

Khazaria

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The Khazar Empire (ca. 650-ca. 965/68), one of the largest states of medieval Eurasia, dominated a region from the Ukrainian steppes to lands approaching the Ural River and from the Middle Volga region to the North Caucasus and [Crimea](#). Important segments of its population converted to Judaism in the mid-to-late eighth century. Khazaria's ruling core of Turkic tribes stemmed from the Türk Qaghanate (*qaghan* "emperor") centered in Mongolia and ruling a domain stretching from Manchuria to the Black Sea. The Türk Empire divided into eastern (552–630, 682–742) and western (552–659, ca. 690–ca. 766) halves for administrative purposes. The Khazar Qaghanate, apparently led by a breakaway branch of the Türk ruling clan, the Ashina, seceded from the fragmenting Western Türk realm around 630–650.

There are anachronistic references to the Khazars before 630 in Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, and other sources, but it is only from about 650 that we can speak with confidence of the Khazars as a clearly defined polity. Khazaria brought under its rule an ethnically diverse population of Turkic, Iranian, Finno-Ugrian, Slavic, and North Caucasian peoples engaged in variety of economic pursuits: pastoral nomadism, agriculture, viticulture, and the hunting-gathering activities typical of the northern forests. It played a major role in international trade as an intermediary between these forests and the Byzantine and Islamic Empires. Ibn Khurdādhbih (ninth-century author of an important geographical survey) mentions several transcontinental routes of the "Rādhānīyah," a Jewish merchant company (later supplanted by the Scandinavian-Eastern Slavic Rus') that traversed Khazaria and played a key role in the Euro-Asian trade. Aside from these brief notices on their routes and goods, little is known about the "Radanites" or their religious and cultural influence (if any) in Khazaria.

The Khazars took 10 percent of the value of the goods that passed through their lands and presumably provided protection for the merchant caravans in return. The capital, located in the Volga estuary, Atil (the Turkic name for the Volga), was a cosmopolitan trading center with substantial Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and pagan communities. With the exception of the ruler's palace and some government buildings, the capital's inhabitants lived in nomad tents. The site of Atil remains undiscovered. A previous urban center (up to the early eighth century) had been either Samandar (subsequently noted as ruled by a Judaized Khazar of the royal house or by a Muslim of Arab origin) or Balanjar (not far from modern Derbent in Dagestan). The Khazars, as was the case with many of the early Turkic states, were noted for their religious tolerance, permitting each religious community to govern its internal affairs according to its own traditions.

Khazar ethnic origins are much debated. It is unclear if they derived from a Turkic tribe or tribal union called *Khazar*, stemming from earlier Turkic nomadic peoples, or whether this ethnonym was originally a political term denoting a group that had broken away from the Western Türk state. The polyglot character of the Khazar realm further complicates the issue. Some contemporary Muslim geographers report that the Khazar language was similar to Bulghar (a form of Turkic that differs from Common Turkic and survives today only in Chuvash). Others (sometimes the same authors) say that Khazar was unlike any other tongue. The surviving fragments of the Khazar language, mainly titles, personal names, and place names that were transmitted in a wide range of Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek, Armenian, and Georgian sources, among others, are largely Turkic but do not provide enough evidence to tell us which form of Turkic the people spoke.

From about 650 to the late 670s, the Khazars subjugated or drove off the Bulghar tribes in the Black Sea steppes. At the same time, they became involved in a protracted war with the Muslim Caliphate for control of Caucasia. In 737, Marwān, the Umayyad general (and later the last Umayyad caliph, r. 744–750), staged a surprise raid and captured the Khazar Qaghan, who was obliged to convert to Islam. This conversion was short-lived, however, as the Muslims were unable to maintain a military presence on the lower Volga. The wars with the Caliphate (which waned in the latter half of the eighth century) and an entente with Byzantium (reinforced by marital ties) against their common foe, the Muslims, brought the religious question to the fore. The Khazar ruling elite, opting, in all likelihood, for a recognized monotheistic religion that would not entail subordination to the Arabian caliph or Byzantine emperor, converted to Judaism (of the Rabbinite, not [Karait](#) form).

The dating of the [conversion](#) is not firmly established. Very likely this is because it was a complex process, beginning with the upper strata of Khazar society (the *qaghan* and his entourage) and later spreading to other but not all segments. This is typical of the process of conversion across Eurasia. Yehudah Halevi (1075–1141), in his *Kuzari*, written in distant Spain centuries after the fall of Khazaria but claiming information that came from the Khazars, placed the conversion around 740. This may have marked the beginning of the process. Al-Mas'ūdī, a well-informed Muslim historian living in the mid-tenth century, says that the Khazar ruler converted during the reign of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809), attracting Jews to Khazaria from Muslim lands and Byzantium who joined an already existing Jewish community in Khazaria (especially in Crimea). Supporting evidence for this date can be found in imitation Arab coins with the notation *ark al-khazar* (Land of the Khazars) that the Khazars periodically minted. One grouping of coins from AH 223/838 CE, replaced the customary Islamic formula announcing the prophethood of Muḥammad with *Mūsā rasūl Allāh*, "Moses is the Messenger of God."

Clearly, by this time Judaism had begun to take on the trappings of a state religion or at the least was part of the profile that the Khazars presented to the world. Only members of the ruling clan who professed Judaism could become Qaghans. The expansion of Judaization is reflected in Muslim sources. While some Muslim sources note that Judaism was largely limited to the ruling elite, Ibn Fadlān, who was in the Khazar vassal state of Volga Bulgharia in 921–922, says that "the Khazars and their king are all Jews." Ibn al-Faqīh, writing ca. 930, reports "all of the Khazars are Jews, but they have been Judaized recently." The Khazar Hebrew correspondence of the mid-tenth century (an exchange of letters between the Khazar ruler, Joseph, and the Jewish courtier of the Spanish Umayyads, Ḥasdai ibn Shaprūt and the "Letter of an Unknown Khazar Jew," probably from the same era but preserved only in a twelfth-century copy from the Cairo Geniza) presents the conversion as an internal process, a return to Judaism, thereby placing it in a context that would be more familiar to Jewish audiences, but traces the origins of the Khazars to Togarmah, the biblical progenitor of the Turkic peoples. A letter from (or to?) Khazar Jews in [Kiev](#) (Qiyoba), also probably from the tenth century (and preserved in the Cairo Geniza), shows the presence of Khazar and other Jews there, confirmed by later Rus' sources.

The bulk of the nomads under Khazar rule remained shamanists and worshipers of the Inner Asian celestial deity, Tengri. The ruler of Khaydaq, a city in Dagestan that was in the Khazar sphere of influence, is said to have worshiped on successive days with his Muslim, Jewish, and Christian subjects, clear evidence of the religious complexity of the region.

A unique feature of tenth-century Khazaria was the institution of sacral kingship in which the *qaghan*, a now sacralized figure, reigned but did not rule. The actual governance of the realm was left to the "king" who had the title of *qaghan-beg*. Dual kingship was well known in the Turkic world. The sacralization of the Khazar *qaghan*, however, was different. A secluded, venerated symbol for the well-being of the state, all prostrated themselves before him when he made his rare public appearances. The few high officers who were admitted to his presence underwent purification ceremonies. This may have derived from Iranian notions of kingship introduced into court culture by the Ors guard (from Iranian Khwārazm) that

surrounded the *qaghan*, whose chief minister came from them. It had nothing to do with the Judaism of the ruling elite with which these practices coexisted. The *qaghan*'s investiture was identical to that of the Türk *qaghans*, including a rite of ceremonial strangulation, at the conclusion of which the new *qaghan*, about to lose consciousness, predicted the length of his reign.

In 965 and apparently again in 968–969, Khazaria, already in decline, was attacked by the Rus' and Oghuz (a neighboring Turkic tribal union). According to Muslim accounts, the *qaghan* agreed to convert to Islam in return for aid from Khwārazm. Thereafter, the Khazars faded as a power of any consequence. There are scattered references to them in Rus' and other sources. Crimea, which they once dominated, continued to be called *Gazaria* in Latin sources. Other Jewish communities that developed in the region undoubtedly absorbed Khazar Jews and Judaized Khazars. Other Khazars melded into incoming Turkic nomadic peoples. The role of the Khazars in the shaping of East European *Ashkenazic* Jewry is periodically the subject of speculation. Judaized Khazars may have been one of the components of what became the largest Jewish community in the modern era, but it is very unlikely that they were a determinative element.

Suggested Reading

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Source: <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khazaria>

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Golden, Peter B. 2010. Khazaria. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khazaria> (accessed February 12, 2023).