

## **The Khazars**

by Peter Wolfe and Jeff Zolitor

At the height of their empire the tribe known as the Khazars controlled an area roughly encompassing The Ural Mountains to the Carpathian Range, the Caucasus, and much of the Black Sea. About 1/3 of what is now Eastern Europe, as well as much of the Asian Steppes came under direct control of the Khazars or one of their client states.

The powers of the world at the time, Islam and Christianity, were pushing ever closer to a total domination of much of the populated world. The Eastern Caliphate with its seat in Baghdad, had begun to cross the Caucasus and had hoped to conquer the area of the Black Sea and Eastern Europe.

The vast area separating the Eastern Christian Empire, or Byzantium and the Eastern Caliphate was home to numerous Turkic tribes, related by similarities in language origin and a common geographic ancestry. These tribes were mostly nomadic, expert horseman, fierce warriors, and inclined to remain unaffiliated with either the Christian or Islamic Empires.

Over time one of those tribes, The Khazars, grew in both size and sophistication and in turn came to be the dominant buffer between Byzantium's eastward designs, and Islam's westward advances. Trade between Christianity and Islam took place through the land of the Khazars. Both spheres of influence put intense pressure on the Khazars to adopt their religion and worldview, thereby tipping the balance of power in the area. The Khazars chose a diplomatic course that steered clear of favoring one over the other, earned the grudging respect of both and insured their status and independence. They chose to become Jews!

There have been several stories of the Khazar conversion that have made it to us this day, coming from Moslem, Jewish and Christian sources.

al Masudi, a traveler from the Eastern Caliphate wrote that the Byzantine Emperor forced the Jews to emigrate and they came to the Khazar country and found "an intelligent but uneducated race to whom they offered their religion. The natives found it better than their own and accepted it."

In the late 950's, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, while serving the court of Abd al Rahman III, Caliph of the Umayyad Empire, the Western Islamic Caliphate in Spain, used his diplomatic ties to inquire about Jewish communities throughout the world and intervene on their behalf whenever possible. Hasdai first heard of the existence of the Khazars from merchant traders from Persia. Hasdai decided to send a delegation. He believed that the Khazars may have represented one of the ten lost tribes of Israel and were descendants from Palestine, as the Sephardim were. The letter contained a formal greeting, some detail of the current Caliph, and questions about the Jewish rituals of the Khazars. The response from Joseph included his version of the events that led to the conversion of the Khazars.

In Joseph's version, his ancestor King Bulan, drove out the sorcerers and idolaters from his land. An angel later appeared to Bulan telling him he must worship the one true god, and in return he

would “bless and multiply Bulan’s offspring, and deliver his enemies into his hands and secure his kingdom to the end of the world.”

Joseph continues by relating how Bulan was again visited in a dream and bade to build a place of worship in which the Lord may dwell, for: “the sky and the skies above the sky are not enough to hold me”. Bulan tells the angel that he wishes to carry out the endeavor but doesn’t possess enough gold or silver to finance such an enterprise. The angel told Bulan to lead his armies into Armenia where a treasure of silver and gold awaits him.

There are Arab and Armenian sources that relate stories about a Khazar invasion into the area in 731C.E., lead by “Bulkhan”. These sources seem to fit very well with the time frame of Joseph’s story and Arab sources relate the fact that the Khazars controlled gold and silver mines in the Caucasus.

After the success in Armenia, “The King of Edom (Byzantium) and the King of the Ishmaelim (Muslims) heard the news and sent him envoys .... and learned men to convert him to their beliefs.” Bulan was wise and also sent for a Jew. After long and futile discussions, the king decides to meet with the representatives’ seperately. He asks the Christian which of the other two religions is nearer the truth. The Christian answers, the Jews”. He then asks the Muslim the same question and gets the same answer, “the Jews”. Since both Christianity and Islam believe that Judaism is nearer the truth, Bulan chooses to adopt the Jewish faith.

Regardless of how or why it happened, once the conversion took place, Judaism seems to have become stratified into Khazar society, and those who could, mostly the ruling classes, did send their sons to study in the great academies in Spain and quite possibly the great Academy at Sura in Babylonia as well.

The Kagan was a hereditary ruler who lived in seclusion, and established traditional law. By the 10th Century, the Kagan was reduced to a spiritual figurehead, and the real power was in the hands of the Bek, a person serving beside the Kagan. The Bek led the army and ran the government, with the Kagan remaining the Chief Judge. Under the Bek were a variety of administrative and military officials and local governors. While most were appointed, some localities elected leaders. The governors collected taxes on the products of blacksmiths, food and drink, and customs duties. A court, composed of two Jews, two Muslims, two Christians and one pagan, dealt primarily with trade issues.

In the 720’s the Khazar capital was the city of Samander, which was visited by the Arab traveler, Al-Istakhri. He later wrote that it had vineyards and gardens, and that Muslims and mosques were plentiful, as well as markets. A later traveler, Ibn Hauqal, said there were people of multiple religions living there, with mosques, churches and synagogues. In 750, Itil became the capital of Khazaria. Travelers wrote that only the royal and public buildings were made of brick; most homes were yurts, or felt covered tents. The Khazars also founded part of Kiev as an economic hub, where people engaged in jewelry making, blacksmithing, bone and stone carving, and ironworking.

The Khazars grew grain and vegetables, using plows, hoes, sickles and scythes. They operated mills and created irrigation canals, and transported their goods in carts and on skiffs in the Volga

River. They grew grapes and cherries and caught fish, bred domestic animals, and hunted wild animals, using arrows, spears, axes and lassos.

Khazaria was an important trading center, on the crossroads of the trade routes between Europe and China. The Great Silk Road, long the center of trade between China and the West, was blocked to Christian traders by the Muslims, so Byzantium concentrated their trade to China through Khazaria. Khazars participated in trade, trading candlewax, honey and wine. They exported central silver dishes and coins, quilts, cotton, felt, and cushion covers to the Urals and beyond, and imported pottery from Armenia, Iraq and Iran.

The traders included Jewish Radhanite merchants, traveling between Regensburg, Vienna and Kiev, Khazaria, Persia and China, trading cinnamon, musk, camphor, swords, silk, furs, and slaves; Viking Rus traders, who transported furs, foxskins and swordblades; Arabs, and perhaps Chinese. All traders paid custom duties, which were the main source of revenue for Khazaria.

The Khazars held influence in the area as evidenced by the stories that have made their way to us from various sources. Cherson, a border city between Byzantium and Khazaria became the home in exile of the former Byzantine Emperor Justinian II. He managed to escape and make his way to the Khazar city of Doros where he formed an alliance with the Kagan to regain the throne, and the Kagan's sister was given to the former Emperor in marriage. In the meantime, Kagan Busir made a deal with the new Byzantium Emperor Tiberius III who offered a rich reward for Justinian, dead or alive. Busir ordered Justinian assassinated but when his wife, Busir's sister, heard of the plot, she warned her husband and the two were able to flee to the land of the Bulgars. The Bulgar king then made an alliance with Justinian and helped him regain his throne.

During his second reign, Justinian had become overwhelmed with his hatred for the inhabitants of Cherson, now a Khazar town and sent expeditions against it. The Khazar army met the expeditionary force and upon being taken prisoner by the Khazars, Justinian's representative in the area, a man named Bardanes, promptly switched allegiance from the Bulgars and Justinian, to the Khazars, as did the entire Byzantine expeditionary force. The Byzantine armies deposed Justinian and elected Bardanes the new Emperor under the name of Philippicus. While Philippicus was deposed a few years later, the story goes to show the influence that the Khazars wielded over the destinies of the Eastern Empire.

That the Khazars were astute and able enough to finesse their way onto the scene as a superpower is true enough. What we must also come to realize when discussing the extent of their empire and influence, is that the world map of Eastern Europe and Asia looks the way it does thanks in large part to the Khazars. Had Islam gained a permanent foothold in eastern Europe, the pressure on Christian western Europe may have been too great to sustain its Christian kingdoms. Had Christianity made permanent inroads into the central Asia, the Caliphate may have had to expend resources at its northern border that could have zapped much needed resources from the war against the Crusaders.

It is ironic that the most celebrated information we have on the Khazars, that being the Hasdai letters, were written by the Kagan who saw the destruction of his state. It wasn't pressure from the Caliph in the east, or the Emperor in the south that caused the eventual fall of the kingdom, it

was the pagan hordes from the north, known variously as Vikings, Norsemen, and in the east, Varangians, or, the Rus. They were expert sailors, and fearless warriors on land.

In the mid to late ninth century, there was conspicuous movement of the various tribes in Eastern Europe and Asia. The Magyars, long allies of the Khazars and their agents in the Steppes, had begun moving across the Don River. Prior to the move, they were charged with collecting tribute from the Slav and Finn people north of their domain. The Rus had now begun their sweep with a combination of savage warfare and plunder, and the Kagan needed help securing his eastern and northern borders. It seems that the relocation of the Magyar was a mutual arrangement. At about the same time, an agreement between Byzantium and the Khazars brought craftsmen, engineers and architects to Khazaria to help build a massive fortress on the Volga, just south of the Don River in their new capital, Itil. The fortress was known as Sarkel. It seems that the relocation of the Magyar and the construction of Sarkel were part of a combined strategy to halt the Rus advance.

The strategy wasn't to last very long. In about 862CE., the Rus conquered and occupied Kiev. At about the same time, in a global version of musical chairs, a tribe called the Pechenegs located in the area between the Volga and the Ural rivers and also ruthless according to Emperor Constantine, were retreating in advance of an onslaught from their neighbors to the east, the Ghuzz. The Pechenegs tried to cross the Don and settle in Khazaria but the Khazars beat them off. The Pechenegs continued their move to the west and confronted the relocated allies of the Khazars, the Magyar. In successive assaults, the Pechenegs continued to push the Magyar, and in 896, struck a deal with the Bulgars situated along the Danube. Constantine tells us that the Bulgars and the Pechenegs made a pact to annihilate the Magyar, and while the Magyar fighters were away on a campaign, the two tribes descended into the land of the Magyars and massacred their families. The Magyar warriors returned to find their families killed, their homes desolate and ruined. The once mighty Magyar then moved into present-day Hungary, where they remain to this day.

With the Magyar gone the loss of Kiev was inevitable. The western tribes were no longer under the Kagan's control and the Rus could now rally the Slavonic tribes around the Dnieper River with the cry, "Pay no tribute to the Khazars".

The loss of tribute and territory in the west was further exacerbated by the fact that the Rus were also following the Volga River down to the Caspian Sea, putting pressure on the Khazars from the east. In 910C.E., the goal of the Rus was to sack the rich cities of the Caliphate along the Caspian, but each time a flotilla traveling down the Volga passed the Khazarian capital of Itil, they were required to solicit permission, and pay customs duty. The Russians were not pleased with the arrangements, and the Khazars were equally perturbed because of their friendly relations with the Caliphate at the time. In 913 the matter exploded when the Russian fleet entered the Caspian Sea and once again set their sites on the Islamic cities around it. The Rus were particularly brutal and destroyed all that stood in their way, including woman and children. They raped and pillaged, raided and burned and even made incursions inland.

With the Magyars gone, Kiev gone and the Dnieper River firmly in the hands of the Vikings, control of the Black Sea was wavering. In 945, Byzantium entered into a commercial treaty with

the prince of Kiev, Prince Ingvar – (later Igor), who was leader of the western Russian activities. The Rus were beginning the process of assimilating into Slavic culture, adopting Slavic names, and in the process becoming closer with the Christian Empire. The good relations that the Khazars had enjoyed with Byzantium were becoming strained under the pressure being applied to their western frontier, and another, less overt action. In 957 during a state visit, Helga – (later Olga), Igor's widow accepted baptism from no less than, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine himself. This small act sealed the fate of the Khazars.

Svyatoslav would hear none of this, and continued his brutal assault on everything Khazar. In an action against one of the Khazars tribute tribes south of Moscow, the Prince of Kiev decided to turn south and head for the Don River. One chronicler has the Prince, in true Viking form, sending messengers to the Khazars and announcing: "I am coming upon you". When the Kagan heard of the approach, he sent the army out to meet them. The Rus won the day, and took control of the Don River. The Khazars fortress on The Don, Sarkel, fell to the Russians in 965.

Arthur Koestler, in his book 'The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and Its Heritage' argues that the defeated Khazars were the predominant ancestors of the Ashkenazic Jews. He based his theories on immigrations of the Khazars to Eastern Europe, which is supported by various types of evidence, some of which he cited, and some cited later by Kevin Brook.

Before the destruction of Khazaria, some Khazars joined the Magyars and migrated to Hungary. They were among the soldiers protecting Hungary's borders. In the 10th Century, Hungarian Duke Taksony, son of a Khazar princess and Magyar royalty, invited Khazar Jews to settle in Hungary. If it is to be believed, a Byzantine chronicle indicates that many Hungarian troops in the 12th Century observed Jewish law.

According to Martin Gilbert, Jews migrated from Khazaria to Lithuania in 1016, and Jews from Vilnius claim Khazar ancestry. Documents and archeological finds indicate that Khazars founded glass factories in Grodno. These similarities may support the idea of a Khazar influence in Eastern Europe, but they hardly support an argument that the Khazars were the predominant ancestors of the Ashkenazic Jews.

The greatest evidence against a significant Khazar ancestry for Ashkenazic Jews is DNA testing. Data shows that the predominant origin of Ashkenazic Jews has been the Middle East. This indicates that the role of the native-born Khazars as a source of Ashkenazic Jews was minor. However, there is some genetic evidence that characteristics of some Ashkenazic Jews are shared by Armenians and Turks, and Jews from the Balkans. The documentary and archeological evidence for a Khazar origin is stronger in Hungary and the Ukraine. Still, the sources I have examined seem to show that the influence of the Khazarian Jews in those areas, no matter how large or small, was overwhelmed by the emigration of western Jews.

Another reason for the slight DNA differences in some Ashkenazic Jews may be intermarriage. Jews converted and intermarried with others in ancient Israel, in the Roman Empire and in Medieval Europe. There is no reason to think that it did not occur in Central Asia as well. Jews from Crimea and the Byzantine Empire, who may have originated in the Middle East intermarried with the Turks. Genetic tests show that intermarriage occurred far less with Jews

than in the population as a whole, and in certain groups, like the Kohanim, it happened very little at all. This infrequent intermarriage could well have been enough to account for any genetic marker differences.