What do we know about the Khazars for certain?
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Ladies and Gentlemen, Good morning, I guess after my talk, some of you would like learn more on the Khazars on the Internet. Warning: almost all you’ll find there would be pure fantasy. I’ll try to summarize what we know for certain. We call ‘Khazaria’ a polity in the Northern Caucasus and around the lower course of the Volga plus subject territories to the North and West that existed between the mid-seventh century till about 970 CE. As such, Khazaria was the most long-living steppe-empire ever. The term ‘Khazars’ is misleading. Like Imperial Russia or USSR and like Poland-Lithuania, the Khazar realm was a multi-ethnic entity. We don’t know what was the percentage of the Eteo-Khazars in the population of the realm, or who exactly they were. When we say ‘Khazars adopted Judaism’, we cannot be certain that we are talking about the Khazars proper and not about the ethnic relatives of Alans, Volgan Tatars and Eastern Slavs. We simply don’t now and never we will.

Early Arabic-writing historians mentioned, anachronistically, the Khazars as enemies or allies of the late Sasanian kings; they simply projected the situation of their own days into the past. We know nothing about any Khazars till the second half of the seventh century when they first appear on the scene, destroying the polity of their neighbors and, possibly, blood-relatives, the Bulgars; this Khazar victory over the Bulgars prompted the dispersion of the Bulgars to the places like Moesia, Bulgaria of today, the territory of the present day Tatarstan, to the gorges of the Northern Caucasus, where Balqars, or Malqars, can be still found, and even to Hungary and to Rimini in Italy. The late case, anecdotally, is reminiscent of an episode of the end of WWII, when a Cossack Stan was established in the vicinity of Rimini.

This is how the Khazar Empire was established – through the expulsion of the Bulgars from Bulgaria Magna somewhere between the rivers Don and Kuban’. The name of the Khazars meant something like ‘freebooters’, ‘people who roam around’. If it sounds to you as somehow similar to Cossacks or Qazakhs, or even if you think of the Brodniki of the North-Western edge of the Steppe – this is for a good reason. These names are connected, indeed, though not directly.

As every empire, Khazaria was multi-ethnic, and this implies that the imperial tribe or nation was doomed; as Milorad Pavić put it, thinking, of course, of his fellow Serbs in the former Titoist Yugoslavia, ‘there were many nations in Khazaria, but there was no Khazar nation’. In fact, Pavić’s novel The Khazar Dictionary was inspired, as he hinted somewhere in his book, by the two volumes long PhD by Peter Benjamin Golden, published in Budapest in 1980; Golden’s book is, basically, a dictionary of almost two hundred Khazar or Khazar-related words. Nevertheless this brilliant work, we don’t know what language spoke the Khazars proper. Some Arabic-writing authors claimed that the Khazar language was like that of the Turks, meaning Turkic peoples in general, not the Turks of Turkey; while others said that the Khazar language is not like Persian or Turkic, and is different of all the languages. There are some reasons to believe that the Khazar language belonged to the same small ‘deviant group’ among the Turkic languages as the Turco-Bulgar, the dead language of those Bulgars who had fled to Bulgaria and to Tatarstan of today, or the living Chuvash language on the Volga Curb. Some claimed that the Khazars spoke the language of the Slavs – and I incline to take this seriously, for the latest period of the Khazar history; this is what the oldest source on
the early Polish history, from the time of Mieszko, claims; the author was a Spanish Jew who has seen Khazar merchants in Prague and Krakow who spoke Slavic.

I can explain briefly how come by referring to two telling parallels: after a couple of centuries on the Danube, the Turco-Bulgars who had fled the Khazars from the Voronezh Hills, adopted the Slavic speech of their subjects; it was that Slavic type of speech that became the common literary language of all the Slavs, almost; there is one Slavic language that does not continue the Cyrilo-Methodian tradition: this is Polish; add Kashubian.

There were two Arab-Khazar wars, long and bloody (First Arab–Khazar War (c. 642/652) and Second Arab–Khazar War (c. 722–737)); sometimes it is stated that the Khazars prevented Islam from being introduced in the Eastern Europe, but this is far from being correct. Two Byzantine emperors were married to Khazar princesses (Justinian II ‘the Slit-nosed’, 685-695 and 705-711, and Constantine V ‘the Dung-named’, 741-775) and one was called ‘the Khazar’ (Leo IV ‘the Khazar’, 775-780). Khazars had several cities: one of them was Semender, somewhere in the North Caucasus, possibly in the vicinity of Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan; the name of this city was somehow connected to the name of the Serbian town Smederevo, famous for its Judaeo-Avar relics; another Khazar city – and once their capital - was Balanjar, possibly, between Derbent and Semender, or near Buynaksk in Dagestan.

The Khazars were in possession of a fortress Sarkel; the name means ‘The White House’ in Chuvash, an aberrant Turkic language, probably a dialect of the dead Khazar language, and possibly was the same as Belaja Vezha, ‘the White Encampment’, of the Russian Primary Chronicle. This fortress, built in white bricks, was constructed for the Khazars by a Byzantine engineer, Petronas Kamateros, whom the then Emperor, Theophilus, had sent to assist both his Khazar allies and the Byzantine interest against common enemies, who probably were the Proto-Magyars. Sarkel was built at a vital portage between the Don and the Volga, where these two rivers come close to each other, in the mid-840s. Archeologists have found at the site designs similar to some Jewish symbols; under Stalin’s rule, the site was submerged by the Tsimlyansk Reservoir, on the shores of which the Russians grow grapes for what they call Soviet Champagne. Possibly, this fortress was taken by the Kievan Vikings and their Slav subjects in the late 960; later, the Russian Primary Chronicle made references to Belaja Vezha and to the people of Belaja Vezha as semi-independent from Kiev and interfering in Kievan Rus’ internal affairs. Were these people descendants of the Khazar warriors or not is an open question.

But the most important city of the Khazars, their last capital, lay on both shores of the lower course of the Volga; some believe this was the site of Samosdelka, where interesting archeological works have been under way during the last decade. This city was composed from three different cities: the western part, on the western shore of the Volga, the eastern part, on the eastern shore of the river, and an island, where the Khazar ruler had his residence built of bricks; no other was allowed to use bricks but him. The name of this triple city was generally given as Atit or Itil, Turkic for ‘a big river’ (the Kazan-Tatar for Volga is still Idel). Some Arabic and Persian-writing authors give another names of the city: Khazarān, Khamlij, possibly also Khanbaliq, ‘the city of the sacral ruler’, and Sarighshin; indeed, the city of Saqsin is mentioned in the area by the twelfth century traveler from Granada in Andalusia, Abu Hamid al-Gharnati, and may be a continuation of Sarighshin; the Old Russian form Sorochin possibly relates to the same place. In the center of the river there was, as said, an island; one Byzantine source calls this island Atech, which is obviously, a copyist’s mistake for Atel; however, this mistake
is the source of the name of the Khazar princess Atech in Milorad Pavić’s ‘Khazar Dictionary’.

Between 733-746\(^1\) an episcopal seat was established at Atil (\textit{ho Astēl}), and a Muslim youth from Baghdad, Abo, who chose a Georgian identity and faith in Christ, was able to convert at Atil to Christianity around 780; later, he returned to Tiflis and was there executed for his apostasy of Islam; now Abo is the patron saint of Tbilisi; what is important here is the fact that in 780 there was a bishop to the Khazars; the non-Christian Khazars were described in Abo’s \textit{Vita} as the ‘Khazars Sons of Magog’, they were Mongoloid (\textit{sašin} \textit{p>iri}ita, ‘with horrible faces’), pagan (‘having no religious law’), blood-eating and savage (\textit{k>ac velur}). However, there is no bias in this description, for they worshipped the Creator (\textit{šemokmedi}), the Turkic God of Heavens \textit{Tägri}.\(^2\) Certainly, they were not Jewish or Muslim by 780, thus being at odds with a unique and somewhat blurred reference in Arabic that in 780 there was a bishop to the Khazars; the non-Christian Khazars found this better for their religion; the Khazars found this better than the one they had, and accepted it.

Al-Mas’udi, one of the best Arabic sources, said that the Khazars converted to Judaism in the times of Harun al-Rashid (766-809) and promised to tell the circumstances; we have no such a description. Al-Dimashqi, quoting al-Mas’udi (he said it was Ibn al-Athir), said that the Jews persecuted in Byzantium in the time of Harun al-Rashid fled into Khazaria and adds that they found there a skillful but unsophisticated bunch of people to whom they proposed their own religion; the Khazars found this better than the one they had, and accepted it.

In 830s, interesting coins have been struck in Khazaria, bearing the Arabic text ‘There is no god but Allah and Musa (Moses) is His messenger’. These coins can be seen as evidence that the Khazars – or some of them – had converted to Judaism. However, we could recall, especially in this building of the Polish embassy, that the first Polish coins, from the time of Mieszko had Jewish features, too – they had Mieszko Krul Polski written in Hebrew characters. Still, these Polish coins tell nothing about the religious adherence of Mieszko or the Polish peasantry or nobility. The same can be true for the Khazar coins with a Jewish-like text – in both cases, the coins were struck by Jews, that’s all.

In 860, the Byzantine Emperor Michael III and the fiercely anti-Roman Patriarch of Constantinople Photius sent two monk brothers, Constantine and Methodius, to convert the Khazars to Christianity. Their mission was a failure, but from the description we have we can see that the Khazar Qaghan takes a reconciliatory position towards Cyril, the Christian missionary. He tells the Byzantine that ultimately we all believe in the same things, and nothing specifically Jewish is described. One year later, the brothers were sent on a much more successful mission, to the Slavs of Great Moravia, and invented the Glagolitic alphabet, not to be confused with the Cyrillic called after the other name of Constantine-Cyril.

The Arabic texts from the first quarter of the next, the tenth, century, state that the Khazars and their rulers are Jewish, but have become so recently. The Jews are the smallest religious community in Khazaria, with the majority being Muslims, Christians and Pagans. The sacral ruler, the Qaghan, lives in his brick-built palace on an island in

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\(^2\) Jveli kartuli agiograp\-iuli literaturis jeglebi, 58.9-11.
the Volga; he is void of real power and is subject to a series of taboos – he is forbidden to do this or that, he can leave his island only four times a year, etc. When he trespasses a certain limit of years, he is strangled; when he dies, they build a giant complex for his burial with multiple false tombs, then they let a river overflow the burial complex and kill all those who had taken part in the building the graves and in the burial of the Qaghan. Nothing of this smacks of Judaism; however, when the news arrived in 922 that the Muslims destroyed a synagogue somewhere, he gave orders to destroy the minaret in his own capital, killed the muezzins and added, that ‘if I did not fear that not a synagogue would be left in the lands of Islam, I should destroy the mosque’.

The real power is in the hands of his deputy, called ishad (a term of Iranian origin) or later, bek. This deputy has, in turn, his own deputies. This system of the dual kingship is called diarchy and was attested, about the same period, more or less, among the Hungarians, Vikings, the Merovingian kings and the Carolingian majordomos, the Kieavan kniazs and their vojevodas, the Abbasid Khalifas and the Suljuk sultans, etc.

There is a High Court, with two judges for the Jews, two for the Christians, two for the Muslims, and one for the pagans; Muslims have a kind of autonomy and are represented by a Khaz.

In the middle of the same century, just one generation later, the picture is a bit different: there is a nominal Qaghan and his deputy, the king, there is a Muslim vizier, Ahmad ibn Kuweih, possibly a Khwarazmian, there is a standing army of Muslim mercenaries from the vicinity of Khwarazm who are allowed not to fight their fellow Muslims, and a minaret is overshadowing the Qaghan’s palace, quite a change from the situation in 922. All the slaves coming into the lands of Islam from Khazaria are from amongst the pagans, for the Jews, Christians and Muslim do not enslave those of their own faiths. Jews are said to have come in numbers from Byzantium as a result of the politics of persecutions in the reign of Romanus I Lecapenus (r. 920-944), but also from Khwarazm and other places. Again, al-Dimashqi said that the Jews persecuted in Byzantium in the time of Harun al-Rashid fled into Khazaria and converted the locals.

There are a few references to the Khazars on the first pages of the Russian Primary Chronicles: the Khazars taxed several Eastern Slavic tribes, most importantly Kiev; in 965, according to the Russian Chronicle, Sviatoslav of Kiev, the Pagan son of St. Olga, made a war on the Khazars who came forth against him with their own kniaz, the Qaghan; Sviatoslav won and took their city Belaja Vezha, possibly Sarkel.

Then he went to wage a war on the Danubian Bulgaria, in 967, according to the Chronicle, and perished in 972 on his way back, defeated. Meanwhile, in 968, when Sviatoslav was out in Bulgaria, the nomadic Turkic Pechenegs came for the first time to attack the Russian lands, a recurrent feature for the next two centuries.

Now, we know that the chronology of the pre-eleventh events in the Russian Primary Chronicle is absolutely arbitrary; there are some three or four correct dates, and those are derived from foreign sources used by the compiler of the Chronicle. 972, the date of Sviatoslav’s death, is one of them. 968, the date of the first Pecheneg attack, may be another one. But the dates of Sviatoslav’s Bulgarian campaigns as given in the Chronicles and the descriptions of these campaigns are all wrong.

Two excellent Arabic sources relate that the Russians have destroyed the Khazar capital of Itil and the cities of Khazarān and Semender in 358h / 968/9CE and also Bulghar (on the Volga or on the Danube?). One of them said: ‘there were in Semender many gardens, and it is said that it used to contain 4,000 (or 40,000) vineyards. I asked about it in Jurjan in the year 358 of a man who had recently been there. He said: There is

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not an alms for the poor in any vineyard or garden, if there remains a leaf on the bough. For the Russians descended upon it, and not a grape nor a raisin remained in the place. The Muslims used to live there, as well as other categories of people of different faiths, including idolaters, but they emigrated. Owing to the excellence of their land and the richness of growth three years will not pass till it becomes again what it was.\textsuperscript{4}

This description and the date are at odd with those in the Russian Chronicle; there are two old theories trying to reconcile these data: first, there were two raids by Sviatoslav against the Khazars, one, the minor, recorded by the Chronicle, with the major one, that of 968, omitted. However, the chronology of Sviatoslav’s campaigns in Bulgaria, known well from the Byzantine sources, does not give a timespace for such a campaign. The second theory says that the campaign of 968 was carried out not by Sviatoslav, but rather by some unspecified other Russians.

However, another excellent source in Arabic, Ibn Miskaweih, says that in 354h / 965 a body of Turks attacked Khazaria; the Khazars called the Khwarazmians, their main trade partners, for succor. The Khwarazmians answered that you are Jews and if you wish our help, submit to Islam. The Khazars agreed, with the exception of their king – apparently, their sacral Qaghan who some ten years earlier had exchanged letters with the the leader of the Andalusian Jewry and the Spanish Omayyad vizier Hasdai Ibn Shaprut – but in the end, he converted to Islam as well. In 985, al-Muqaddasi, another excellent source, wrote that the people of Khazarān are no longer Jews but Muslims (p. 361).

This is, basically, all we know for certain; I spared of you some bits, like how many wives the Qaghan had in 922 and how many in 956. The rest you might read about the Khazars would be partisan speculations. The first modern historian of Russia, Karamzin, stated that the Russian State has been born from Khazaria and the the Khazar ‘yoke’ was good for the Eastern Slavs; he needed the good Khazar yoke in order to juxtapose it to the bad Mongol yoke, because of which, Karamzin argued, Russia needs autocracy. Stalin aka P. Ivanov wrote in Pravda that Khazaria was a parasitical cancer growth of Judeo-plutocracy on the body of the peoples of the would-be USSR. In our own days, claims are made that Ashkenazic Jews are descendants of the Khazars; needless to say, we have no Khazar genetic material to substantiate such claims. Thank you for your kind attention.

\textsuperscript{4} ed. Kramers, 393.