Assessing Khazar

The Khazars enter history in the fifth century AD. In the thirteenth, they disappear. Why are these semi-nomads, who reigned from the Caucasus to the Caspian and the Danube to the territory of student.eurasia.org? By Paul Meerts

First, because the Khazars, along with the Franks and the Byzantines, served as a dam against the tide of Islam, thus threatening Europe from three sides. Second, because the Khazar Empire had a very particular dual structure of government. Third, the Khazars had an enduring influence on their neighbours, and as allies of the Greeks, contributed to the perpetuation of Eastern Rome. Last but not least, religious life.

Independent Khazaria

With the disintegration of the Western Turkish Empire in the seventh century AD, the Khazars were freed from the yoke of their Turkic brethren. Henceforth Khazar external relations were with neighbouring tribes, the Bulgars and Magyars who became their vassals, Byzantines, Arabs, Russians and to a lesser extent, Ostrogoths and Vikings. The Khazars influenced world history through the Bulgars, Seljuks, the Magyars and the Russians. The Khazars entered into two confederations, one which moved West and conquered present-day Bulgaria, the so-called proto-Bulgarians. Arpad, leading his people to present-day Hungary, was a Khazar-nominalized Khan. Seljuk who took his Turks to present-day Turkey, was the son of Timur, an officer in the service of the Khazars (Legg 1950: 146, 152, 184).

Until the ninth century Khazaria was an ally of Byzantium. Apart from incidents in the Crimea during the time of Justinian II, the relationship between Byzantines and Khazars were friendly. In the seventh century the Khazars sent 40,000 men to support the Byzantines against the Persians. In the eighth century a Khazar princess became Empress in Constantinople and her son, the emperor Leo, came to be called ‘the Khazar’. In the tenth century the emperor (Khazar) of Byzantium held former higher esteem than the Pope of Rome and the successor of Charlemagne, evidenced in the letters of the Byzantine chancellery to their foes and allies (Dunlop 1954: 15).

The beginning of the end

By the tenth century Khazar relations with the Byzantines had soured. The reasons for this are unclear. It may have had to do with the waning power of the Arab Empire, and thus a reduced need for Byzantium to have the Khazars as allies. It could also be that the conversion of the ruling elite annoyed Constantinople.

Arab-Khazar relations were more hostile. Although many more Khazars were Muslim than Christian, the history of Khazaria is riddled by wars with Arab invaders. Arab forces made deep incursions into Khazar territory, conquering the Caucasus and taking hold of the trade routes on the Volga and the Caspian. 

Power dispersed

Khazar’s political system might provide the key to understanding Khazaria’s downfall. Like other Turkic peoples, the Khazars had a system of tribal and clan rule. Of the many tribes that made-up the empire, one or two were dominant. Within these tribes, leading clans existed, and within the clan were leading families; the royal family came from the leading clan. This did not mean, however, that the royal family held de-facto power in the country. Real power was wielded by the Beg, comparable to the great-vizir, shogun, or hohefijur.

The real power struggle was over the post of the Beg. The Beg was chosen by the tribal assemblies. The Khazars were not always a ‘correct’ families. The Beg took the real decisions, was in charge of the treasury, the army and was assisted by generals and local rulers. This was the ‘republican’ element in the state of Khazaria. But the Khagan remained the formal head of state; in a ceremonial sense the Beg was his underling. Khazar relations were friendly. At times the division of power between the formal and the de-facto power centre was blurred. The absence of a political focal point may be the first reason for the downfall of Khazaria; there was a de-facto double kingship in the Khazar realm.

Economic dependency

Khazaria’s economy, unlike the steppe empires where cattle breeding was the dominant source of income, depended on trade and agriculture. Cattle, rice, fish and wheat were the most important products. The country was situated at a crossroads on the silk-route. The Khazars’ tolerance attracted many traders, among them Greeks, Arabs and Jews. Besides the trade with Byzantium, the Caspian offered numerous possibilities for exchange with Persians and Arabs. This oriental trade was supported by raw materials found in the Caucasus, such as gold and silver. The slave trade was also important. Russians brought slaves from the North to the slave-market in Til, who where then shipped to the Muslim lands in the South. Russians, Bulgars and Burtas brought in furs and fish. Tributes paid by vassal tribes and the Caliph added to the Khazar treasury, as did transit merchants who paid ten percent of the value of their goods to tax collectors.

References:
- Subtelny, O. (1990) ‘...the survival in popular memory (in Ukraine) of the long struggle in the past with the Judaic Khazars’ (Subtelny 1990: 52).

Khazaria was an enigma in world history. The Khazar Empire governed a crucial region on the Eurasian crossroads for over three hundred years, with social and state structures not readily found elsewhere.

The only visible trace of Khazaria on the world map is the name of that gigantic inland sea, the Caspian, an upcoming focal point of world politics.

Can the rise and fall of the Khazar Empire explain the Jewish presence in Central and Eastern Europe? Research on the subject began in the nineteenth century, in 1993 researches hosted the first symposium on Khazar bringing together Israeli, American and Russian scholars. Interested readers are referred to www.khazaria.com.