

The History of the Jewish Khazars

D.M. Dunlop

Situated between the lower Volga and the northern Caucasus, the Khazar country, populated by a non-Semitic people, lay across the natural line of advance of the Arabs between the seventh and the tenth centuries. This strategic location enabled the Khazars to play an important role in the political struggles of the day and to be, in a sense, the champions of Christendom. Yet, at one point in their evolution, in the mid-eighth century, their king and the upper class of the population adopted Judaism.

To write this comprehensive history of the Khazars—the first in any Western language—Professor Dunlop has studied many of the often obscure and at times contradictory sources in a variety of languages, including the valuable new material in Hebrew that has come to light in this century. He also makes use of Chinese references to the Khazars, which have never before been taken into consideration.

The author traces the Khazar beginnings, their possible relations with the Persians before Islam, their contacts with the Greeks and wars with the Arabs, their conversion to Judaism, the alleged correspondence between one of their rulers and a Jewish leader in Spain, the relation with the Russians, the collapse of the Khazar independence at the beginning of the eleventh century, and, finally, the disappearance of the people.

European Jewry in the Middle Ages was stirred and impressed by the fact that an independent Jewish state existed. The great poet Judah Halevi cast his theological work *Kuzari* (SCHOCKEN SB 75) in the form of a dialogue between the King of the Khazars and a Jewish scholar.

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SCHOCKEN BOOKS 67 Park Avenue New York City 10016



Cover illustration: letter found in the Cairo Genizah describing the Khazar empire

D. M. DUNLOP

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SB167

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SCHOCKEN SB 167 \$2.45 in Canada \$2.75.



THE HISTORY
OF THE
KHAZARS
BY E. M. DOWLING

First SCHOCKEN edition 1967

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 67-26985

This edition published by arrangement with Princeton University Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

READERS of Gibbon are familiar with the name of Leo the Khazar, Emperor of the Greeks in the 8th century of our era, whose mother, a Khazar princess, had married Constantine V. The Khazars are repeatedly mentioned by the Byzantine writers, and evidently their power bulked large on the political horizon of those days. A simple example: in the 10th century, letters from the imperial chancellery on the Bosphorus to the Khazar Khaqan, as their ruler was called, bore a more handsome gold seal than that judged necessary for correspondence with the Pope of Rome or the successor of Charlemagne.¹

The Khazars have another and special claim on our interest. Their territory was situated between the lower course of the Volga and the northern slopes of the Caucasus, extending as far as the lands round the Sea of Azov, and, at least in the 9th century, even farther west to Kiev and the middle Dnieper, while eastward they exercised control over the tribesmen as far as the Oxus. The Khazar country thus lay across the natural line of advance of the Arabs. Within a few years of the death of Muḥammad (A.D. 632) the armies of the Caliphate, sweeping northward through the wreckage of two empires and carrying all before them, reached the great mountain barrier of the Caucasus. This barrier once passed, the road lay open to the lands of eastern Europe. As it was, on the line of the Caucasus the Arabs met the forces of an organized military power which effectively prevented them from extending their conquests in this direction. The wars of the Arabs and the Khazars, which lasted more than a hundred years, though little known, have thus considerable historical importance.² The Franks of Charles Martel on the field of Tours turned the tide of Arab invasion. At about the same time the threat to Europe in the east was

¹ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Caerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, ed. Bonn, I, 690.

² Underestimated by Cavaignac, *Histoire du Monde*, t. vii (Paris 1931), 169.

hardly less acute. It is clear that the victorious Muslims were met and held by the forces of the Khazar kingdom. Though like the Franks the Khazars were thus in a sense the champions of Christendom, they belonged racially to the nomadic or semi-nomadic type of central Asia and at this time were still shamanists. Later as we shall see—and this is not the least remarkable thing about them—they converted to Judaism. It can, however, scarcely be doubted that but for the existence of the Khazars in the region north of the Caucasus, Byzantium, the bulwark of European civilization in the east, would have found itself outflanked by the Arabs, and the history of Christendom and Islam might well have been very different from what we know.

The question may be asked, Why has no attempt so far been made to write the Khazar history, if it is worth recording and a substantial amount of material is available? A continuous account of the Khazars was in fact given by the Cambridge historian J. B. Bury, in a chapter of his *History of the Eastern Roman Empire*.³ This may be taken as the best account available, though there are others, besides a great number of monographs on various aspects of the subject and incidental references in modern books. The chief reason why we are not more familiar with the Khazars appears to be neither the lack of intrinsic interest presented by their story nor the absence of material, but rather the difficulty of dealing with the existing sources—partly because they are written in a variety of languages, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Russian, Persian, Turkish, and even Chinese, with which no one can be expected to be conversant at first hand; and partly because of the contradiction and obscurity of the data thus afforded. The sources for the Khazars have steadily accumulated as our knowledge of Oriental history has grown. Last century saw the publication of Arabic geographers and historians who have much to tell us about them. In the present century, valuable new material in Hebrew has come to light.⁴

³ C. xiii (London 1912).

⁴ The opening up of the "geniza" (storeroom) of a synagogue in Old

The bibliography has increased to very considerable proportions, and critics have expressed their views on the Khazars in another range of languages, almost as formidable as that of the original sources. Certainly the position is very different from the days when Buxtorf connected the name of the Khazars, on whom he could get no information, with the Persian Chosroes (Khusraw). But in spite of the great additions to our knowledge, an attempt to trace their history is by no means plain sailing, as will be seen in the following pages.

Some time before the war Professor Paul Kahle, then Director of the Oriental Seminar in the University of Bonn, and Professor Henri Grégoire of Brussels intended to collaborate on a work on the Khazars. It was generally expected that an important and definitive book would be the result. Unfortunately, however, the outbreak of war and attendant circumstances interfered with their plans. Some years ago Professor Kahle proposed that I should take up the Khazar investigation, and I was very glad to fall in with his suggestion. In the course of the work I have had the great advantage of being able to consult Professor Kahle at need and am much indebted to him for his generous help in innumerable ways. Without him the book would not have been written. He has left me a free hand in the selection, arrangement, and presentation of the material, and while I have no doubt been influenced by his opinions on general questions, he is not responsible for the views expressed and particularly the misapprehensions and errors which, I take it, are unavoidable in a work like this.

My task has been to go over the available material and construct therefrom as coherent an account as possible of the fortunes of the Khazar nation and state. There is little new in the way of sources in the present work. Exceptions are some variant readings from manuscripts of al-Iṣṭakhri and al-Mas'ūdi sent me from Oxford by Professor Kahle—the texts have long been in print; a short account of the Khazars, probably by the

Cairo has contributed to this as to other historical questions. See Paul E. Kahle's Schweich Lectures: *The Cairo Geniza* (London 1947), 14ff.

Spanish geographer ibn-Sa'īd, which I also owe to Professor Kahle; a hitherto unnoticed passage in al-Ya'qūbi bearing on the Khazar double kingship; and an interesting account of incidents purporting to have taken place at the Khazar court at an unspecified date, from a Persian manuscript in the Leyden University library, to the authorities of which I should like here to express my thanks. But I have taken notice of the Chinese references to the Khazars, which has not been done until now, so far as I know, even by the most recent writers on the subject. Professor Haloun, whose recent death is a great loss to many Orientalists personally as well as to Oriental studies, kindly helped me in this part of the work. Some of the Greek passages quoted will probably not be found elsewhere.

In the course of the work such subjects as the Khazar beginnings, their possible relations with the Persians before Islam, contacts of the Khazars and Greeks at different times, the wars with the Arabs, the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism, the alleged correspondence between Spain and Khazaria in the 10th century, relations of Khazars and Russians, and, finally, the collapse and disappearance of the Khazar state will be discussed. Some of these are highly controversial questions, and the reader need not feel alarm if on cardinal issues, such as the date of the conversion to Judaism or of the final eclipse, widely differing estimates have to be examined. He will be invited in the development of the argument to look for traces of the Khazars as far west as Denmark and as far east as China, and to consider that—apart from the conversion to Judaism, which is an undoubted fact—they are said to have adopted at different times Islam and Christianity as well. The evidence, obscure and contradictory as it frequently is, will be set down as clearly as is in the writer's power. Complete and, it is hoped, accurate translations of some of the most important Arabic texts are given in the course of the work.

Of a host of books and articles which have been consulted, one or two stand out as specially stimulating. The first of these is comparatively old and differs essentially in its conclusions

from what is said here, J. Marquart's *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*.⁵ Another is Kokovtsov's *Evreisko-khazarskaya perepiska v X veke*.⁶ The two books are poles apart in method and scope. The German's is diffuse and difficult to read, yet it contains a great many valuable suggestions about the period which concerns us. The Russian professor deals with a limited subject, the documents in Hebrew, half a dozen in number, bearing on the Khazar correspondence with Spain, around which, of all questions involved in Khazar history, controversy has been fiercest. This is discussed with admirable clarity and economy of words. To these must be added Professor A. Zeki Validi Togan's edition of ibn-Faḍlān's narrative of a journey to the Volga Bulgars, the notes and appendices to which contain material on the Khazars which has never before been published.⁷ I have been able to use the book through the kindness of Professor Minorsky. Professor Minorsky's own translation and commentary of the 10th century Persian geography *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam* contains important new information.⁸ I cannot omit one other work, the excellent bibliography of the Khazars compiled by the Slavonic division of the New York Public Library and published with a notice by A. Yarmolinsky in their *Bulletin* for 1938. My attention was first drawn to this by Dr. Cecil Roth of Oxford.

I must also mention briefly the extensive works of Artamonov, Poliak, and Zajączkowski, all of comparatively recent date, in which the problem of the Khazars is approached from very various points of view. Artamonov's *Očerki drevneishei istorii Khazar* appeared in 1937.⁹ Consonantly with its title, this book

⁵ Leipzig 1903.

⁶ The Hebrew-Khazar Correspondence in the 10th Century, published by the Russian Academy, Leningrad 1932.

⁷ Ibn-Faḍlān's Reisebericht, A.K.M., xxiv, 3 (Leipzig 1939). A useful summary of Zeki Validi's material with an English translation of ibn-Faḍlān's narrative is given by Robert P. Blake and Richard N. Frye in "Notes on the Risala of ibn-Faḍlān," *Byzantina Metabyzantina*, 1, ii (1949), 7-37.

⁸ E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, New Series xi (1937).

⁹ Subtitled *Études d'histoire ancienne des Khazares*. Leningrad 1936.

INTRODUCTION

deals only with the early history of the Khazars, the last date given being A.D. 738. In his preface the author disclaims knowledge of Oriental languages and says that he writes as an archaeologist. Artamonov is specially interested in the Khazars as connected with the history of his own country. Within its limits his work seems to be an objective treatment of the subject. A. N. Poliakov published his book entitled *Khazaria* (in Hebrew) at Tel Aviv in 1944. (I first saw Dr. Cecil Roth's copy, and later received another through the good offices of Dr. S. Morag of Jerusalem.) The book, which is conceived as the first, historical part of a larger work on the Khazars, develops theories earlier expressed by the author in his article "The Khazar Conversion to Judaism" in the Hebrew periodical *Zion* (1941), but offers a much richer documentation, especially in Jewish sources. Some of these theories are discussed below. The work has been the subject of a good deal of criticism.¹⁰ Zajaczkowski's *Ze studiów nad zagadnieniem chazarskim* (1947) is written from the standpoint of Turkish linguistics.¹¹ Both in this book and in a number of articles, the author, who is a well-known Turcologist, has thrown considerable light on the surviving Khazar nomenclature, which he proposes to illustrate from the dialects still spoken by the Karaite Jews in Poland and the Crimea.¹² These Karaites he regards as the principal present-day representatives of the ancient Khazars. He tends to minimize rather than exaggerate the importance of the Hebrew documents. Dr. S. Seliga of St. Andrews University has greatly facilitated my study of these Polish works.

¹⁰ Cf. the review of M. Landau in *Qiryath Sepher*, XXI (1944), 19-24, in Hebrew. I have not seen A. Eshkolli in *Moznaim*, XVIII, 298-304, 375-383, with Poliakov's reply, *op.cit.*, XIX, 288-291, 348-352. (These references to Hebrew periodicals are due to Dr. Morag.)

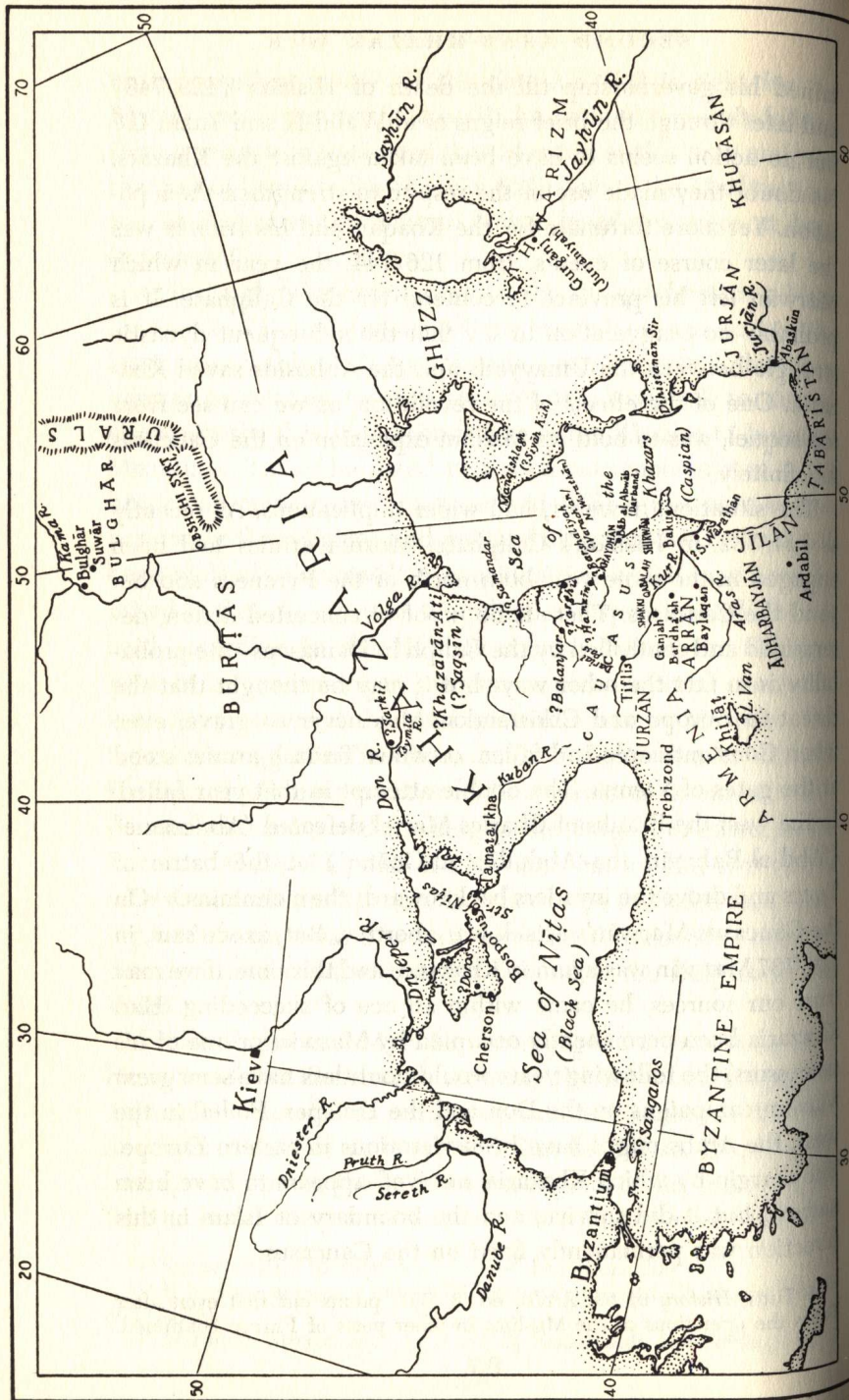
¹¹ Studies on the Khazar Problem, published by the Polish Academy, Cracow. There is a detailed review in *Der Islam*, B. 29 (1949), 96-103, by O. Pritsak.

¹² Recent articles of Zajaczkowski include "Problem językowy Chazarów" (The Problem of the Language of the Khazars), *Proceedings of the Breslau Society of Sciences*, 1946, and "O kulturze chazarskiej i jej spadkobiercach" (The Khazar Culture and Its Heirs), *Myśl Karaimska*, Breslau 1946.

INTRODUCTION

Finally, I should like to thank Professor H. W. Bailey of Queens' College, Cambridge, Professor V. Minorsky, and Professor C. J. Mullo Weir of Glasgow University, who read through the present work in manuscript and from whose advice and suggestions I have profited in various ways. I should also like to express my grateful thanks to Professor Philip K. Hitti and the Trustees of Princeton University Press.

D.M.D.



THE KHAZAR CONVERSION TO JUDAISM
ACCORDING TO THE ARABIC SOURCES

THERE is no *locus classicus* in Arabic for the Judaizing of the Khazars, but perhaps the most frequently canvassed passage is the following, from the well-known *Murūj al-Dhahab* (Meadows of Gold) of Mas'ūdi, begun in 332/943 and completed in 336/947: "In this city [i.e., Atil, the capital of Khazaria on the Volga] are Muslims, Christians, Jews and pagans. The Jews are the king, his attendants and the Khazars of his kind [*jins*]. The king of the Khazars had already become a Jew in the Caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashid, and there joined him Jews from all the lands of Islam and from the country of the Greeks. Indeed the king of the Greeks at the present time, A.H. 332 [=A.D. 943-944], Armānūs [i.e., Romanus Lecapenus] has converted the Jews in his kingdom to Christianity and coerced them. We shall give the history and numbers of the kings of the Greeks later in this book, with an account of this king and him who shares his empire with him [i.e., Constantine Porphyrogenitus] at this time in which our book is dated. Many Jews took flight from the country of the Greeks to Khazaria, as we have described. An account is given of the Judaizing of the Khazar king which we do not mention here. We have already mentioned it in a previous work."¹

It is a matter of conjecture which of his writings Mas'ūdi here refers to, and the account has not come to light. In a work of Dimashqi (*ob.* 727/1327) the following occurs. "Ibn-al-Athīr tells how in the days of Hārūn the Emperor forced the Jews to emigrate. They came to the Khazar country, where they found an intelligent but untutored race and offered them their

¹ *Murūj al-Dhahab*, II, 8-9. I have followed the arrangement of Bodleian MS., Marsh 243 (I, 792), collated by Professor Kahle.

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- a.—anno.
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 Ad fin.—*ad finem*, at the end.
 a.h.—Anno Hegirae.
 Ad init.—*ad initium*, at the beginning.
 A.K.M.—*Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*.
 a.m.—Anno Mundi.
 Arne—*La Suède et l'Orient*, *Archives d'Études Orientales*, Upsala 1914.
 art.—article.
 Assemani—*Bibliotheca Orientalis*, Rome 1719-1728.
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 B.—Band.
 B.G.A. } —*Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*,
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 Bibl. Ind.—*Bibliotheca Indica*.
 B.R.A.—*Bulletin of the Russian Academy*.
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- c.—chapter, or *circa*.
- Carmoly—*Des Khozars*, in *Itinéraires de la Terre Sainte*, Brussels 1847.
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- col.—column.
- Constantine Por.—Constantine Porphyrogenitus.
- Darband Nāmah*—Kasem Beg's edition in *Memoirs of the Russian Academy, Divers Savants*, 1851.
- Découverte*—see Barthold.
- Dorn } —*Nachrichten über die Chasaren, Memoirs of*
Dorn, Bal'ami } *the Russian Academy*, 1844.
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- ed.—edited by, edition of.
- ed. Bonn—*Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn.
- edd.—editors.
- E.I.—*Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

- Enc. Jud.*—*Encyclopaedia Judaica*.
- Eranshahr*—see Marquart, *Eranshahr*.
- E.R.E.—see Bury, E.R.E.
- Ferrand—see abu Ḥāmid al-Andalusi.
- flor.—*florvint*
- fol.—folio.
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- G.A.L.—see Brockelmann.
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- Ḥudūd*—see Minorsky, *Ḥudūd*.
- ib.* } —*ibidem*.
ibid. }
- Ibn-Aṭṭam al-Kūfi—*Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, Seray ms. 2956, cited by Zeki Validi, *Ibn-Faḍlān*, etc.
- Ibn-al-Aṭṭar—ed. Cairo, A.H. 1303.
- Ibn-Faḍlān—ibn-Faḍlān's *Riḥlah*, ed. Zeki Validi, whom see. § means section of this text.
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- Iṣṭakhri—ed. De Goeje, *Bibl. Geog. Arab.*, i.
- J.A.—*Journal Asiatique.*
- J.A.O.S.—*Journal of the American Oriental Society.*
- J.E.—*Jewish Encyclopedia.*
- J.Q.R.—*Jewish Quarterly Review.*
- J.R.A.S.—*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.*
- Juwayni—*Ta'riḫ-i Jihān-gushāy*, ed. Mirza Muḥammad in *Gibb Memorial Series.*
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