

THE KHAZARS – Language

OVERVIEW

The Khazars were one of the nomadic peoples who appeared in the southern steppes in the early 7th century. The Khazar realm was a branch of the Western Turkic (Göktürk) Empire.

The Western Turkic language family included many varieties of the Oghur languages, such as Onoghur, Bulgar, and Khazar. It was poorly documented, and most of the information about these languages comes from outside sources written in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Latin, Armenian, Old Russian, and Georgian, as well as other languages.



It has been claimed that the language of the Khazars resembled that of the Volga Bulgars. A Turkic runic script of a single word that has been translated as “I have read” was found in the *Kievan Letter* (930) from the Cairo Genizah, a storehouse of Jewish documents, manuscripts and manuscript fragments.

The Kievan Letter

The Khazar Khanate was a multiethnic, multilingual state ruled by the Khazars, but which included a variety of other peoples such as Turkic Bulgars, Iranian Alans, Pechenegs, Finno-Ugrian Mari, Burtas, Magyars, and a number of East Slav tribal groups. Within the khanate there were many Turkic groups speaking a number of Turkic languages.

LANGUAGE

Like many Arab and Russian historians in the 10th century, the Persian traveler Al-Istakhri in his *Kitab Masalik al-Mamalik* stated that the Khazars were ethnically close to the Volga Bulgars and the language of Volga Bulgars was like the language of Khazars. Later, however, he emphasized that the language of the Khazars did not resemble either the Persian or Turkish languages, and that the language of the Khazar was spoken by the people of Bab-al Abwab (Darband) along with other languages.



There were also claims that the Khazar language was a Chuvash dialect of Turkish belong to the Oghuric linguistic group, and that the Chuvash people were the descendants of the Volga Bulgars, speaking a dialect similar to the Khazars.

There Khazars left no written records in the their language. There is also no information about which language was used as the official language in this multilingual environment. It has been claimed that an as yet unidentified Turkic language was spoken by the khagan and the ruling elite, while several Turkic languages were used by the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples who lived within the Khazars’ extensive territory. One major scholar of the Khazars, Peter Golden, has argued that there were several Turkic languages used in the Khazar realm and that at least one of them was related to the Oghuro-Bulgharic branch. In addition, he claims that the limited number of recorded Khazar toponyms, titles and personal names are clearly Turkic.

Discussion/Questions

1 – What factors have made it difficult for scholars to determine what language the Khazars spoke?

Readings

- 1- Артаманов, М.И., *История Хазар*, Издательство государственного эрмитажа, 1962.
- 2 Brook, K. A., *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- 3- Marcel Erdal “The Khazar Language”, *The World of the Khazars New Perspectives Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium* hosted by the Ben Zvi Institute, Brill, 2007.
- 4- Koestler, A., *The Thirteenth Tribe, The Khazar Empire and its Heritage*, Picador, 1976.
- 5- Golden, P., “Khazarica: Notes on Some Khazar Terms”, in *Turkic Languages*, Edited by Lars Johanson, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005.
- 6- Johanson, L., *Turkic*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- 7- Brook, K. A., *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2018.