

Khazar Khaganate

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The Khazar Khaganate, or Qaganate, emerging c.630s–650 and destroyed by c.968/969, was one of the largest political formations of the medieval Eurasian world. In the west, it extended from the Don–Dnieper zones in Ukraine to the trans-Volga lands approaching medieval Khwarazm (on the Amu Darya delta) in the east and from the Middle Volga region in the north to the North Caucasian steppelands and Crimea in the south. Khazaria played a major role in the trade between the northern forest zone and the Byzantine and Islamic Empires, the leading political and economic powers of the Mediterranean world. The Khazar Khaganate was a long-lived state in a steppe region in which statelessness or ephemeral nomadic polities were the norm. At its summit stood a core of Turkic tribes deriving from the Türk Empire (552–630, 682–742 in the east, 552–659, c.690–c.766 in the west) that had created a trans-continental empire from Manchuria to the Black Sea. Khazaria was a multinational state ruling over some 25 Turkic, Iranian, Finno-Ugrian, Slavic, and Palaeo-Caucasian peoples, who engaged in pastoral nomadism, agriculture, viniculture, apiculture, fishing, and in the hunter-gatherer economy of the northern forests. Khazaria's cities attracted foreign merchants and artisans and its subjects followed Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and various pagan cults, the government appointing judges for each faith. Despite being a major Eurasian power, many fundamental questions about Khazar origins, domestic history, religious life, impact on

neighboring states, and the fate of their descendants remain obscure or hotly debated.

The Khazars appear in a great variety of sources – Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Pahlavi, Persian, Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Slavic, Latin, and Chinese. From the Khazars themselves, aside from three letters in Hebrew dating probably to the mid-10th century, the twilight of Khazar power, one of which is from a Khazar ruler, we have remarkably little. There is also a small but growing body of numismatic evidence.

The Khazars stemmed from groupings of Turkic tribes that had been entering the Volga–North Caucasian region and adjoining steppe zones since the 4th century CE. Often denoted as “Hunnic,” these included various Oghuro-Bulghar tribes, arriving in the 460s, and the Sabir union that came in the early 6th century. The Sabirs formed a key substratal element in the Khazar union. Whether a tribe named “Khazar” was present at this time, perhaps deriving from the Toquz Oghuz confederation in northern Mongolia and southern Siberia, remains unclear. Many of these “Hunnic” tribes came under the rule of the western branch of the Türk Khaganate in decades after 552. When the Western Türk Khaganate, beset by internecine strife, began to fragment, the Khazar Khaganate emerged as an independent state, c.630s–c.650, in its western, lower Volga–North Caucasian and eastern Pontic steppe regions, most probably led by a branch of the Türk royal house, the Ashina, with a core of Western Türk troops. Khazar khaganal traditions, including the ritual strangulation of the new khagan upon his enthronement, were uniquely Ashina.

From the latter half of the 7th century into the 8th century, they warred with the Arabs in the North Caucasus, often raiding deep into

the territory of the Caliphate and with the Bulgars. These struggles contributed to the consolidation of their statehood. By the late 670s, the Bulgars had been defeated; some fled to the Balkans and Pannonia (modern Hungary), others submitted. A Khazar *entente* with Byzantium played a role in their warfare with the Arabian Umayyad Caliphate for control over the Caucasus. When a sudden attack into the lower Volga zone in 737 gained the Arabs a momentary advantage, the Khazar Khagan was forced to embrace Islam. With the withdrawal of the overextended Arabs, the Khagan abjured Islam, but the experience brought the religious question to the fore. The Khazars, previously adherents of the Central Asian celestial sky god Tengri cult and shamanists, slowly moved toward one of the Abrahamic faiths, all of which were represented within their realm. The ruling elite, and subsequently elements of the Khazar inner core tribes, converted to Judaism, probably in stages that may have begun as early as the latter part of the 8th century. By the late 830s, if not slightly earlier, Judaism became the “official” religion of the ruling elements of the state, as has been demonstrated by Khazar coins and noted in the Khazar Hebrew documents (which include accounts of the conversion), and in Muslim and Latin sources. By the first half of the 9th century, the actual governance of the state appears to have been assumed by a Khagan-Beg (also called “Ishad” or “Yilig”), perhaps from a dynastic line of deputies, while the Khagan became a sacralized, talismanic figurehead, the embodiment of the heavenly good fortune of the state, who was rarely seen in public and before whom all, including the Khagan-Beg, showed obeisance. Whether the conversion was the source of this change in governance, its result, or the consequence of foreign invasion and internal political realignments remains the subject of scholarly debate. The choice of Judaism

admitted the Khazar elite into the “family” of Abrahamic monotheism without the political encumbrances that conversion to Christianity or Islam would have brought.

Some significant, but less frequent Khazar raids into Islamic lands continued in the latter part of the 8th century. By 800, the Khazar–Arab border had stabilized in the North Caucasus. Derbent (Arab. Bâb al-Abwâb) in Daghestan became the primary border city between the two empires. During the 9th century Khazaria became an important trading partner of the Islamic world, its capital city Ätil/Atil (also the Turkic name of the Volga River), largely consisting of nomadic tents (only the Khagan, Khagan-Beg, and governing officers dwelled in brick buildings), functioning as one of the main funnels through which the goods of the Baltic and northern forests entered the Caliphate. Revenues from customs duties, taxes on subject peoples and non-Khazar “foreign” residents of the capital, and other income helped to pay for the *Ors*, a special, salaried guard-corps of the Khagans consisting of Khwarazmian Muslims. The chief bureaucratic official of the realm was also a Muslim. Ätil/Atil was located in the Volga delta, perhaps to be identified with the ruins at Samosdelka. It is unclear if other Khazar toponyms, for example, Khamlikh (Khan-baliq, “city of the Khan”), Sarighshin, were parts of Ätil/Atil or represented different urban developments. In 840/841, according to Byzantine accounts, Constantinople aided in the building of Sarkel, an important fort on the left bank of the Don. Sarkel, however was one of a number of Khazar forts, and the exact role and goals of the Byzantines, who uneasily held parts of the Crimea alongside the Khazars and hoped to use the latter as a line of defense against steppe incursions, remain unclear. Similarly, the identity of the foes – Hungarian, Pecheneg, or Rus’ – against whom Sarkel was constructed, is also

problematic. By the 10th century, the Khazars, faced with declining revenue due to the expansion of Volga Bulghar trade and threats from the Pechenegs and Rus', began to fade. In 965, the Rus', allied with the Oghuz, overran Sarkel and the Khazar capital. A second attack in 968–969, ended Khazaria as a political power.

In addition to pastoralism (the Khazars themselves seem to have practiced a kind of semi-nomadism) and their important role as middlemen in international commerce and in the slave trade that brought captured and enslaved peoples of the northern forests and steppe zone into the Caliphate, the Khazars, or at least their subject peoples, engaged in a variety of economic pursuits, such as agriculture, viticulture, apiculture, fishing, ceramics, metalworking (including the making of armaments), and other forms of craft production.

SEE ALSO: Nomads; Religion and empire; Russia: 1. Rus' and the Riurikid dynasty (9th century to c.1240); Slavery, institution of;

Steppe empires; Trade and commerce; Türk Khaganate

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