vicinity of workshops with blacksmith forges where large amounts of production waste have been discovered (iron slag, bloom and clay crucibles), including over 100 flawed locks and keys, and a total of 22 intact spherical cones (Khalikov, 1976). A vast area of the inner town previously populated by metallurgists remains unstudied – the so-called Kuznechny Mar with large amounts of iron slag discovered on the excavated surface.

Another handicraft district – a pottery quarter with a total area of approximately 3 ha was located within the territory of the outer town on the right bank of the Bilyarka river. This is where N.A. Kokorina discovered about ten two-tier blacksmith forges. The earliest of them are dated 10<sup>th</sup> century (Kokorina, 1983, p. 50, etc.). High quality products of Bilyar potters – pots, cauldrons, pitchers, cups, bowls, dishes, lamps, cup-shaped vessels (“children pots”) – all glazed and unglazed ceramics – have been studied rather thoroughly (ref.: Dishware, 1986; Kokorina, 2002).

Bilyar settlement possesses a large and unique collection of glass articles characterized by a narrow range of items (goblets, glasses, flasks, chalices, alembics, jars, lamps and window glass), simplicity of shapes and ornamentation

techniques, which demonstrates consistent standardization both in terms of morphological characteristics and chemical composition. The chemical composition of Bilyar glassware fully corresponds to the characteristics of the geological and biochemical resource province of the Central Trans-Kama region (Valiulina, 2014).

The availability of glass workshops is a prerequisite to independent glass making. Clear evidence of glass production has been discovered in Bilyar, represented by workshops at excavations 38 and 41, where apart from the remains of furnaces the researchers have discovered thick-walled glass-melting pots with remaining liquid glass, calcinators with drops of glass, fragments of iron articles presumably representing glass blower tools, stocks of raw material and production waste – sandiver, numerous clumps, strings and drops of glass (Valiulina, 2005).

The dating capacity of glass adornments allows to determine the chronological framework of the entire complex of glass articles. In general, glass items discovered at Bilyar settlement are dated to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> – first third of 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bilyar glass making should be considered as an integral element of Middle Eastern tradition. Meanwhile, the craft formation period occurred in 12<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Trans-Caucasian and possibly Central Asian centres (Valiulina, 2015; Valiulina, 2016 b).

The discovery of chemical vessels in Bilyar and other Pre-Mongol towns of Bolgaria, and the subsequent discovery of an alchemist, jeweller and glass blower's workshop in the centre of Bilyar have allowed to conclude that alchemy existed in Volga Bolgaria in 12<sup>th</sup> – early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, the

researchers had a rare opportunity to use the archaeological materials in order to visualize the initial development stage of alchemy – experimental, handicraft, or practical chemistry in Eastern Europe (Valiulina, 2016).

The establishment of such a highly technical craft as glass making in the Pre-Mongol period is an absolutely logical phenomenon reflecting the generally high level of Volga Bolgar economy and its urban culture, in particular the flourish of urban craft.

A great contribution to the investigation of Muslim monuments in Volga Bulgaria has been made by E.A. Khalikova. She was the first Bolgar researcher to complete a thorough investigation of the funerary rite of pagan and Muslim burials, and trace the dynamics of changes in the funerary ritualism of the Volga Bulgars in 8<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. An analysis of vast factual material obtained as a result of investigations performed at five urban necropoleis of Bilyar allowed her to classify the burials into two chronological periods (10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> – early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), which provided an opportunity to trace the gradual transition of the population from paganism to Islam (Khalikova, 1976; 1986). The concept suggested by E.A. Khalikova on the degree of Islam's distribution across the Pre-Mongol Volga Bulgaria has been acknowledged by many researchers.

Certain achievements have been made in the investigation of monuments located in the vicinity of Bilyar where in the territory with a radius of approximately 20 kilometres the researchers have discovered 327 sites of archaeological heritage, including 78 prehistoric monuments, 16 settlements

of the Imenkovo culture dating back to the early medieval period, as well as 16 settlements, 203 ancient villages, 18 burial mounds (in particular, a cemetery with 14<sup>th</sup> century tombstones), and 10 monetary hoards of the Pre-Mongol Bolgar and Golden Horde periods. Several sites have been excavated (Drozdova, 1997; Shakirov, 2012; 2014).

Long-term archaeological investigation of medieval monuments located in the vicinity of Bilyar, have allowed to collect significant material reflecting the possibilities for the analysis of settlement's structure, economical and demographic potential. An analysis of the topography, arrangement and characteristics of the material culture of 10<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century Bilyar neighbourhood allow to consider it as a framework element of the metropolitan area of Pre-Mongol period closely related to the town, and in the Golden Horde period – as one of the most significant peripheral centres of the Ulus of Jochi (Shakirov, 2012a).

In the early Golden Horde period the role of an administrative and political centre of the region passed on from the destroyed Great Town to the Golden Horde Bilyar (Bilyar ancient villages 2 and 3) located 1.5 kilometres north-west of the fortifications protecting the outer town of Bilyar settlement (Valiulina, 2000). The collection of items discovered at the monument during the excavations of 1994–1998 and annual collections of excavated material include household, handicraft, trade and armament items. The urban character of settlement's culture is signified by valuable and prestigious articles: a bone belt plate with a dragon's image crafted with the cut-out carving technique, Middle Asian glass dishware, amber, and a collection

of art pottery. Unglazed circular dishware demonstrates the continuity of pottery traditions with the manufacturing of the Pre-Mongol period. Moulded ceramics reflects the migration processes occurring place in the complex political environment of the early Golden Horde period. The town's existence period has been determined as second half of 13<sup>th</sup> – first half of 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Valiulina, 2004).

A previously unknown 15<sup>th</sup> century town actively investigated since its discovery in 1998 is located 3.5 kilometres north-west of Bilyar settlement. It has almost perished from the historical memory, and no traces of the town have remained in written sources. Toretskoye urban settlement occupies the foreland area of a smooth slope located on the second upland fringe of the right bank of the M. Cheremshan river and the right bank of the Toretsk stream (with a partial transition to the left bank). The area of the monument is 25 ha, whereas the thickness of its cultural layer reaches 40 cm in the central area and diminishes in the southern slope. Approximately 5000 square metres have been investigated during excavations, which have revealed residential buildings, utility structures, manufacturing complexes, burials, monetary and material hoards.

The town is characterized by the peculiarity and abundance of material culture of cosmopolitan and multi-religious population (Valiulina, 2011a; 2011b 2015b). Dimensions of international trade are confirmed by the discovered items which consist of Chinese porcelain, Syrian glass, amber; Crimean glazed ceramics, Khwarezm dishware and mosaic tiles, Hanseatic tin and lead seals (Valiulina, 2010; Valiulina,

2015a), as well as highly developed multi-product crafts.

The presence of non-Muslim population who practised Christianity in the town is signified by the discovery of cult items (a stone icon; body crosses, an encolpion cross), Russian ceramics (amounting up to 50% of findings at certain sites) and pig bones in osteological materials. The character and amount of numismatic material demonstrates that Toretskoye settlement could have been a coin minting centre in 1420–1430s.

The single-layer monument supposedly existed in 15<sup>th</sup> or very late 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and ceased to exist as a result of a military assault in late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Presumably, the attackers were the Nogais. By late 15<sup>th</sup> century Nogai troops had advanced upstream to the Kama mouth, which is signified by written sources, as well as an almost complete absence of settlement monuments dating back to the Kazan Khanate period in the Central Trans-Kama region.

Expressive illustrations of the last page of town's history are hoards and the so-called common graves – hastily performed collective burials with no adherence to rituals.

Therefore, excavations have revealed a unique monument of early Kazan Khanate – a centre of highly developed craft and international trade of 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from the abovementioned trends in the works of Bilyar expedition members, one should note the interesting research of the anthropology of Bilyar population (Efmova, 1976; 1991; Fattakhov, 1979), palaeozoology (Petrenko, 1976, 1984; Asylgaraeva, 1997; 2002) and palaeobotany

(Tuganaev, 1976; Frolova, 1979). Materials from Bilyar have also been actively involved in research on the history of material culture (Davletshin, 2004), decorative and applied arts of the Tatar people and its ancestors (Valeev, Valeeva-Suleimanova, 1987; Valeeva, 1983), in the second volume of the seven-volume “History of the Tatars” (History of the Tatars, 2006).

In view of the now archaeological findings Bilyar represents the largest economical, political and cultural centre of the Bolgar state, maintaining close trade relations with Kievan Rus, ancient Russian princedoms, Oriental and Western states (Valeev, 1995; Kochkina, 1999; Valiulina, 1999; Khuzin, 2001, p. 237 and cons.).

In early 1990s works at the settlement almost stopped due to a complete cessation of the financing of Bilyar expedition. An expedition of Kazan State University headed by S.I. Valiulina continued to work at the medieval monuments of the Bilyar area. Minor works were conducted at the settlement itself by an expedition of the Institute of History named after Sh. Mardzhani, Tatarstan Academy of Sciences (until 2012), and in the recent years – by the Institute of Archaeology named after A. Kh. Khalikov under the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan in collaboration with the Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies of Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University (Shakirov, 2010).

#### *Issues of Bilyar archaeology.*

Despite the large-scale excavations conducted over the 50 years of existence of Bilyar expedition, a vast area of the town remains absolutely uninvestigated (with approximately 0.3% of the overall

territory of the settlement excavated). It particularly refers to the outer town and suburban settlements. The territory of the inner town is better investigated, but no materials have been obtained which would allow to obtain at least a general outline the dynamics of the town's historical development and social topography, as the locations of the ruler's residence, caravanserai, district mosques, handicraft and trade sites have not been clearly indicated. A method of uncovering wide areas of cultural layers has been used in Bilyar archaeology for many years. Unfortunately, even this technique which has proven itself well in practice provided insufficient results in terms of investigation of the intra-urban planning structure. The researchers could not determine the characteristics of urban space organization, character of planning and construction in certain areas within the large territory of the settlement at each stage of its development, particularly at the early stage.

The chronological framework of the settlement's existence have been determined on the basis of long-term research as early 10<sup>th</sup> century (922) – first third of 13<sup>th</sup> century (1236). In the recent years the researchers have attempted to confirm an earlier date of the town's establishment corresponding to the second half-late 10<sup>th</sup> century (ref.: Khuzin, 2010). Besides, there have been doubts concerning the initial territory of the town within the fortifications of the outer town. These issues require solution by thorough analysis of materials from Bilyar itself, as well as their comparison with materials from Bolgar and Suvar – “the only monuments” which existed as early as in early 10<sup>th</sup> century according to our opponents.

The contemporary stage of archaeology's development is characterized by active implementation of natural-scientific techniques in the process of artefact analysis. Such techniques as metallography, chemical and spectral analyses of non-ferrous metal, glass and glazed ceramics have been used in archaeology for a long period of time. Unfortunately, until now the investigation of urban craft and its products has been carried out using traditional techniques only (with a minor exception, ref.: Semykin, 1991; Valiulina, 2005). Meanwhile, Bilyar offers great possibilities in the research of artisan production and social organization of crafts. The researchers are yet to investigate the vast areas of metallurgical and pottery suburbs, which promise new discoveries, as well as such branches of craft as non-ferrous industry and jewellery, bone carving and construction. A more thorough investigation of the multi-faceted handicraft activities of the Bilyar population, which will expand the information potential of the artefacts, is only possible with the use of modern techniques. New approaches are also required in the investigation of other types of economic activity of Bilyar citizens – cattle breeding and agriculture, hunting and fishery.

Another promising task is the investigation of the Bolgar urban phenomenon in close relation to the initial agricultural surroundings. The social and economic nature of the medieval town cannot be correctly interpreted without detailed research of the economic structure of the surrounding area, its economic and demographical potential. Archaeological investigations of settlement monuments erected simultaneously with the ones in Bilyar

settlement, as well as monuments which were created in the subsequent Golden Horde period but in a way represent a continuation of Pre-Mongol sites will contribute to the solution of the issue of continuity of Bolgar and Bolgar-Tatar cultures which has become relevant in the historiography of the recent years.

Another problem requiring a final decision is the debatable issue of the Pre-Mongol capital of Volga Bulgaria located at the site of Bilyar settlement according to a number of Bolgar researchers. The solution can be found by means of a comparative study of archaeological materials from the so-called “6<sup>th</sup> layer” of Bolgar fortified settlement, early Bilyar and Izmer settlement on the Kama river which according to the materials of long-term research by E.P. Kazakov accommodated a large (over 60 ha in area) trade and handicraft settlement of 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The available information does not contradict with the possible localization of the meeting point of the Bolgar ruler with Baghdad embassy (922) and the “Standing of the Rus”. In our opinion, the search for an objective response to this issue is to a large extent related to the achievements of Bilyar archaeology.

Another relevant matter is the investigation of Bolgar town in the system of medieval urban civilizations of Ancient Rus, Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Middle East and Western Europe; in relation to steppe civilization which has always featured a synthesis of nomadic and settled cultures, and finally the system of trade and craft settlements along the Great Volga route usually considered as a northern branch of the Great Silk Road.

The ultimate objective of investigations is the reconstruction



of the architectural appearance of the Pre-Mongol capital of Bolgar state at various stages of its development, a wide spectrum of economic and spiritual life, ethnic composition and population of the town and adjoining settlements, simulation of the ecological condition, natural and geographic conditions of the life of medieval population in the central regions of the Western Trans-Kama.

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**БИЛЯРСКОЙ АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ – 50 ЛЕТ:  
ИТОГИ И ПРОБЛЕМЫ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ВЕЛИКОГО ГОРОДА**

**Ф.Ш. Хузин, С.И. Валиулина, З.Г. Шакиров**

В статье подводятся основные итоги исследований Билярского городища – уникального памятника средневековой археологии Восточной Европы, расположенного в Алексеевском муниципальном районе Республики Татарстан. Небольшое количество сведений о Биляре сохранились в древнерусских летописях (в них он назван Великим городом) и в трудах арабо-персидских авторов X–XIV вв. В исторической науке памятник известен с XVIII в., однако археологические раскопки его по большому счету начались лишь в 1967 г. В течение 20 лет исследовались укрепления города, пять городских могильников (в т.ч. некрополь знати в центре города), открыты руинированные остатки трех кирпичных зданий и белокаменной Соборной мечети с отдельно стоящим минаретом, ремесленные мастерские (гончаров, стеклоделов, кузнецов-металлургов), десятки и сотни рядовых жилищ, хозяйственных построек и колодцев. Открытия Билярской экспедиции получили положительный резонанс в археологических кругах страны. С конца 1980-х годов работы экспедиции начали сворачиваться из-за отсутствия полноценного финансирования. Небольшие раскопки охранного порядка производились в основном на окрестных поселениях. Исследования на самом городище возобновились в 2015 г. Необходимость возобновления систематических раскопок на Биляре и памятниках его округа очевидна и с точки зрения научной, и с точки зрения практической – использования результатов исследования в туристических целях.

**Ключевые слова:** археология, Волжская Булгария, Билярское городище и его округа, история изучения, основные достижения, проблемы и перспективы исследований.

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