

# THE KHAZARS – Social Structure

## OVERVIEW

The Khazar Khanate had a heterogeneous, multilingual ethnic composition confessing all major religions including Paganism, Shamanism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The ruling strata of the Khazars originated from the Western Türk State (Göktürk). In Khazaria, there were political and military elites and the ruling house was a relatively small clan whose origin was distinct from that of the majority of their subjects. The ruling elite of the Khazars converted Judaism in the 9th century.

This ethnically and religiously diverse society was stratified into several classes such as settled agriculturalists, herders, tradesman, Muslim merchants, Muslim mercenaries, members of the army, craftsmen, and slaves.

## CLASS

Many historical sources classified the Khazars as two different ethnicities: Black Khazars (Qara-Khazars) and White Khazars (Ak Khazars). The Black Khazars were the lower classes, the population (commoners and tradesmen) that was subordinate to or ruled by the White (*Ak*) Khazars who were the uppermost class in the khanate - the nobility, warrior elite and ruling classes.

The Khazar social strata included a dual monarchy at the top, which consisted of the khagan and the beg. The sacral isolation of the khagan developed gradually, and he became a spiritual figurehead while the *beg* became co-monarch and military leader. Below the *beg* came the *Kender-Khagan* (deputy beg), *Javshighar* (sergeant), *Tarkhan* (commander of troops), *Tudun* (governors), *El-teber* (Vassal kings) and *Vizier* (official responsible for affairs related to the Muslim community).

Below the Khazar nobility came a group of privileged commoners and functionaries, such as tarkhans, judges, and local governors.

There was standing army, *al-orsiyya mercenaries* (Muslim mercenaries) in the service of the Khanate. This ethnically diverse society also included other classes such as settled agriculturalists, herders, tradesman, members of the army, craftsmen, and slaves. According to Gumilev, in Khazaria there were also *Muslim merchants* who lived and had private houses in the capital.

There were also twenty-five subject rulers. All subject rulers were obligated to send daughters to the harem of the Khagan. They constituted the second of two distinctive classes of privileged nobles. The first were those of the ruling pastoralist society, and the second were those of the subjugated agriculturalist society. The agriculturalist nobility maintained its privileges but its position and interests were secondary to those of the pastoralist nobility.

The khaganship was hereditary. In the years following the conversion to Judaism, only a Jew was eligible to become a Khazar khagan. The Khazar khagan's conversion to Judaism created a new division in Khazar society, as only those who converted to Judaism could be members of the privileged leading class, while the rest of the population consisted of an underprivileged class of pagans, Jewish children and Khazar women.

## Discussion/Questions

1. How did two distinct class of nobles come to exist in Khazar society?
2. What effect did the Khazar conversion to Judaism have on the class structure of Khazar society?

## **Reading**

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