

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE KHAZARS – RELIGION

OVERVIEW

The Persian historian Gardizi pointed out the similarity of the Khazar native religion to that of the Oguz Turks. Before their conversion to Judaism, most of the Khazars were shamanists, and their particular belief system was Turkic shamanism which involved the worship of thunder and lightning and horse sacrifices.

The Persian explorer Ibn Rusta also commented on the Khazar religion: “Their supreme authority [the Khazar *khāqān*] is Jewish, and so is the *īshā* and those commanding officers and important men who support him. The rest of them follow a religion like the religion of the Turks”.

Islam and Christianity were the first monotheistic religions existing in the area. Judaism was also spreading, and the Khazars likely converted to Judaism in about 740.

Mas‘ūdī commented about the later period of the Khazar state and stated that the king, his court and all those of the Khazar race practise Judaism, to which the king of the Khazars was converted during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd.

The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* mentioned that the Khazars adopted Karaite Judaism towards the end of the 8th century. Karaite Judaism recognizes the validity of only the twenty four books of the Tanakh but not that of the Talmud.

RELIGION

According to Golden, the Khazar native religion was much like that of the North Caucasian Huns and other Turkic peoples.

In 737, the Umayyad general (and subsequently last Umayyad Caliph) Marwan broke through into the Khazar core lands on the Volga, captured the Khagan and forced him to convert to Islam.

Ibn Fadlan stated that one of the Khagan officials, the *Khaz*, was a Muslim, and he was in charge of the Muslims.

The sources do not indicate that the Khagan remained a Muslim. Due to internal disorder in the Caliphate, which brought an end to the Umayyads in 750, there was no political pressure to remain Muslim.

In the 9th century the Khazar khagan and the noble elite adopted Judaism. The reason for the conversion, although not certain, was possibly the long-lasting struggle between the Khazars and Arabs for control of the Caucasus; another potential reason was to maintain their independence from Byzantium and the Arab world and avoid the pressure to convert to either Christianity or Islam.

There were already Christian, Jewish and Muslim traders in the Khazar state, and the state became a buffer zone between two religions – in the west Christianity from Byzantium and in the south Islam. The Khazars were tolerant of all faiths but were subject to pressure from their neighbors to convert to either Islam or Christianity.

Ibn Fadlan’s account indicated that the Khazars were tolerant of and lived side by side with believers of other religions: “The king of the Khazars has a mighty city on both banks of the Itil (Volga). The Muslims are on one bank, the king and his retinue on the other. The Muslims have a congregational mosque in this

city. This is where they perform the prayer and gather on Friday, the day of congregation. It has a tall minaret and a number of muezzin". However, the Khazars would take punitive measures against any religious community that persecuted Jews in their own territory. Ibn Fadlan mentioned one incident he witnessed where the Khazars destroyed the minaret of a mosque and executed the muezzin in retaliation for the destruction of a synagogue: "In the year 310 [922–23],⁸⁰ the king of the Khazars was informed that the Muslims had razed the synagogue in Dār al-Bābūnj. He gave orders for the minaret to be razed and for the muezzins to be killed. He said: "I would not have razed the mosque, were I not afraid that every synagogue in the territory of Islam would be razed!"

Discussion/Questions

- 1- What was the Khazars' original religion?
- 2- How was it possible that the Khazarians had adopted Judaism as the ruling religion, but not the Christianity or Islam with which they were in close relations?

Reading

- 1- Golden, P., "The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism", in *The World of the Khazars New Perspectives Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium* hosted by the Ben Zvi Institute, Brill, 2007.
- 2- Wasserstein, D., "The Khazars and the World of Islam", in *The World of the Khazars New Perspectives Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium* hosted by the Ben Zvi Institute, Brill, 2007.
- 3- Hartley, J.M., *The Volga, A History*, Yale University Press, 2021.
- 4- Brook, K.A., *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- 5- *Большая Советская Энциклопедия*, Главный редактор Б.А. Введенский, Том 46, Государственное научное издательство, 1957.
- 6- Калинина, Т.М., Флеров, В.С., Петрухин, В.Я., *Хазария в кроскультурном пространстве*, ЯСК, 2014.
- 7- *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness Arab Travellers in the Far North* Translated with an Introduction by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, Penguin Books, 2012.
- 8- *Mission to the Volga*, translated by James E. Montgomery, New York University Press, Year: 2017