

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE KHAZARS – MYTHOLOGY

OVERVIEW

Before their conversion to Judaism, most of the Khazars were shamanists and worshipped spirits as well as a variety of natural forces and elements. Their particular belief system is known as Tengri shamanism.

For the Khazars, their spiritual leaders were *shamans* (*qams*) who were healers and protectors from the evil spirits. The *shaman* entered a trance to contact with the invisible evil spirit and expelled them from the earth.

MYTHOLOGY

The Khazars had a pantheon. The leading god was *Tengri*, the god of the sky who created the world. *Umay* was the mother goddess. One of the twin deities *Yir* was the god of the earth and *Sub* was the god of water.

Tengri governed the upper world, while *Umay* and *Yir* and *Sub* - the middle world, and the god of death, *Erlık* - the lower world - hell.

The deity *Ärklig* was a warrior god who guarded the diverse spheres of life. The Khazars also worshipped the deity *Ku'ar* who was a thunder god that punished evil people and spirits through lightning.

The Khazars had rainmaking rituals and believed in the power of rain-making stones. The shamans used these stones to create rain or snow.

The Khazars worshiped other natural forces like the moon, sun, fire etc. In the Khazar pantheon, there were gods for the moon and sun, and the moon god was female and the sun was male. It was believed that the sun god was the son of *Tengri* and the fire god was the son of the sun god.

The Khazars also worshiped animals, and each tribe had its own sacred animal. Trees were also considered sacred for the Khazar people. There were people in the Tepsen (Phullai) which was located in the southeastern part of the Crimean peninsula that performed sacrifices to an oak tree. Other sacred elements of the earth were mountains, rivers, and springs.

Pagan spiritual traditions were widespread in the Khazarian land, including human sacrifices in funeral ceremonies. In the graves of the elite there are traces of human sacrifices of young women, children, slaves or servants.

Khazars as well as other peoples in the khanate made amulets and belt mounts decorated with sacred images and motifs. Among these are depictions of horses and circular “sun amulets” whose shape represented Tengri. However, after the spread of Judaism in the first half of the 9th century such objects begin to disappear from Khazar burials and settlement sites.

According to the Syriac chronicle of *Pseudo-Dionysus of Tell-Mahrê* (Chronicle of Zuqnin) from the late 8th century, in the entry 730-731, the Khazars were godless nations and they are Magians (Zoroastrians); and in the entry 731–732, the Khazars did not know God and did not realize that there is no God in heaven. This indicates that at the time that this chronicle is written the Khazars had not yet adopted any of the three major monotheistic religions.

Discussion/Questions

1- Why do scholars believe that the Khazars original religion was a form of Tengrism?

Readings

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 Edited by Peter B. Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai and András Róna-Tas, Leiden • Boston, 2007*, pp.123-162.

2- Brook, K. A., *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

3- Richard A. E. Mason, "The Religious Beliefs of the Khazars," *Ukrainian Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1995), p. 383.

4- *The Chronicle of Zuqnin, parts III and for AD 488-775*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999.