

Episode 17 – Khazars in the Romania territory

Hello again, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 17 where we will be discussing the Khazars and their presence on the Romanian lands.

I'm very excited to share this episode with you, one of my favorite episodes, together with the previous one on Jewish participation in the Romanian cultural avantgarde. This is up there because the history buff in me learned some new and very interesting things about Khazars.

Btw, the music at the beginning of the episode is Khazar music; the episode notes have a link to the whole album.

In some of the previous episodes, we touched upon the Khazar influence felt in two of the three Romanian Principalities, Wallachia and Transylvania, during the medieval ages. But who were the Khazars and what do we currently know about them?

Let's briefly look at: **Khazar History**

Please note that the geographical focus of this episode is the Eastern Europe and Asia area bound by the Black Sea in the West, Caspian Sea in the East and the Caucasus mountains in the North.

The first reliable written source concerning the Khazars might date from as early as the 2nd century, when tribes later sometimes identified as Khazars occupied land north of the Caucasus, clashing with Armenians and enjoying notable success until the 4th century. Whether or not they really were ethnically related to the later Khazars is nevertheless questionable. During the astonishing expansion of the vast but ephemeral Hun Empire in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, these possible proto-Khazars disappear from history, but when they suddenly re-emerge in the 6th century, they already controlled a large territory.

An early reference to the Khazars is in a supplement attached to the 6th century Syriac translation of *"Ecclesiastical History of Zacharias Rhetor"*, the Greek church history written by Zacharias Rhetor, which describes the Khazars as one of many nomadic tribes living in tents north of the Caucasus mountains. Historic accounts relate the Khazars living under the suzerainty of the Western Turkish Empire, alternately called West Kök Türkic or Turkut Kingdom. These historical events must therefore be understood in the context of this larger narrative: the Western Turkish Empire decline and the rise of the Khazar Empire.

The 8th century Greek historian Theophanes, Saint Theophanes the Confessor, wrote of the Khazars as "Turks from the East". It is currently widely agreed that the Khazars were closely related to Turkic tribes such as the Bulgars and Bashkirs.

Ahmad Al-Muqaddasi, a 10th century Arab geographer, wrote in *Descriptio Imperii Moslemici* that “In Khazaria, sheep, honey, and Jews exist in large quantities”. This almost mythical, certainly reductionist, portrayal of the Khazars illustrates to some extent what is commonly known of the Khazars. The Khazars are widely recognized as having formed an Empire consisting in large part of trade and commerce. Likewise, the Khazars are infamous among historians for their anomalous conversion to Judaism. Hence such a description of the Khazars sums up what we know of the enigmatic Khazars. However, the historic records tell a more complex story. The Khazars, while widely engaging in commerce, and certainly while converting to Judaism in a spectacularly unique sequence of events, played an integral role in the history of Eastern Europe, and indeed the very world.

According to the Byzantine emperor and chronicler Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, who ruled in 913–959, the original Khazars were Turks. However, some other writers believe they had similar Finno- Ugrian origins to the Magyars or Hungarians, and still others maintain that they had comparable origins to the Georgians of the Caucasus.

In the 6th century, The Khazar lands bordered at the east the nomadic tribes known simply as Turks; in the north their neighbors were Finnish tribes; in the west, they were Turkic Bulgars; while in the south, Khazar territory bordered that of the Alans and reached the river Araxes (Aras) in the Caucasus which now is flowing along the borders between Turkey and Armenia. It is significant to note that the Khazars adopted the governmental institutions of their former Turkish overlords. Likewise, this new Khazar Empire was similar in constitution to previous steppe empires. The Khazar Empire was multi-ethnic and multireligious. Initial Khazar efforts focused on the conquest of Southern Caucasus, especially in the form of the city of Derbend, a Dagestan city located on the Caspian Sea, and the Iranian trade routes. This necessarily focused the Khazars on the Persian Empire and then the explosion of Arabic power under the tutelage of Islam. Indeed, the Khazars became so troublesome that the Sassanian Persian ruler Kavadh I (ruled 488–496 and 498–531) and his son Khusrow I (531–579) had long fortifications built from the mountains to the sea in northern Shirvan, a city in the North Khorasan province of current Iran.

During the 7th century the Khazars took advantage of divisions among their long-standing Bulgar rivals to seize control of territory north of the Black Sea. Thereafter the loose association of Bulgar tribes split apart, some migrating north to establish a new state around the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers. Some migrated into the Balkans to establish a state which still exists as Bulgaria, and others fled even further afield, but some remained under Khazar rule.

It was also during the early 7th century that the Byzantine Empire started paying serious attention to this rising new power. Clearly the Khazar tribes could have endangered the Byzantines, so the latter offered gifts and, in time-honored fashion, formed links by marriage with the Khazar ruling family. It was by such means that the Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) was able to win the Khazars to his side in Byzantium’s fight against the Sassanian Empire. Khazars aided the Byzantine emperor Heraclius by sending an army of 40,000 soldiers in his campaign against the Persians. It was a Khazar-Byzantine union that finally broke the power of the Persian Empire in late 627. Combined Khazar- Byzantine forces marched on Persia and shattered a large

Persian army before the city of Nineveh. A humiliating peace was forced on the Persian king. This proved to be a fleeting victory, followed almost immediately by the sudden and unexpected eruption of the newly Muslim Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula. Byzantine armies were tumbled back to what would become the Empire's heartland of Anatolia, while the weakened Sassanian Empire collapsed entirely. A newly emergent superpower, the Islamic Caliphate, soon challenged the Khazars themselves. The major attempt of the Muslim armies to take control of the Transcaucasus came in 622 while Mohammed was still leading Islam. In a hadith, a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad, Khazars are mentioned as follows: *Allah's Apostle said, The Hour will not be established until you fight with the Turks; people with small eyes, red faces, and flat noses. Their faces will look like shields coated with leather. The Hour will not be established until you fight with people whose shoes are made of hair.*

Now a genuine Byzantine-Khazar alliance developed. Attempts by the Khazars to oppose Arab-Islamic expansion were initially unsuccessful, although their forces achieved some victories. The conflict between the Khazars and the Arab Muslims which started in the late 600s with occasional raids back and forth across the Caucasus Mountains intensified after 721 into a full-scale war. In a major Muslim invasion in 730, the Khazars decisively defeated the Arab Muslims in the battle of Ardabil. In the end, the Muslim Caliphate was only able to establish dominance over the South Caucasus, leaving the North Caucasus and the routes to Eastern Europe in Khazar hands.

When their capital at Balanjar just north of the Caucasus was sacked, the Khazars moved their center a short distance north to Samandar, a now Daghestan city on the Caspian coast. After this too was destroyed the Khazar capital was moved again, this time to Atil in the delta of the Volga River. Only a defeat of the Muslims on the banks of the Bolangira saved Khazaria from collapse, and thereafter Atil remained the administrative center of the Khaganate until the Khazar state was eclipsed in the 960s.

In the late 700s, Franks under Charlemagne's leadership destroyed the Avar Empire with its center in the Danube basin. The Khazars, could not afford to only observe the vacuum created so they built fortifications like the Sarkel fortification, a Turkish word meaning White Fortress, built in 830s by a joint team of Byzantine and Khazar architects to protect the north-western border of the Khazar state. A Magyar-Khazar alliance was responsible for the protection of the Khazar's key border region around Sarkel.

In the 880's an equally major historic shift took place as the Byzantines established themselves as the dominant power in the Mediterranean, and Constantinople eclipsed Baghdad as the center of economic activity. Rivers leading to Constantinople became all important. The Dnieper gradually replaced the Volga in commercial supremacy.

Svyatoslav, Grand Duke of Kiev, conquered the Khazar city of Sarkel, including its fortress in 965. The subsequent battle which took place between the Khazars and Rus resulted in the annihilation of the Khazar army. Svyatoslav subjugated the tribes previously under the Khazars in the region. Ibn Hauqal, the 10th century Arab writer and geographer, wrote that the conquest of Itil took place in 967, though there has been some speculation whether the city was not conquered until much later. With the stunning defeat of the primary Khazar cities of Sarkel and

Itil, the Rus spelled the end of the Khazar Khaganate as a major power and transferred control over the Volga and Don trade routes to the Slavs.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 11th century two small Khazar principalities still remained. One, centered upon Kerch at the eastern tip of the Crimean peninsula, survived until 1016, when it was crushed by Byzantine and Rus forces. Its Khazar population had earlier converted to Karaite Judaism, which recognizes the validity of only the 24 books of the Tanakh, roughly equivalent to the Christian Old Testament, but not that of the Talmud.

In medieval Russian chronicles the final mention of Khazars as a distinct people is found in 1079, though the term 'Khazarian' continued to be used even into the 15th century to describe some vassals of the Muscovite princes.

A successor state of the Western Turks, Khazaria was a polyethnic- multifaith state with a population of Turkic, Uralic, and Slavic peoples. Khazaria was the first feudal state to be established in Eastern Europe. During the 9th and 10th centuries, Khazaria was one of the major arteries of commerce between northern Europe and southwestern Asia, as well as a connection to the Silk Road. The name "Khazar" is found in numerous languages. Pax Khazarica is a term used by historians to refer to the period during which the Khazaria dominated the Black Sea steppe and the Caucasus Mountains. The Caspian Sea, came to be known to Iranians as the *Khazar Sea* as an alternative name. Many other cultures still call the Caspian Sea "Khazar Sea".

Being surprisingly tolerant and pluralistic society, even its army incorporated relatively harmoniously Jews, Christians, Muslims and Pagans at a time when religious warfare was the order of the day around the Mediterranean and in Western Europe. By welcoming educated and worldly Jews from both Christian Europe and the Islamic Middle East, Khazars rapidly absorbed many of the arts and technologies of civilization. As a direct result of this cultural infusion, they became one of the very few Asian steppe tribal societies that successfully made the transition from nomad to urbanite. Settling in their newly created towns and cities between the Caspian Sea and the Crimean Peninsula on the Black Sea, they became literate and multi-lingual agriculturalists, manufacturers and international traders. Many artifacts from the Khazars, exhibiting their artistic and industrial talents, have survived to the present day.

The Khazars were truly an unusual phenomenon of the Middle Ages. Surrounded by savage peoples and nomadic tribes, they nevertheless had all the attributes of a civilized state: an established government, an extensive flourishing trade and a regular army.

The paradox of the nomadic Empire of the Khazars that flourished in the most inhospitable of environments and adopted the least popular of religions, is a profound one. The combination of Asiatic lore with steppe Empire, a respected 'Third Power' in a region of instability, is remarkable. This power was well recognized among the great states. The Persian king reserved a gold throne for the Kagan. The Byzantine Emperor, when writing to the Pope or Emperor in the West, used a seal worth two solidi, whereas messages to the king of the Khazars bore seals of three solidi. A living symbol of Khazar power was the Emperor Leo the Khazar, who ruled Byzantium in 775-780, so named after his mother, the Khazar Princess 'Flower' - the one who created a new fashion at court. The Rus would utilize the Khazar term 'Kagan' in their own

government, recognizing the Asiatic legitimacy in the title, and aligning themselves as the successors of the Kagan in Itil.

By serving as a buffer state between Christians and Muslims, Khazars blocked the western spread of Islam in Europe. It was the military might of the Khazars that made it impossible for armies of Islam to roll west into eastern Europe and possibly even into Scandinavia. Scholars say that if Arabs had occupied what is now Ukraine and Russia, the Rus would never have been able to push south and east from the Baltic to establish Russia.

Let's review now why the Khazars were historically unique: **Khazar Jewish Conversion**

Jewish communities had existed in the Greek cities of the Black Sea coast since late classical times. Chersonesos, Sudak, Kerch and other Crimean cities sustained Jewish communities, as did Gorgippia, and Samkarsh was said to have had a Jewish majority as early as the 670s. Jews fled from Byzantium to Khazaria as a consequence of persecution under emperors Heraclius, Justinian II, Leo III, and Romanos I. These were joined by other Jews fleeing from Sassanid Persia, and later, the Islamic world. Jewish merchants regularly traded in Khazar territory, and may have wielded significant economic and political influence.

Though their origins and history are somewhat unclear, the Mountain Jews also lived in or near Khazar territory and may have been allied with the Khazars, or subject to them; it is conceivable that they, too, played a role in the Khazar conversion. The Mountain Jews, also called Caucasian Mountain Jews, are Persian-speaking Jewry along with Jews of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The Mountain Jews are the descendants of Persian Jews from Iran, and fall within the Mizrahi category of Jews. The forerunners of the Mountain Jewish community have inhabited Ancient Persia since the 5th century BC. The language spoken by Mountain Jews, called Judeo-Tat, is an ancient Southwest Iranian language which integrates many elements of Ancient Hebrew.

But let's get back to the Khazarian conversion to Judaism.

The Khazar tale relates the Khazar kagan, in Turkish "ruler", called for representatives of the three great religions: Christian, Muslim and Jewish. We may infer that the Jews already had some influence at the Khazar court because historical documents relate that Christian and Muslim representatives were sent for, whereas the Jewish representative was present at court. The kagan listen patiently to each explaining their faith. Finally, he asks both the Muslim and the Christian which faith of the other two they would consider most correct. Both, believing in the Torah, respond that the Jewish faith is closest to their own. The tale relates that the kagan was thus convinced to convert to the Jewish faith. However, no conversion in the steppes was undertaken without political motives. In preferring the Jewish religion both to Christianity and Islam, the kagan was no doubt moved by a desire to remain politically and culturally independent of both Byzantium and of the Arab Caliphate.

Traditionally the date of kagan Bulan's Jewish conversion is considered to be the year 740. This date was established by Yehudah ha-Levi, a 11th century Sephardic Jewish poet, physician and philosopher. Bulan which means "elk" in Turkish, though some sources give him the Hebrew name of Sabriel. Constantine Zuckerman, a French historian, gives the more convincing date of

761. This fits better with evidence from Cyril's travels to the Khazars in 860 (Cyril and his brother Methodius were Byzantine Christian theologians and missionaries known for their work evangelizing the Slavs).

During the 8th century, the Khazar royalty and much of the aristocracy converted to Judaism. Yitzhak ha-Sangari is the name of the rabbi who converted Khazars to Judaism according to Jewish sources.

Recently discovered numismatic evidence suggests that Judaism was the established state religion by 830, and though Cyril, who visited Khazaria in 860, did not identify the Khazars as Jews, the kagan of that period, Zachariah, had a biblical Hebrew name.

A later king, Obadiah, strengthened Judaism, inviting rabbis into the kingdom and built synagogues. According to the Schechter Letter, early Khazar Judaism was centered on a tabernacle similar to that mentioned in the Book of Exodus. Archaeologists at Rostov-on-Don have tentatively identified a folding altar unearthed at Khumar as part of such a religious building. A reminder that a tabernacle was a portable sanctuary and place of worship used by the Israelites in the Bible.

The 10th century Persian historian Ibn al-Faqih reported that "all the Khazars are Jews".

The Khazars enjoyed close relations with the Jews of the Levant and Persia. The Persian Jews, for example, hoped that the Khazars might succeed in conquering the Muslim Caliphate. The Khazar rulers viewed themselves as the protectors of international Jewry, and corresponded with foreign Jewish leaders.

The high esteem in which the Khazars were held among the Jews of the Orient may be seen in an Arabic commentary on Isaiah ascribed by some to Saadia Gaon, a 9th century prominent rabbi and Jewish philosopher, who was active in the Abbasid Caliphate, while others credit Benjamin Nahawandi, prominent Persian Jewish scholar of Karaite Judaism. The commentary says "The Lord hath loved him." "This", says the commentary, "refers to the Khazars, who will go and destroy Babel", i.e., Babylonia, a name used to designate the country of the Arabs.

References to the Khazars adopting Judaism as their religion are found in Arabic, Christian and Jewish sources.

The most famous account is found in the letters known as the Khazar Correspondence, exchanged between Rabbi Hasdai ibn Shaprut (c. 915–975), and Joseph, king of the Khazars. Hasdai ibn Shaprut was a fascinating individual in his own right. Born in Jaen, Spain, Hasdai was a Jewish scholar and physician proficient in multiple languages. Originally appointed as physician to Caliph Abd-ar-Rahman III (912–961), he eventually became the caliph's faithful counselor. Although he didn't bear the official title of vizier, he was effectively the minister of foreign affairs and arranged alliances with various foreign powers. He worked tirelessly for the betterment of his fellow Jews, and it is largely due to his efforts and support of Jewish learning that Spain became the new center of Torah learning after the Geonic period in Babylonia. At first, Hasdai only heard scant rumors of the existence of a Jewish state. However, the existence of the Khazar state was eventually confirmed by two Jewish merchants, Mar Saul and Mar Joseph. Hasdai then decided to make contact with the Khazars.

The initial attempt by Hasdai failed, since the Byzantines, who feared a direct alliance between Spain and the Khazars, held up Hasdai's emissary on the pretext that the roads were not safe. But Hasdai persevered; he sent a new emissary and was eventually able to make contact. In his return letter, King Joseph replied to Hasdai's questions regarding the history of the Khazars and which tribe they were from. King Joseph explained that his ancestor King Bulan decided to give up his pagan beliefs in order to accept one of the three leading faiths: Judaism, Christianity or Islam. King Joseph then described how, after King Bulan accepted Judaism, a descendant of his, King Obadiah, "reorganized the kingdom and established the Jewish religion properly and correctly. He built synagogues and *yeshivot*, brought in Jewish scholars, and rewarded them with gold and silver. The Jewish scholars could have come from Baghdad and Constantinople. They explained to him the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud and the order of divine services". Rabbi Abraham ben David (Abraham ibn Daud, c. 1110–1180), in his *Sefer Kabbalah* (Book of Traditions), writes about the letter King Joseph sent to Hasdai ibn Shaprut informing him that he and his people followed the rabbinical faith. Abraham ibn Daud reported meeting Khazar rabbinical students in Toledo, and that they informed him that the "remnant of them is of the rabbinic faith." This reference indicates that some Khazars maintained ethnic, if not political, autonomy at least two centuries after the sack of Atil.

In 1999, a large Viking treasure was discovered on a farm in Sweden. Known as the Spillings Hoard, this treasure included Islamic, Nordic and Persian coins. One of the most noted coins in the hoard, dated to c. 800, is from the Khazar Kingdom and is referred to as the "Moses Coin." The coin is inscribed with the words "Moses is the messenger of G-d" in contrast to the usual Muslim text "Muhammad is the messenger of G-d."

A letter in Hebrew dated 4746 (985–986) refers to "our lord David, the Khazar prince" who lived in Taman. The letter said that this David was visited by envoys from Kievan Rus' to ask about religious matters — this could be connected to the Vladimir conversion which took place during the same time period. Taman was a principality of Kievan Rus' around 988. The authenticity of this letter, called the Mandgelis Document, has however been questioned by some scholars. According to the Russian Primary Chronicle, in 986 Khazar Jews were present at Vladimir's disputation to decide on the prospective religion of the Kievan Rus'. Whether these were Jews who had settled in Kiev or emissaries from some Jewish Khazar remnant state is unclear.

At least one 12th century Byzantine source refers to tribes practicing Mosaic law and living in the Balkans.

The story of the Khazars would perhaps have been a footnote in Jewish history if not for Rabbi Judah Halevi (c. 1080– 1141), who wrote the 11th century classic Jewish philosophical work commonly known as *The Kuzari* (or *Al Khazari*). The work's full title is "*Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*." Inspired by the story of the Khazars, *The Kuzari* takes the form of the debate in which the king of the Khazars invites representatives of each of the three major religions to come and explain their beliefs. The group includes a Muslim imam, a Christian priest and a rabbi. After the king is won over by the rabbi's arguments, the rabbi demonstrates the superiority of his faith by bringing clear proof of the Giving of the Torah at

Sinai and explaining the commandments in rational terms. Instead of using complicated philosophical ideas, Rabbi Judah Halevi bases his arguments on history, tradition and common sense. In the introduction, the author states that the purpose of his work is to reply to the attacks of those who wish to denigrate Judaism.

Originally written in Arabic, the book was translated by numerous scholars into Hebrew and other languages. Though the book is not considered a historical account of the Khazar conversion to Judaism, scholars have postulated that Yehuda had access to Khazar documents upon which he loosely based his work.

Giovanni di Plano Carpini, a 13th century Papal legate to the court of the Mongol Khan Guyuk, gave a list of the nations the Mongols had conquered in his account. One of them, listed among tribes of the Caucasus, Pontic steppe and the Caspian region, was the "Brutakhi, who are Jews." The identity of the Brutakhi is unclear. Giovanni later refers to the Brutakhi as shaving their heads. Though Giovanni refers to them as Kipchaks, they may have been a remnant of the Khazar people. Alternatively, they may have been Kipchak converts to Judaism (possibly connected to the Krymchaks or the Crimean Karaites).

Some medieval Ruthenian epic poems mention Ruthenian warriors fighting the Jewish Giant. Ruthenia would correspond to the territories of modern Belarus, Ukraine, and some of western Russia.

Let's review now: **Khazars In Transylvania**

At some point in the 9th century, as reported by Byzantine emperor and chronicler Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, a group of three Khazar clans called the Kabars revolted against Khazar government. The three Kabars tribes were defeated and then joined a federacy of Magyar tribes called "Ten Arrows", two Uralic tribes and eight Turkic tribes of Sabirs and Onogurs. They called themselves Magyars and it is believed that their name as *Hungarian* represents a Slave version of the respective word. The Magyars left the previously inhabited Don-Dnieper basin where they were under Khazaria control and together with the Kabars moved west and pushed the Pechenegs out of Pannonia, modern-day Hungary, under the leadership of the Kabar chieftain Almutzes and later Árpád. This penetration of Kabars, a Jewish Khazarian community, into Transylvania through the vast process of transmigration through South-Eastern Europe of the population from the former empire of Khazaria, is mentioned in a series of works. The Khazar-Kabars were well known as skilled goldsmiths and silversmiths. The Hungarians, initially more primitive, learned these skill from the Khazars. The fact that the Hungarians were ruled in Pannonia by a Khazarian tribe is due to the fact that the Khazars knew the area as they had traveled before, on the occasion of their first entry into Pannonia next to the Huns.

Arpad, the first leader of the Hungarians and the son of Kabars leader Almutzes, was invested in office according to the customs of the Khazars, by standing on the shields of the fighters. From this close Kabaro-Hungarian communion, in the young Hungarian state both Hungarian and Khazarian were spoken, at least until 950. The Hungarian historian Erik Molnar, in his work devoted to the ethnogenesis of the Hungarians, attributed a great importance to the Khazar influence that would have lasted 200 years.

The Hungarian-Khazar settlement corresponds to a wide area covering part of current Hungary and Transylvania lands, the core of which would have been the middle Tisza and extended to the Apuseni Mountains to the west, the Danube in the south, the Somes river to the north and the foot of the Carpathians in the east. The historian Victor Neumann describes a peculiarity of the modern Jewish diaspora in Maramures: the Jewish shepherd. It is possible that one of the main features of the Kabars civilization, animal husbandry, became predominant with the passage of time, to the detriment of the military character. Another occupation of the Khazarian Jews was related to the transport of salt on Mures; the only areas with salt deposits were in the Carpathian mountains.

At Sânnicolaul Mare, a locality in the Banat region, a treasure dating from the 10th century was discovered in 1799. On one of the main vessels of the treasury, there appears the figure of a victorious Khazar prince dragging a prisoner by the hair.

Towards the end of the 10th century, the Hungarian ruler Taksony invited a second wave of Khazarian emigrants to settle on his domains. Two centuries later, Ioan Cinnamus, the Byzantine chronicler, talks about troops who kept the Mosaic law, but fought as part of the Hungarian army in Dalmatia in 1154.

The system lasted until the end of the 10th century, when Stephen I, also known as King Saint Stephen, the first King of Hungary from 1000 or 1001, took on the Roman Catholic faith and defeated a rebellious Transylvanian ruler probably a Khazar, proud of his non-Catholic faith. This puts an end to the Hungarian-Khazar dualism in leadership. In today's Hungary, there are villages and people with family names called Kozár and Kazár.

Khazars In Wallachia

Lazar Saineanu, one of the first and most valuable Romanian linguist, wrote in 1887 a study published in the *Convorbiri Literare* magazine, "Literary Conversations" in English, entitled **The Jews or the Tartars or the Giants**, where he attempted to follow the tracks of the first Khazar settlement in Oltenia, and to give a physical description of those newcomers and a remake of their speech. In this article, Saineanu, after grouping all available linguistical, archaeological, and topographical elements which showed an identification of the Jews with the Tartars and the Giants, in the Romanian folkloric traditions, asked the following question: *Was there, in the past, any population about which one could have said it belonged both to the Jews and to the Tartars, at the same time?* To this question he answered that such people did exist, and it was known in history by the name of Khazars, of Tartar origin, which occupied almost all Meridional Russia and which, after having adopted the Judaic religion, during the 8th century, survived for over three centuries as a Judaic state (1016). After having spread its domination over the Oriental Europe, these Tartar-Jews suddenly vanished from the stage of history.

After the extinction of their power, these Khazars mixed up with other Tartar population living by the Black Sea, but the echo of their origin did not completely disappear from the people's memory. Some of these Khazars might have sought an early shelter in Transylvania, and from there, they might have arrived in the Danubian countries, especially in Wallachia, in the Muscel and Romanati districts, where the memories about them seem to have concentrated.

Their settlements and inhabitations have left important tracks, which acquired colossal proportions, in the mind of the people. Supernaturally-sized humans might have lived in an old time of which the oldest of men can hardly recall, and those people were called Jews or Tartars.

The Romanian peasant uses the word *Jidov* (Jew) in several acceptations of which might be deducted from the basic meaning of *Giant*. In the Dragoslavele, former Muscel county, a traditional conception was preserved, according to which "there were once some Jews in Piatra Ghimbavului, and there still is a hole in the stone there, where stone milk flows; and a son of a Jew in Piatra Galbena, was love with the daughter on another Jew in Piatra Ghimbavului, and he went to her, in a hide. Her father saw him, on the peak of the Prislop mountain, and threw a stone at him, to hit him, but missed him. This stone can still be seen on the peak of the Prislop mountain and is as big as 6,600 pounds.

Saineanu gives two more examples. The first refers to some information he came about in the Radomir area, in the Romanati county. Here "towards the West, some old ruins are still standing, about which the old-timers say they were an ancient town since the Tartars and the Jews." The other example refers to the Piatra village in the Oltul de Sus area in Romanati county not far from the Emulsesti commune. Here, while building a rail-road, a mound was cut having a depth of 6.5 feet, where "several walls were found made of small stone and very large bricks, along with fragments of very large pots, as thick as two fingers. Hence, it was concluded that the place must have been an old dwelling from the times of the Giants or the Jews." There are also interesting toponyms of *Jidova*, the Jews' place, or *Uriasa*, the Giants' place, near Campulung, in the Poenari village in Muscel county. Here were the ruins of the *Jidova* fortress which "according to the old-timers, is a very old wall." Then, in the Schitu-Golesti commune in Muscel county, there was a ruined fortress. This fortress was called *Jidova* and is said to have been built by Tartars or Jews. The toponym *Jidova* is frequent with forms of relief. Thus, in the lanca village in Romanati county, "there is a cliff said to have been dragged out of the earth by the Jews, also called the *Jidova* cliff, and the place they had dragged it from is still visible today, eastwards."

In the Raureni village in Muscel county, "a mound is still visible, 55 feet high, 195 feet in circumference, rounded, with sharp edge, said to have been made by Jews. Further, in the same village, in a wood, there is a clearing of 325 feet long, where it is said that the Tartars' camp once was.

Such a mound with the same toponym was to be found in the Cacalet village in Romanati county. Jews' bones are buried under this huge earth of 33 feet high, 175 feet in circumference and truncated edge.

Saineanu also brings forth "the popular metaphor *Jewish work* to name very hard work for beyond the powers of the ordinary men, a restless and stubborn work."

Romanian fairytale characters such as *the Red Emperor* or *the Red Man*, cover all Romanian ethnographical areas. Tales from Moldavia, Transylvania, from the Southern Romania or from Bucovina advise us to avoid "the red man".

There is a series of strange characters, in the Romanian fairy-tales, called "solomonari", having "shamanic attributes, able to ride dragons, to perform celestial ascensions above the clouds." Worth noticing is the fact that "their name, solomonar or șolomonar, and their magical powers are explainable by the fact that they are the successors of the wisdom and magical powers of King Solomon. They are recruited from among humans, but they look like savage giants they are red-haired, swollen eyes, hairy body and they wear begs full of magic tools among them an iron

hatchet, birch bridle, a wisdom book In connection to the origins of the belief in the “solomonari”, there is “the influence of the figure of the Jewish Rabbi (the Kabbalist, the Hasidic, mythicized by the folklore, as in Bucovina, it is said that “only the Jews can become solomonari.”

The presence of such characters as the “Giant-Jews”, or the “solomonars” with “red hair”, in the main ethnographical regions of the Romanian space might demonstrate the fact that this territory was once under the direct control of the khazar empire which might have held in partial or total possession, for a limited time.

Khazars and the Question of Ashkenazi Jewish Ancestry

The Khazar’s most controversial legacy, the racially loaded question of Eastern European Jewry ancestry has been the subject of controversy for over two centuries. The “Rhineland hypothesis” depicts Eastern European Jews as a “population isolate” that emerged from a small group of German Jews who migrated eastward and expanded rapidly. Alternatively, the “Khazarian hypothesis” suggests that Eastern European Jews descended from the Khazars, with Mesopotamian and Greco–Roman Jews continuously reinforced the Judaized empire until the 13th century. Following the collapse of their empire, the Judeo–Khazars fled to Eastern Europe. The rise of European Jewry is therefore explained by the contribution of the Judeo–Khazars.

Speculation that Europe's Jewish population originated among the Khazars has persisted for two centuries, from at least as early as 1808. In the late 19th century, Ernest Renan and other scholars speculated that the Ashkenazi Jews of Europe originated among refugees who had migrated from the collapsed Khazarian Khanate westward into Europe. Though intermittently evoked by several scholars since that time, the Khazar-Ashkenazi hypothesis came to the attention of a much wider public with the publication of Arthur Koestler's *The Thirteenth Tribe* in 1976. It has been revived recently by geneticist Eran Elhaik, who in 2013 conducted a study aiming to vindicate it. Genetic studies on Jews have found no substantive evidence of a Khazar origin among Ashkenazi Jews. Geneticists such as Doron Behar and others have concluded that such a link is unlikely, noting that it is difficult to test the Khazar hypothesis using genetics because there is lack of clear modern descendants of the Khazars that could provide a clear test of the contribution to Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry. They also found no genetic markers in Ashkenazi Jews that would link them to peoples of the Caucasus/Khazar area. Atzmon and others found evidence that the Ashkenazi have mixed Near Eastern and Southern European/Mediterranean origins. Xue and others note a wholly Khazar/Turkish/Middle eastern origin is out of the question, given the complexity of Ashkenazi admixtures. The majority of contemporary geneticists who have published on the topic completely dismiss it.

This Khazar hypothesis has been cited at times by anti-Zionists to challenge the idea that Jews have genetic ties to ancient Israel. It has also occasionally played some role in antisemitic theories propounded by fringe groups of American racists, Russian nationalists and adherents of the Christian identity movement.

Although the Khazar theory is contradicted by genetic evidence and has little support amongst academics, in the Arab world it still enjoys popularity among anti-Zionists and antisemites. Such

proponents argue that if Ashkenazi Jews are primarily Khazar and not Semitic in origin, they would have no historical claim to Israel, nor would they be the subject of God's Biblical promise of Canaan to the Israelites, thus undermining the theological basis of both Jewish religious Zionists and Christian Zionists. In the 1970s and 80s the Khazar theory was also advanced by some Russian chauvinist antisemites, particularly the historian Lev Gumilyov, who portrayed "Judeo-Khazars" as having repeatedly sabotaged Russia's development since the 7th century.

This concludes episode 17; in the next episode when we will discuss the Sephardic Jews and their presence in Romania and I promise to keep it short.

Until then be well.