

The History of the Khazars

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Muqaddasi wrote in *Descriptio Imperii Moslemici* (tenth century) that “In Khazaria, sheep, honey, and Jews exist in large quantities”.¹ 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 most know of the enigmatic Khazars. However, the historic records tell a very different 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. This account will focus first on the origins of the Khazars and their rise to power. From here the periodization of Pritsak is most useful with his division of the history of the Khazars into two periods: the North Caucasian (650-750) and the Volga-Donets (750-965).² In an examination of the prevalent themes and historical factors within these periods a broad spectral comprehension of the history of the Khazars might be revealed.

The question of origin concerning the Khazars leads one far from the comfortable confines of the Volga and Dnieper Rivers and deep within the heart of the Asian continent. In an effort to elucidate Khazar history, Artamonov recognizes two important aspects of Khazarology. First, the Khazars must be understood within the context of the Turkic-Uğur tribes occupying the

¹Arthur Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and its Heritage* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1976), 11.

²Peter J. Potichnyi and Howard Aster, eds. *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective*. Second Edition. (Edmonton, Alberta: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press., 1988), 5.

South Russian steppes in the post-Hunnic period. Second, there must be a recognition of the intimate ties of the Khazar state to the West K k T rkic empire, whose successor state it was.³

The Khazars were a predominately Turkic tribe. The Greek historian Theophanes wrote of the Khazars as “Turks from the East”. Other accounts referencing the Khazars refer to them exclusively as Turks, multiplying the confusion found in scant historic records. Nonetheless, it is currently widely agreed that the Khazars were closely related to Turkic tribes such as the Bulgars and Bashkirs.⁴ There is, however, not much more that can be said in this regard without delving deep into philology or Turkic genealogies. By all accounts, and for present purposes, the Khazars were one of the numerous Turkic tribes from central Asia periodically spun loose and sent hurtling toward Eastern Europe across the steppes. Here we encounter the earliest factual reference to the Khazars in a supplement attached to the Syriac translation of *Greek Church History of “Zacharias Rhetor”* which describes the Khazars as one of many nomadic tribes living in tents north of the Caucasus mountains.⁵

The first nomadic inroads into the Eurasian steppe had been made by the Iranians: Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans. By the fourth century AD these groups gave way to the Altaic peoples: Huns, Akatzirs, Bulgars or numerous O uric Turkic groupings.⁶ It is believed that the Khazars were on the European scene around the middle of the fifth century as a people under

³Peter B. Golden, *Khazar Studies: An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars* (Budapest: Akad miai Kiad ., 1980), 23.

⁴Kevin Alan Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*. (Northvale, Jew Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 2002), 2.

⁵Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 13.

⁶Golden, *Khazar Studies*, 14.

Hunnish sovereignty. The subsequent collapse of the Hun Empire left a power vacuum in Eastern Europe through which new waves of nomadic hordes swept. Tribes such as the Huns would come to wield power, but often fleetingly, and when the loose tribal confederation on which their power rested was jolted loose by some dramatic event (in this case the death of Attila) the component tribes melted back into the steppes, regrouped, and in time reappeared as a new tribal union bearing a new name or were joined by another stronger tribe with imperial ambitions.

During this time the Khazars seemed content with raiding the rich regions of Georgia and Armenia. It was in the second half of the sixth century that the Khazars became a predominate force among the tribes north of the Caucasus.⁷ However Khazar independence was not yet to be achieved. A new tribal confederation was to be established before the Khazars could assert their growing power. Historic accounts relate the Khazars living under the suzerainty of the Western Turkish Empire (alternately West K k T rkic or Turkut Kingdom). These historical events must therefore be understood in the context of this larger meta-narrative: the Western Turkish Empire is the death of one such confederation and the rise of the Khazar Empire the inception of a new one.

In approximately 550 AD the Western Turkish Empire had achieved hegemony over the Eurasian steppe, occupied the Crimea and a great deal of the territory north of the Caucasus to secure the lucrative trade routes running between Byzantium and central Asia.⁸ Founded by

⁷Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 22.

⁸Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (London: Cornell University Press., 1982), 35.

Ishtemi, the yabghu kagan, brother of the supreme Turk kagan Bumin, he was a member of the Turkic Asena (Ashina) clan. The Asena tribe is especially important when considering the political legitimacy of the Turkish tribes as the tribe was believed to have been divinely appointed to rule. Ishtemi's son Tardu next reigned, followed by Ch'u-lo whose unsatisfactory reign led to revolts. Shih Kuei's reign led to the expansion of the Empire, which continued under his brother Tong Yabghu's reign.⁹ The Western Turkish Empire was a confederation of tribes, held together by such rulers or Kagans.¹⁰ In 630, the Eastern Turkish Empire succumbed to a re-invigorated China under the Tang dynasty and the Western Turkish Empire sank into prolonged civil war.¹¹ It is out of the ashes of this Western Turkish state that the Khazar Empire was to emerge.

Tong Yabghu's son is widely considered as the founder of the Khazar state. After the collapse of the Western Turkish Empire the whole region between the Volga and the fortress city of Derbent came into Khazar possession.¹² 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. In fact Thomas Noonan notes the problem of even discussing ethnic Khazars in the Khazar Empire:

⁹Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 14.

¹⁰Or Kaqan or Khaqan or Chagan or Qağan - Koestler recognizes that orientalist have strong idiosyncrasies about spelling. This paper will follow Koestler's spelling as Kagan, as he usefully puts "it is the least offensive to Western eyes". Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 5.

¹¹Golden, *Khazar Studies*, 51.

¹²Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 15.

“The Qaghanate did not possess the rather uncomplicated, homogenous society that such terms as Turk, nomad or Jew suggest. It is thus necessary to go beyond traditional models and think in terms of a number of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups coexisting over the course of several centuries with a number of sedentary and semi-sedentary groups in a very heterogenous, multi-ethnic state.”¹³

The Empire of the Khazars was composed of some twenty-five to twenty-eight distinct peoples.¹⁴ Indeed, this pluralism pervaded deeper than ethnicity. The judiciary of the Khazars reflected this in Atil (Itil), the capital city of the Khazars. The supreme court was formed of two Jews, two Muslims, two Christians and one pagan. A multi-confessional judiciary arose to accommodate the needs of a multi-confessional population.

The Khazars themselves formed the ruling elite of this conglomerate and were divided likewise into nine clans or areas.¹⁵ In addition to this clan/tribal division there is further evidence that the Khazars were separated into White and Black Khazars. This adds more confusion. It was customary among Turkish peoples to refer to the ruling classes or clans as ‘white’ while the lower strata was ‘black’. There is no reason to believe, for example, that the ‘White Huns’ that invaded India and Persia in the fifth and sixth centuries were any whiter than

¹³Anatoly M. Khazanov and André Wink, eds. *Nomads in the Sedentary World* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press., 200), 77.

¹⁴Extrapolated from Ibn Fadlan’s account which states that three Khazar kings had twenty-five wives each of whom was the daughter of a neighbouring ruler and had been taken either voluntarily or by compulsion. The Jewish traveller Eldad ha-Dani indicated that the Khazars took tribute from 25-28 kingdoms while the *Reply of King Joseph* suggests 28 tributary nations. Anatoly M. Khazanov and André Wink, eds. *Nomads in the Sedentary World* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press., 2001), 77.

¹⁵This is turn is deduced from Pecheng sources. As the Pechenegs were a neighbouring tribe (though frequently at odds with the Khazars) they consisted of eight provinces each with its own name and prince. Each province belonged to a particular clan and each province was subdivided into five districts. It is therefore reasonable to assume that each of the nine Khazar provinces was the home of one Khazar clan or tribe. Anatoly M. Khazanov and André Wink, eds. *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, 77.

the Hun tribes that invaded Europe. Therefore this white/black controversy leaves one with little extra evidence with which to extrapolate the ethnic origins or composition of the Khazars.¹⁶ Importantly, however, what must be drawn from this is that the ethnic Khazars, like most peoples of nomadic origin, were not a uniform, homogenous race.

With the fall of the Western Turkish Empire Khazar sovereignty was firmly established. Other states grew out of the Turkish Empire as well, with which the Khazars periodically did battle. One such example of particular interest is the defeat of Old Great Bulgaria, which significantly expanded the realm of the Khazars, and led to the establishment of the Volga and Danube Bulgars. With successes on the field and prosperity at home Khazar government and economy began to take shape. Pritsak's North Caucasian (650-750) period now begins to unfold.

During the North Caucasian period Khazar efforts focussed on the conquest of Southern Caucasus, especially in the form of the city of Derbend, the Alan Gate, and the Iranian trade routes. This necessarily focussed the Khazars on the Persian Empire (for what short time it survived) and then the explosion of Arabic power under the tutelage of Islam. It is toward the end of this period that the mysterious conversion of the Khazars takes place.

It was a Khazar-Byzantine union that finally conspired to break the power of the Persian Empire in late 627.¹⁷ Combined Khazar- Byzantine forces marched on Persia and shattered a large Persian army before Nineveh. A humiliating peace was forced on the Persian king. The

¹⁶Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 19.

¹⁷Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press., 1992), 9.

assault was a blow the Persians would never recover from adequately and the Khazars and Byzantines may very well have done themselves a disservice by removing a powerful obstacle such as the Persians from the warpath of the Arabs.

The onslaught of the Arabs opens the chapter of Khazar history that is most widely recognized. Peter Golden does the legacy of the Khazars justice in contrasting them to Charles Martel.

“Every schoolchild in the West has been told that if not for Charles Martel and the battle of Poitiers there might be a mosque where Notre Dame now stands. What few schoolchildren are aware of is that if not for the Khazars... Eastern Europe might well have become a province of Islam. The Khazars blunted the Arab advance through the Caucasus and fought them there to a standstill.”¹⁸

Border skirmishes between the Arabs and Khazars were nearly constant, prompting some commentators to identify them collectively as a hundred years war. However, most historians recognize two distinct conflicts, which will be focussed on here, within the broader conflict.

The first Arab-Khazar war lasted from 642-652. The war began when the Arab general ‘Abd ar-Rahman attacked Khazaria.¹⁹ The course of the warfare was typical; each side would score a victory against the other, but be unable to maintain a foothold on the opposite side of the Caucasus, thus being forced to retreat. It was not until 651-652 that Arab troops invaded for a final time and succeeded in passing north of Derbent, the much prized fortress built by the Sassanid Persian Emperor Khusrau in an attempt to contain the Khazars²⁰, and advanced on Balanjar, the original Khazarian capital city. Here the Khazars met the Arab army and crushed

¹⁸Golden, *Khazar Studies*, 14.

¹⁹Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 160.

²⁰Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 158.

it. The defeat of the Arab army at Balanjar is regarded as the end of the first Arab-Khazar war, however, hostilities continued as both powers raided each others territories.

The second Arab-Khazar war lasted from 722-737. It began with a Khazar army of thirty thousand invading Armenia in 722. The Muslim army led by Jarrah ibn Abdullah al-Hakami retaliated by assaulting north and penetrating Khazar lands in 724.²¹ The Arab army reached as far as Samandar before it was forced to retreat. Again, this second war continued the course of the first. First the Khazar and then the Arab army would penetrate deep into the other's territory, but be unable to maintain a foothold. However, in 737, the Khazars suffered a devastating and nearly terminal defeat. Unprepared for the advance of the forces of General Marwan ibn Muhammad, the Caliphate's governor of Armenia, the Arabs pushed the Khazars back from the Dariel Pass (Alan Gate) in the Caucasus and took Balanjar, Samandar and Al-Bayda. The Khazars fled before Marwan's onslaught but eventually Marwan captured the Khazar kagan. However, great as the power of the Arabs was, they did not possess the resources necessary to control so turbulent a region. Therefore Marwan forced the kagan to pledge support to the Caliphate and adopt Islam, at which point he retreated with his army across the Caucasus. The toll the Arabs had taken on the Khazar countryside was devastating, but Khazar sovereignty was intact and the Arab onslaught had been held. Likewise, while the Khazar kagan may indeed have converted to Islam, the conversion was either short-lived or of little consequence, as in short order the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism is seen. Conflict continued between the Khazars and the Caliphate, mostly due to dynastic quibbles. However, by the late eighth century the destructive energy of the Arabs was largely spent and the Khazars would never again face

²¹Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 161.

such a test from the south.

Whether the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism properly belongs in the North Caucasus period or the Volga-Donets period is a matter of some debate. Traditionally the date of King Bulan's conversion is considered to be the year 740. This account, granted by Yehudah ha-Levi, means that Bulan could have been the ruler who was forced to convert to Islam. Constantine Zuckerman gives the more convincing date for this as 861. This fits better with evidence from Cyril's travels to the Khazars in 860.²² As well, there is no evidence of Judaism having made much of an impression in the eight century in the realm of the Khazars. Noonan apparently completely dismisses the Arabic sources which identify the conversion date earlier and identifies the date as "sometime prior to ca. 870".²³ Appropriately, he can hardly be heavily chastised for dismissing Arabic accounts here as Islamic texts which relate the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism equally pervert the tale, not only the date. Koestler puts it well when he says that "Arab historians certainly had a gift for sugaring the pill".²⁴ The Khazar tale relates the kagan calling for representatives of the great religions: Christian, Muslim and Jew. 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. Here the kagan listens patiently to each explain their faith. Finally he asks

²² Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 125.

²³Anatoly M. Khazanov and André Wink, eds. *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, 77.

²⁴Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 57. In conversation with Kevin Alan Brook he related that "I am always amazed when people assume that the Arab chronicles speaking about Jews & Khazars must be 100% correct in their assessment of Khazar society & customs & the extent/type of Judaism in Khazaria, when Ibn Fadlan got his information on Khazars from a hostile Bulgar source and the rest of them were writing without first-hand knowledge and may have had a bias towards portraying Islam as influential."

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. The Arabic version of this tale reports that a Jew in the Khazar's court had the Muslim scholar poisoned before he could participate in the event.

The king's reasoning here is symbolic: he is willing to accept doctrines which are shared by all three - their common denominator - and refuses to commit himself to any of the rival claims which go beyond that. Koestler describes this as "the principle of the uncommitted world, applied to theology."²⁵

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.²⁶ This is not to claim that the conversion was any less genuine. It is clear that the Khazar kagan felt emotionally connected to not just the Jewish faith, but to the fate of world Jewry. While political relations with the Caliphate were largely peaceful during this time Ibn Fadlan wrote of the religious tension that existed between the two:

The Muslims in this city [Itil] have a cathedral mosque where they pray and attend on Fridays... When the king of the Khazars was informed in a.H. 310 [AD 922] that the Muslims had destroyed a synagogue which was in Dar al-Bubunaj, he gave orders to destroy the minaret, and he killed the muezzins. And he said: 'If I had not feared that not a synagogue would be left standing in the lands of Islam, but would be destroyed, I

²⁵Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 57.

²⁶Dimitri Obelensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (London: Phoenix Press., 2000), 175.

would have destroyed the mosque too.²⁷

The extent of the conversion of the Khazars is equally a matter of great historical disagreement. Many sources place the conversion of the Khazars as a conversion of the ruling class alone, and not, therefore, of the common people. Some sources speak of the widespread proselytization of all the peoples in the Empire. Both accounts are somewhat suspect. Kevin Alan Brook offers a very useful interpretation of the original source material here. His interpretation espouses that, while the Khazar Empire encompassed many non-Jewish people, the ethnically Khazar people (who, if it is remembered, were outnumbered by their subject peoples) were Jewish to a large extent.²⁸ This is just what one would expect to find in an Empire constituted of confederated tribes held together by force. While no doubt there were Jewish converts from other tribes, the mass proselytization of non-ethnic Khazars does not seem to have taken place.

According to the Schechter text, the conversion of the Khazars had further ramifications. Pritsak relates how at the same time the proselytized Khazars changed the name of their warrior chief and instituted a monarchy, naming him as their first king.²⁹ This could be the instance whereby the kagan, a pagan, was supplanted in authority by a Jewish bek (beg).³⁰ The kagan became a largely ceremonial head of the nation, while the bek (beg) controlled the army and

²⁷Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 103.

²⁸Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 139.

²⁹Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 103.

³⁰It is not known whether this was the inception of the dual monarchy, or whether the Jewish bek supplanted the kagan, but it is known that there was a Jewish bek on the throne while there was still a pagan kagan. Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 137.

state policy. There is, however, equal evidence that the dual kingship was present before the conversion of the Khazars. Nevertheless it is agreed that the power of the kagan became largely ceremonial after this time, at which point the bek became more powerful. Whether the conversion of the Khazars played a significant role in the establishment of the diarchy is not established, however it does seem to be a likely possibility.

The Volga-Donets period was characteristic of nomadic incursions and persistent warfare on the Khazar's northern borders. The Byzantine engineered fortress of Sarkel constructed for the Khazars is evidence of these challenges. It was the successful incursion of two of these great forces that spelled doom for the Khazars: the Rus and the Pechenegs.

The destruction of the Avar Empire by the Carolingians, with its centre in the Danube basin was crucial for the history of mid-eastern Europe.³¹ The Khazars could not afford to calmly observe the vacuum then present but not occupied by the Franks. The construction of Sarkel and the fortification of Kiev were rapidly undertaken. However, more than one power was set on capitalizing on this new vacuum.

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 centre of economic activity.³² Rivers leading to Constantinople became all important. The Dnieper gradually replaced the Volga in commercial supremacy.

A Magyar-Khazar alliance was responsible for the protection of the Khazar's key border region around Sarkel. However, starting in AD 862, when Kiev was annexed by the Rus,

³¹Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 49.

³²Peter J. Potichnyi and Howard Aster, eds. *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations*, 5.

pressure began building on the Magyars.³³ As pressure from the north increased, the Pechenegs, realizing the ramifications of new commercial developments, were forced to leave the Syr-Daria basin and began their push westwards.³⁴ Unable to contain both powers, the Magyars fled west leaving the Khazar's western flank exposed. Though initially defeated by the Khazars and their remaining allies the Pechenegs successfully crossed Khazar territory and created a wedge in the steppe zone by controlling the maritime towns. The Rus were likewise determined to control Dnieper trade and eliminate Volga competition. In practical terms this meant the end of the Khazar Empire.

The Rus were quick to set about their task. In 912-913, the Rus made their first incursion into the Caspian via the Volga. An Arab account relates how the Khazar king allowed five hundred Rus ships with one hundred men on each passage down the Volga, as long as they agreed to present the king with half of the booty they acquired. However, the actions of the Rus on the Caspian were so devastating that the Muslim mercenaries serving in the kagan's army insisted on revenge. The kagan, warning the Rus in advance, did little good. It is told that thirty thousand men were killed by the Muslims, while those who survived were killed by Burtas and Bulgars further north. Several commentators note that the numbers here seem likely to have been exaggerated. Nonetheless, the significance of this retaliation is not lessened. Somewhat ironically the Arab chronicler describing these events in 943 relates that no such incursion had ever been repeated again. The second incursion took place later in the year 943.³⁵

³³Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 93.

³⁴Peter J. Potichnyi and Howard Aster, eds. *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations*, 6.

³⁵Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 190.

It may be significant that this second attempt occurred only after a devastating defeat was inflicted on the Rus by the Byzantines at the hands of Greek fire. Pritsak speculates that this force may have been the remnants of a failed assault on Byzantium too ashamed to return home.³⁶ As the Schechter text records, this expedition on the Caspian ended in failure. Arab histories relate that pestilence broke out among the Rus and they were put to flight. Significantly, from this point forward the Khazars forbade the Rus entrance into the Caspian. This seemingly ended the conflict, however Joseph, king of the Khazars, records in his letter to Hasdai³⁷, some years later:

I live at the mouth of the river [Volga] and with the help of the Almighty I guard its entrance and prevent the Rus'ians who arrive in vessels from passing into the Caspian Sea... because of this I am at war with them, and were I to let them pass but once, they would destroy the land of the Ishmaelites as far as Baghdad.³⁸

Inevitably, as the Khazars and Rus extended their respective influence, they would come into major conflict. This took the form of a Khazar invasion of the Crimea in 962. The Crimean Goths appealed to the Rus for defence and Svyatoslav, Grand Duke of Kiev, accepted the call. Svyatoslav's acceptance of this call was likely motivated by the Khazar's actions in closing the Caspian.

Svyatoslav, Grand Duke of Kiev, conquered and seized the Khazar city of Sarkel, including its fortress in the year 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 wrote that the conquest of Itil took

³⁶Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 138.

³⁷Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 103.

³⁸Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 192.

place in 967³⁹, 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 transferred control over the Volga and Don trade routes to the East Slavs.

However, while the Khazar Empire died in 965-967, the Khazar state lived on for several years. With the aid of the Khwarizm, and apparently the price of the conversion of the Khazar kagan to Islam, the Khazars were able to regain Itil and maintain a degree of political independence until 1016.⁴⁰ In 1016, a combined effort of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II and the Rus utterly destroyed whatever remained of the Khazar Empire. The royal family of Khazaria reputedly fled to Spain. It is with a taste of delicious hindsight that historians can see here the shortsighted policy of the Byzantines. The stability and prosperity that the Khazars had brought to the notoriously unstable steppes had been an advantage the Byzantines had taken for granted. Into this power vacuum sprang new waves of invaders, the most formidable of which were the Ghuzz. A branch of the Ghuzz, the Seljuks, were responsible for destroying a huge Byzantine army in the historic battle of of Manzikert (1071). The loss of stability in the steppes led directly to the Byzantine loss of Asia Minor to the Turks, previously the heartland of the Byzantine Empire. On such evidence one cannot think that history is without a sense of irony.

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

³⁹Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*, 194.

⁴⁰Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 109.

king reserved a gold throne for the Kagan.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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. While it is doubtful that Kiev adopted a double monarchy there is evidence that other Rus principalities adopted the Khazar system of Kagan and Bek. Khazar influence on Hungary in the form of the Magyars may also be traced, with the Kabars (Kavars) a Khazar tribe that accompanied the Magyar migration. Yet the Khazar's most controversial legacy, the racially loaded and here unanswered question of Eastern European Jewry, is the subject of the most concerted scholarship. 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.

⁴¹Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 23.

⁴²Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 13.

⁴³Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 74.

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