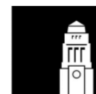

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Book Section:
Evans, N orcid.org/0000-0001-8725-0042 (2023) Ibn Fadlan and the Khazars: the hidden centre. In: Shepard, J and Treadwell, L, (eds.) Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC , pp. 133-148. ISBN 9780755618170

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Chapter 9

The Hidden Centre: Ibn Fadlan and the Khazars

Nick Evans

From: J. Shepard and L. Treadwell (eds.), *Muslims on the Volga in the Viking Age: In the Footsteps of Ibn Fadlan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), pp. 133–148.

The empire of the Khazars occupies a curious place in Ibn Fadlan's narrative of his visit to the Volga.[1] The Khazars were at the forefront of the minds of Ibn Fadlan and most of the people whom he encountered, and yet they are strangely elusive. The mission was ostensibly a response to an appeal to the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (908–32) from the Bulgar ruler Almish ibn Shilki (Almış *elteber*), who had requested assistance against the Khazars. The envoy sent by the Bulgars, Abdullah ibn Bashtu al-Khazari, was evidently of Khazar origin himself.[2] During their journey beyond Khwarazm, they encountered Ghuzz (Oghuz) tribesmen, one of whom was convinced that the Abbasids were plotting with the Khazars, and another of whom planned to use the caliphal envoys as ransom for Ghuzz captives held by the Khazars.[3] On arrival in the land of the Bulgars, they were told by Almish of his fear of the ruler of the Khazars.[4] However, modern readers have had difficulty pinning down what Ibn Fadlan's mission was designed to achieve, and where the Khazars fitted into the strategic calculations of those close to the Abbasid caliph in the 920s.

Part of the problem arises from the way that the text has survived. The Mashhad Manuscript cuts off after just the first few lines treating the role of the Khazar ruler. The same lines appear half way through an entry on the Khazars attributed to Ibn Fadlan in Yaqut's *Muʿjam al-buldan* ('Dictionary of Countries').[5] As discussed elsewhere in this volume, Yaqut

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[1] Written with the financial and intellectual assistance of Claudia Rapp's Wittgenstein-Prize 'Moving Byzantium' project at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the University of Vienna. I would also like to thank Jonathan Shepard, Luke Treadwell, Nancy Lindisfarne and my reader for their comments.

[2] IbnF[1] §§ 3, 8, pp. 190–1, 194–5, and introduction, pp. 169–70; IbnF[2], pp. 3, 6. On the name Bashtu: Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 160–2. On the title *elteber*, and its use by the Khazars as well as the Bulgars: Semenov (2018).

[3] IbnF[1] § 33, pp. 210–12; IbnF[2], p. 21.

[4] IbnF[1] §§ 45, 72, pp. 220–1, 238–41; IbnF[2], pp. 29, 44–5.

[5] Yaqut, *Muʿjam al-buldan*, ed. Wüstenfeld, vol. 2, p. 438, lines 11–14; tr. Montgomery, § 4.4, pp. 18–19.

is problematic as a source for Ibn Fadlan.[6] The first section of Yaqut's entry on the Khazars appears to derive from the early tenth-century geographer al-Istakhri, rather than from Ibn Fadlan, as Yaqut claims.[7] Even if we treat the final lines of the Mashhad Manuscript and the remainder of Yaqut's entry on the Khazars as deriving from Ibn Fadlan's original text (as most scholars have tended to do), we should still recognise the distinction between the passage on the Khazars and the rest of Ibn Fadlan's text. Unlike the passages on the Ghuzz, the Bashkirs (Bashghirds), the Bulgars and the Rus, which are presented as eyewitness accounts set out according to the progress of Ibn Fadlan's itinerary, there is no account of Ibn Fadlan's return journey, or of what direct contact, if any, he had with any Khazars besides the envoy Ibn Bashtu.[8]

The elusiveness of the Khazars is a theme of the concluding section of Ibn Fadlan's text as it is usually reconstructed. In the concluding lines of the Mashhad Manuscript, we read, 'He [the Great Khagan] appears in public only once every few months, at a distance'. It is his deputy, the Khagan Bih (*Qaghan* Bäk), who is responsible for the practical business of commanding the army and administering the 'kingdom'.[9] The Yaqut quotation enumerates the small number of officials who are ever admitted to the Great Khagan's presence. Nobody is permitted to know the location of the Great Khagan's grave: those who bury him are beheaded. When he goes out riding, a mile's distance is kept between him and his army, and his subjects must prostrate themselves and keep their heads lowered until he has passed.[10] If this information was not first-hand, the text appears to say, this is because almost nobody had access to first-hand information on the heart of the Khazar polity.

The ambiguity of the position of the Khazars within Ibn Fadlan's account parallels that found in Byzantine sources, which return again and again to peoples who may be used as allies against the Khazars, but have no dedicated section to the Khazars themselves.[11] This has contributed to sharply divergent modern assessments of the significance of the Khazar

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[6] See Montgomery and Treadwell in this volume.

[7] Yaqut, *Muʿjam al-buldan,* ed. Wüstenfeld, vol. 2, pp. 436–8; tr. Montgomery, §§ 4.1–3, pp. 16–19; see also al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 220–4.

[8] As Montgomery observes, there is only one passing reference to the return journey in the text itself: IbnF[1] § 50, pp. 226–7 and p. 265 n. 47; IbnF[2], p. 33.

[9] Tr. from IbnF[1] § 90, pp. 254–5; IbnF[2], p. 55. On the Qaghan and Bäk: Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 162–5, 192–6.

[10] IbnF[1] §§ 90A–91, 93, pp. 254–7; IbnF[2], pp. 55–6, 57.

[11] *DAI* chs 10–12, pp. 62–4.

khaganate in the first half of the tenth century. Some scholars have taken the limited treatment of the Khazars in such texts to reflect their declining power and importance for the caliphal court in the 920s or the Byzantine central administration of the mid-tenth century.[12] Some others have argued that these sources deliberately concealed part of the picture.[13]

To address the problem of the 'hidden centre' of Ibn Fadlan's account, the first part of this chapter will survey evidence for Khazar migrants in the caliphate and Muslims in the khaganate in the ninth and tenth centuries. The second part will consider the commercial interdependence of the caliphate and the khaganate. The final section will return to the question of why Ibn Fadlan was sent in the first place, and whether he had something to hide.

Khazars in the caliphate and Muslims in the khaganate

Ibn Fadlan would have had plenty of opportunities to meet people of Khazar origins visiting or living in the caliphate, or Muslims who had spent time in the khaganate. There were many groups and individuals who moved between the two societies, often resettling upon a permanent basis. After the end of large-scale warfare between Khazaria and the caliphate at the end of the eighth century, Khazars often migrated into the caliphate on the initiative of the central Abbasid authorities.[14] Al-Baladhuri, an important source for the earlier conflicts between Muslims and Khazars in the Caucasus, records that in his own time, in 854–5, the Turkish general Bugha al-Kabir settled a group (*qawm*) of Khazars who wanted to convert to Islam in the territory of Shamkur in the Kur valley. At the same time, he transferred merchants from Bardhaʿa to Shamkur and renamed the city after the then caliph, al-Mutawakkil (847–61).[15] Bugha's actions were evidently connected with his counter-insurgency operations in the Caucasus: he had just burned down Tiflis, the seat of the independent Muslim ruler Ishaq ibn Ismaʿil, and endured a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Tsanars, highlanders controlling access from Tiflis to the Darial Pass in the centre of the Caucasus mountain range.[16] Facilitating the migration of pastoralists from the north to the

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[12] Novosel'tsev (2001), p. 70. For the opposite view: Howard-Johnston (2007), pp. 181–3; Zhivkov (2015) pp. 145–6.

[13] On a coded 'pivot to Khazaria' in the *De administrando imperio*, see Lounghis (1990), pp. 91–101; Magdalino (2013), p. 35.

[14] The last invasion was in 799–800 (183 AH): al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh*, ed. de Goeje *et al.*, vol. 3, p. 648.

[15] al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-buldan,* ed. de Goeje, p. 203.

[16] al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh*, ed. de Goeje *et al.*, vol. 3, pp. 1408–10, 1414–16; Yovhannes, *History* chs 25–6, 31, tr. Maksoudian, pp. 119–24, 139; al-Yaʿqubi, *Taʾrikh*, ed. Houtsma, vol. 2, p. 598. The 'chiefs of Tzanaria' are

Kur valley disrupted existing settlement patterns, while simultaneously opening up access to the Khazars' pastoral economy by moving the merchants to Shamkur.

A later Georgian source claimed that Bugha himself was a Khazar, and was recalled by al-Mutawakkil on the suspicion that he was conspiring with his Khazar kinsmen.[17] No Arabic sources indicate that Bugha was of Khazar origin, but others among the Turkish military certainly were, even if they were a minority.[18] Khazars formed part of the new slave army established by the Abbasid caliph al-Muʿtasim (833–42), and were among those given plots of land in the new capital of Samarra, alongside Turkish slaves from Central Asia.[19] The Khazars in the caliphate were not a homogenous group. They were differentiated by when and how they or their ancestors had entered the caliphate, and by the status they had previously held in Khazaria. Some first-generation immigrants could experience dramatic upward social mobility: such as Itakh, a Khazar slave cook who had been bought by al-Muʿtasim in 814–15, but who rose to become one of the most powerful figures in the caliphate until his assassination in 849.[20]

Names provide part of the evidence for the Khazar presence in the army and administration of the Abbasid caliphate. In Arabic names, the *nisba,* can provide a clue to the town, region or country where an individual or their ancestors came from: somebody called al-Khazari is likely to have Khazar origins. Meanwhile, first names and fathers' names help us trace the careers and assimilation of Khazar families over several generations. Take the example of Ishaq ibn Kundajiq al-Khazari, who rose to prominence as a military leader during the suppression of the Zanj revolt and was the governor of Mosul under both the

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also located in the same region in Constantine VII's list of Caucasian dignitaries: *De ceremoniis* ch. 48, ed. Reiske, tr. Moffatt and Tall, vol. 2, p. 688; see also Martin-Hisard (2000), pp. 487–95; Zuckerman (2000), pp. 532–48.

[17] *Book of K'art'li*, tr. Thomson, pp. 261–2.

[18] On the Khazar slave soldiers (*ghilman*), see Kennedy (2001), pp. 118–20; Ludwig (1982), pp. 355–61; Golden (2002–3), pp. 15–27. Golden expands his prosopography of Khazar *ghilman* by accepting the Georgian attribution of Bugha al-Kabir and including family members.

[19] The plots of land are referred to as the *qataʾiʿ al-khazar*: al-Yaʿqubi, *Kitab al-buldan*, ed. de Goeje, p. 262; Kennedy (2001), p. 119.

[20] al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh*, ed. de Goeje *et al.*, vol. 3, p. 1383; Ludwig (1982), pp. 357–8; Golden (2002–3), pp. 16–17, 21.

Abbasids and the Tulunids.[21] His Muslim first name Ishaq indicates that he was probably a second-generation immigrant. His father's name Kundajiq appears to reflect a Khazar name or title: possibly related to the title of the 'Kundur Khaqan', who appears as one of the chief officers of the khaganate in Ibn Fadlan's account.[22] Ishaq's son, who briefly succeeded him as governor of Mosul, was called Muhammad, but his grandson was named Tarkhan, suggesting a desire to maintain a 'Khazar' identity.[23]

As individuals and groups, Khazars were caught up in the court politics of Baghdad and in Abbasid attempts to quell rebellions in the provinces in the years leading up to Ibn Fadlan's mission. Wasif ibn Suwartakin, a commander involved in the failed coup attempt in 908 in favour of Ibn al-Muʿtazz, appears to have had Khazar origins.[24] His father's name (*Suwar-Tegin) may preserve an echo of the name originally used by the ruling Khazar households for themselves: the Sabirs.[25] Khazar soldiers are reported to have fought bravely against *Qaramita* rebels in 905–6;[26] and a Khazar commander named Sima, who had been used in Abbasid policing actions before, was killed in battle in 916–17 against Ibn Abi'l-Saj,

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[21] al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh*, ed. de Goeje *et al*., vol. 3, pp. 1877, 1879, 1880 (Ibn Kundaj); pp. 1930, 1931 (Ibn Kundajiq); Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 202–4; Golden (2002–3), pp. 20–1; the *-iq* ending appears to be a Turkic diminutive: Golden (1980), vol. 1, p 204.

[22] Kundur Khaqan: IbnF[1] § 90A, pp. 254–5; IbnF[2], p. 55. Kurkundaj is the name of the ruler of the North Caucasian Alans in al-Masʿudi, *Muruj* § 479, ed. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 228; the Magyar ruler in Ibn Rusta is the Kunduh: IbnR, p. 142; Zimonyi (2015), pp. 38–40, 44–5, 50–3, 116–20.

[23] al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-aghani,* ed. Hatim, vol. 9, p. 73. For Khazar uses of the name and title Tarqan/Tarkhan, see Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 210–13.

[24] He is given the *nisba* al-Khazari by al-Masʿudi: *Kitab al-tanbih*, ed. de Goeje, p. 375; Ludwig (1982), pp. 359–60; Golden (2002–3), p. 25.

[25] According to al-Masʿudi, '*al-khazar*' were called '*sabir*' in Turkish and '*khazran'* in Persian: al-Masʿudi, *Kitab al-tanbih*, ed. de Goeje, vol. 8, p. 83. In the late ninth century, the *malik al-suwar* is listed among the highland rulers in the North Caucasus in Ibn Khurradadhbih, *al-Masalik* , ed. de Goeje, p. 124, while *S.w.r* is listed among the towns of the Khazars in the late tenth-century *Hudud al-ʿalam*: *Hudud*, pp. 162, 454–5; Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 87–8. On the Sabir as the core of the Khazar state: Shingiray (2007), pp. 183–9; cf. Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 256–9, Novosel'tsev (2001), pp. 62–3. The tribe of the Suwar (Suwaz in the Mashhad Manuscript) is mentioned by Ibn Fadlan and Suwar was the name of a later Bulgar settlement: IbnF[1] § 69, pp. 236; IbnF[2], p. 42;IbnF[3], pp. 33, 74–5; cf. Ibn Fadlan, *Kitab*, tr. Kovalevskii, pp. 139, 223 n. 599, 321.

[26] These Ismaʿili Shiʿi Carmathians were a serious threat to the Abbasid caliphate in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. See al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh*, ed. de Goeje *et al*., vol. 3, p. 2263.

a renegade warlord in the Caucasus.[27] However, other Khazars appear to have ended up fighting alongside Ibn Abi'l-Saj against the Abbasid authorities. This was due to provocation from members of the caliph's family: a year earlier, a certain Jawamard, 'a Khazar', had been murdered in a drunken outburst in Baghdad by the caliph's cousin Harun ibn Gharib, provoking about a hundred of his companions (possibly also Khazars) to join Ibn Abi'l-Saj.[28]

At the same time as Khazars lived and worked in the caliphate, there were many Muslims living and working in the heart of the Khazar khaganate. Reports of the existence of a Muslim community in the Khazar capital are common in the Arabic geographical literature. According to the passage from Yaqut attributed to Ibn Fadlan, the Khazar capital was divided into two parts on either side of the Volga, with the Muslims living on one side and the Khazar ruler and his retinue on the other. The Muslim community included both permanent residents and those visiting on business. They had their own legal system, under the jurisdiction of a Muslim officer (the *khaz*) of the Khazar ruler, and their own congregational mosque, with a tall minaret and several muezzins.[29] Ibn Rusta also reports the existence of a double city: Muslims lived in both, and had their own mosques, imams, muezzins and schools.[30] Al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal describe the double city, and discuss the large Muslim community, numbering over 10,000 and who have around thirty mosques.[31] In Ibn Hawqal, Muslims are the majority of the (urban) population, which also includes Christians, Jews and 'idolaters'.[32] As in the other sources, the different communities are described as having their own legal systems.[33]

The Muslim groups in the Khazar khaganate were no more homogeneous than the Khazars in the caliphate. Besides the Bulgars themselves, Ibn Fadlan distinguishes between

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[27] Miskawayh, *Tajarib al-umam*, ed. and tr. Amedroz and Margoliouth, vol. 1, pp. 19, 38 (where 'al-Jazari', is probably corrupt for al-Khazari), 46–7; Ludwig (1982) p. 358; Golden (2002–3), p. 24.

[28] Arib, *Silat taʾrikh al-Tabari*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 55–6; Ludwig (1982), p. 357; Golden (2002–3), p. 22.

[29] IbnF[1] § 96, pp. 256–7; IbnF[2], pp. 57–8.

[30] IbnR, pp. 139–40; see also Martinez (1982), pp. 153–4; Göckenjan and Zimonyi (2001), pp. 53–4, 167.

[31] al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik* , ed. de Goeje, pp. 220–4; Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard,* ed. Kramers, pp. 389–93.

[32] In al-Istakhri, Christians and Muslims together form the majority. It is tempting to infer a decline in the Christian population in the Khazar capital between the composition of the two texts, a period when Christianity was becoming more established on the Khazar periphery. Of course, the discrepancy could simply be a copyist's oversight: al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, p. 220; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Surat al-ard,* ed. Kramers, p. 390. Al-Masʿudi describes a tripartite city, also with a mixed population: *Muruj* § 447, ed. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 212.

[33] With seven (or nine) different judges (*hukkam*) for the different communities: al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, p. 221; Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard,* ed. Kramers, p. 390; al-Masʿudi, *Muruj* § 451, ed. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 214.

permanent Muslim residents of the capital and visiting merchants, as well as mentioning subordinate groups who had converted to Islam, such as the tribe of 5,000 men and women, known as al-Baranjar.[34] The tribe's name recalls Balanjar, the name of a Khazar city and a river in the North Caucasus that often appears in the Arabic sources discussing the seventh- and eighth-century frontier wars.[35] A fragment of panegyric by the ninth-century court poet al-Buhturi refers to a slave soldier in the caliphate, evidently of Khazar origin, whose, 'noble rank in Iraq augmented the titles bestowed on him in Khamlij or Balanjar'.[36]

Al-Masʿudi tells us that Muslims dominated Khazar politics due to the role of the *al-larisiyya*, the ruler's praetorian guard. According to al-Masʿudi, their ancestors had fled war and plague in Khwarazm shortly after the emergence of Islam, and had stipulated that they should be given freedom to practice their own religion. He also claims that they never fought in the khaganate's wars against Muslims, and the vizier is always taken from among them: at the time of writing in the 940s, his name was Ahmad ibn Kuyah.[37] The role of this Muslim guard corps in the Khazar khaganate appears to mirror that of the Turkish military within the caliphate. The pious claim that the *al-larisiyya* never fought against Muslims need not be taken at face value, but the potential for religious solidarities to cut across imperial frontiers is an important factor to which we shall return in the final section.[38]

Khazars and Muslims were part of each other's societies. Somebody who maintained a Khazar identity could wield political power in the caliphate, while a Muslim could hold high office in the khaganate. At the same time, ethnic or religious differences could be

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[34] IbnF[1] § 66, pp. 232–3; IbnF[2], p. 39.

[35] Textual references in Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 221–4. The North Caucasian settlement is often identified with the Upper Chir-Iurt fortress in Dagestan: e.g. Magomedov (1975), pp. 63–74; Pletneva (2000), pp. 180–5. Although see the suggestion that this refers to the Varangians: Knutson and Ellis (2021), pp. 7–8.

[36] Cited in Ibn Khurradadhbih, *al Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 95, 124. The French translation identifies the addressee as Ishaq b. Kundaj, but we have seen that he was not the only high-ranking Khazar commander in the mid-ninth century. It is unclear whether Khamlij, the name Ibn Khurradadhbih gives for the Khazar capital, is the same as that given for one side of the double city (Kh.b ?.l.ʿ) in Ibn Rusta (IbnR, p. 139); see also Golden (1980), vol. 1, pp. 230–4; Göckenjan and Zimonyi (2001), pp. 53–4 n. 16.

[37] al-Masʿudi, *Muruj* § 450, ed. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 213.

[38] The origins of the *al-larisiyya* have been linked with traditions about the westward migration of Transcaspian Alans, on the grounds of their ethnonym (*al-Arsiyya* for the Greek *Aorsi*), and, more ingeniously, the *nasab* of Ahmad b. Kuyah (**Kuthah* for the Ossetic name *Kudza, Kudzæg*): Alemany (2000), pp. 265–6, 276. For our purposes, their ethnic origins are less relevant than their existence as a separate social group within the khaganate.

invoked at moments of political crisis. Naming practices, the organisation of urban space, appointments and the dispensation of justice both aided integration and reproduced difference. The roles available to migrants in the respective societies were not exactly parallel: we do not find references to Khazar merchants in the caliphate, for example. The integration of Khazars into the caliphate appears to have been largely through the military, although within this sphere they could play a wide range of different roles, from militarised pastoralists in the Kur valley, to provincial governors in Egypt, or power-brokers in Baghdad. The relevance of their Khazar identity in turn depended on the different contexts in which they operated.

Economic trajectories

Ibn Fadlan's journey to the Volga needs to be seen against the background of this mobility of groups and individuals between Khazaria and the caliphate. We have already touched upon the economic character of some of this mobility, and the institutional arrangements underpinning it: the Khazar authorities put in place administrative arrangements to facilitate the activities of Muslim merchants inside the khaganate, while the Abbasid authorities had taken measures to establish markets for Khazar pastoralists in the Muslim-controlled Caucasus. In this section, we will consider the nature of the economic relationship between the Khazar khaganate and the Abbasid caliphate, and the changing material conditions in the early tenth century that may have prompted the Volga Bulgar ruler's appeal to Baghdad, and the Abbasid caliph's response.

Islamic silver that ended up in hoards north of the Khazar khaganate has been used as evidence for trade passing through Khazaria.[39] Finds of coins with Khazar graffiti, or Khazar imitation coins from the 830s in northern hoards, have enriched the evidence in written sources for the Khazar role in ninth-century trade between the Islamic world and the north.[40] The supply of coins from Abbasid mints begins in the early ninth century, peaks in the 860s, and then declines after around 875, although not to the extent that was once thought.[41] From the beginning of the tenth century, coins from the Samanid emirate of Bukhara begin to

[39] Noonan (1983); Noonan (1984); Noonan (1985 [1987]); Kovalev (2004).

[40] On coins with Khazar graffiti, see Noonan (1987–91), pp. 213–18; see also Kilger (2008), pp. 224–5. On Khazar imitation coins (the *Ard al-Khazar*, Moses and tamgha coins) dated to the 830s, see: Rispling (2001), pp. 327–8; Kovalev (2005).

[41] Noonan (1992); Noonan (1985); for evidence of post-875 circulation, and even continued imports directly from the caliphate: Kilger (2008), pp. 232–3.

appear in large quantities in northern hoards. Thomas Noonan argued that by the time of Ibn Fadlan's mission, the Volga Bulgars were beginning to grow wealthy from trade with the Samanids, providing the context for the Bulgar ruler's ambitions to release himself from tributary obligations to the Khazars. On this occasion, the Bulgar ruler appealed to the Abbasid caliph for aid, but the underlying trajectory – according to this line of argument – was for the Samanid–Volga Bulgar axis to supplant the Abbasid–Khazar one.[42]

However, the Khazar khaganate did not depend for its survival on a single axis of trade, nor can its trade be traced solely on the basis of coin finds in northern hoards. When trade between Central Asia and the Middle Volga intensified, this did not exclude trade between Central Asia and the Lower Volga.[43] Noonan's own research demonstrated that the Khazar economy was diversified and complex: its nomadic elite could draw on resources and the labour of settled farmers, semi-nomads, nomads and skilled artisans from a range of different rural and urban regions under their control.[44] Nor do coins tell the whole story about the system of circulation within the Khazar economy. While the silver supply was obviously crucial to the dynamics of the slave and fur trade with the north, within the Khazar economy, other commodity currencies, especially textiles and beads, may have been more important.[45] North Caucasian cemeteries containing impressive quantities of silk have tended to be overlooked as evidence for Khazar systems of redistribution, and for exchange between Muslim centres and Khazaria.[46] Revised chronologies of such cemeteries may also provide evidence for the continuing wealth of Khazaria into the tenth century.[47]

The intensification of direct trade between Central Asia and the Middle Volga did not in itself deprive Khazar elites of the resources they required to maintain their empire. Ibn Fadlan's report indicates that in the 920s, the Bulgar ruler was still making tribute payments

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[42] Noonan (2000–1); see Jankowiak in this volume for discussion of the Bulgar imitation coinage.

[43] Franklin and Shepard (1996), p. 102.

[44] Noonan (1995–7).

[45] On bead production, importation and circulation within Khazaria: Kovalevskaia (2000); Kovalevskaia (1973); Kovalevskaia (2005).

[46] In 1967, Anna Ierusalimskaia grouped imported silks in the North Caucasus into Sogdian, Byzantine, Chinese and Iranian; in 2012, she grouped them into 'fabrics of the Byzantine sphere', 'Sogdian fabrics' and 'Far-Eastern (Chinese)' – a significant number of Islamic textiles are hiding under these groupings: Ierusalimskaia (1967), table 2, p. 68; Ierusalimskaia (2012), pp. 96–119. On the 'conspicuous redistribution' of textiles in nomadic empires, see Allsen (1997), p. 104.

[47] Savchenko (1999); Roth (1999), p. 528.

to the Khazar ruler. According to Ibn Fadlan, he was required to send the Khazar ruler one sable skin for every household in his kingdom. Meanwhile, his son was living as a hostage at the Khazar court, one of his daughters had been abducted by the Khazars, and he had been forced to surrender another.[48] Ibn Fadlan also provides some information on the Bulgar ruler's own sources of revenue. He apparently did not directly tax crops in kind (millet, wheat and barley), although he would expect donations in the form of mead, wheat and other food for special feasts, and would take a share in the booty from raiding activities. Households presumably had to exchange another section of their surplus production for the sable skins collected by the Bulgar ruler. [49] This was facilitated by merchants who obtained the sable from trappers to the north.[50] The Bulgar ruler also drew revenues from the trade that passed through his territories: he claimed a tenth of the cargo brought up the Volga from Khazar territory, and had a right to take one in every ten slaves brought from the north by the Rus.[51]

In some of the Soviet scholarship it used to be argued that an internal crisis had been brewing inside the Khazar khaganate over the course of the ninth century, as the Khazar elite became solely dependent on long-distance trade and alienated from their subjects.[52] Both the assumption about the egalitarian character of earlier Khazar society, and the claim that the Khazar elite subsequently lost interest in the pastoral economy, are questionable.[53] An alternative approach has been to look at how relations with strong sedentary polities actually aided the crystallisation of nomadic empires on the steppe.[54] Irina Shingiray has argued the concept of the 'shadow empire', originally developed in an Inner Asian context, could be

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[48] IbnF^{1} § 72, p. 238–41; IbnF^{2}, pp. 44–5.

[49] The implication is that the Bulgar ruler first collected the skins, and then passed them on to the Khazars, although he may have kept part of the revenue for himself: IbnF^{1} § 54, p. 228–9; IbnF^{2}, pp. 34–5.

[50] IbnF^{1} § 65, p. 232–3; IbnF^{2}, p. 39.

[51] IbnF^{1} §§ 68, 72, pp. 232–3, 238–41; IbnF^{2}, pp. 40–1, 44–5.

[52] Often with the insinuation that the transformation of Khazaria into a 'parasitic state' was connected to the conversion to Judaism; for references, see Zhivkov (2015), pp. 166–7. Zhivkov connects this with a 'Marxist explanatory model'; in fact, it reflects the nationalist turn in Soviet archaeology in the 1950s: e.g. Merpert (1953). The connection between Judaism and Khazar decline persists in some more recent scholarship: Novosel'tsev (2001), p. 69. This is to say nothing of the non-scholarly literature, critiqued by Shnirelman (2007).

[53] The misinterpretation of steppe aristocracies as egalitarian tribal societies is critiqued in Sneath (2007). My thanks to Johannes Preiser-Kapeller for the reference.

[54] Barfield (1989), esp. pp. 229–31.

applied to the Khazar khaganate's relationship with the caliphate.[55] Shingiray's work corrects a tendency to see the evolution of Khazar institutions in isolation from developments within the Muslim world, and draws attention to the cultural corollaries of the mobility discussed in the previous section. It also helps us to challenge a persistent notion about the Khazars as the saviours of Europe from Islamic expansion.[56] However, the image of Khazaria as the caliphate's 'shadow' may still underplay the indigenous capacities of steppe aristocracies to form strong polities and the multilateral character of Khazar international relations, including with Byzantium.[57]

Even if the Khazar aristocracy was not necessarily becoming poorer, and the traditions of statecraft were not necessarily as fragile as some of the scholarship has implied, disruptions to traditional trade routes and the growing potential for non-Khazar elites in the north to amass significant wealth independently of their relationship to the khaganate did pose their own challenges for both the Khazars and the Abbasids.[58] Opportunities were emerging for groups of nomadic pastoralists, borderland warlords, slave-raiders and urban communities who started to operate outside of, or in the cracks between, the spheres of political influence that had been carved out by the khaganate and the caliphate since the end of large-scale hostilities in the early ninth century. The next section will consider how this instability manifested itself, and how it shaped the calculations of the parties involved.

Why was Ibn Fadlan sent?

The ideological dimension of Ibn Fadlan's journey cannot be ignored. Ibn Fadlan reports a frank exchange between himself and the Bulgar ruler, Almish ibn Shilki, on the subject. After berating Ibn Fadlan and his party for failing to deliver money that had been promised in a letter from the caliph, Almish had his interpreter ask Ibn Fadlan whether he thought the caliph could send an army to defeat the Bulgars. Ibn Fadlan acknowledged that the distances involved would make such an enterprise impossible. Almish then declared that he

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[55] Shingiray (2006); Shingiray (2007), pp. 200–3; Shingiray (2012), pp. 195–7.

[56] On the Khazars as counterparts to Charles Martel, see Artamonov (1962), pp. 224 – 5; Golden (1990), p. 265; Golden (1980), vol. 1, p. 14; Dunlop (1954), pp. ix–x; *Taʾrikh Bab al-Abwab*, ed. and tr. Minorsky, p. 18 n. 2; first critiqued in Russian scholarship over 25 years ago: Novosel'tsev (1990), pp. 60–2. The trope of 'Christendom delivered' goes back to Gibbon (1898), vol. 6, p. 15.

[57] Thomas Barfield's model has been critiqued on similar grounds: Di Cosmo (1999), p. 12; Dromp (2005); Skaff (2012), pp. 8, 241–71.

[58] For steppe nomadic elites as 'aristocracies', see Sneath (2007).

nonetheless feared his patron (*mawla*), the Commander of the Faithful (i.e., the caliph), whereas Ibn Fadlan and his companions had disregarded the latter's instructions, and had hence betrayed the Muslims.[59]

Ibn Fadlan emphasises the religious framing of Almish's appeal for support against the Khazars. Almish described the Khazars as 'the Jews who have reduced me to slavery', and the injustice of the Khazars' abduction of his Muslim daughter is underscored by the fact that the Khazar ruler was a Jew.[60] The Bulgars' conversion to Islam is presented as a recent phenomenon: Almish describes his father as an unbeliever.[61] Ibn Fadlan does not discuss the much debated question of when the Khazar ruler had converted to Judaism. The discovery of coinage issued by the Khazars, datable to 837–8 (223 AH), bearing the legend 'Moses is the Messenger of God', appeared to settle the debate in favour of the conversion of the elite by or around that time.[62] However, this still has to be set against written sources pointing to a conversion in the 860s, and archaeological evidence indicating a change in elite burial practices towards the late ninth century or early tenth century.[63] Efforts to identify stages of the process with adherence to different forms of Judaism, or to explain the Khazar system of dual rulership in terms of the conversion, have not been entirely convincing.[64] There is nonetheless sufficient evidence to talk about both an extended Khazar exposure to Judaism, and a series of moments – such as the late 830s and the early 860s – when adherence to Judaism took on a heightened political significance for the Khazar aristocracy.[65] Ibn Fadlan's mission occurred at another such time.

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[59] IbnF[1] § 47, p. 222–3; IbnF[2], pp. 30–1.

[60] IbnF[1] §§ 45, 72, pp. 220–1, 238–41; IbnF[2], pp. 28–9, 44–5.

[61] IbnF[1] § 44, p. 218–21; IbnF[2], pp. 27–8.

[62] Kovalev (2005), but see Olsson (2013), pp. 504–7.

[63] A case was made for a date of around 861, by Constantin Zuckerman, based on a comparison of the account of a dispute at the Khazar court given an anonymous Hebrew Khazar letter from the Cairo Genizah with the Slavonic *Life* of the future missionary to Moravia, Constantine-Cyril: 'The Schechter Text', ed. and tr. Golb and Pritsak, pp. 107–11; *Life of Constantine-Cyril* chs 8–11, ed. Tomšič, pp. 108–26; Zuckerman (1995), pp. 239–50. A commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by the Benedictine monk Christian of Stavelot also appears to treat the Khazar conversion to Judaism as a recent event in the 860s: Christian of Stavelot, 'Expositio in Matthaeum Evangelistam', ed. Migne, vol. 106, col. 1456. For the archaeological evidence: Shepard (1998), pp. 16–17.

[64] There were probably older traditions of dual kingship, unrelated to Judaism: Golden (2007), pp. 156–7.

[65] Signes Codoñer (2014), pp. 355–62 treats the 838 Khazar coinage as a political message to the Rus and perhaps also Byzantium, rather than as evidence for a single conversion event.

A growing adherence to Judaism beyond diaspora communities living under Khazar rule, and its transformation into the dominant religion of the Khazar aristocracy, was probably influenced by the broadening and deepening adherence to Islam among the wider population in Iran and the eastern Caucasus.[66] This social trend most likely contributed to the conversions to Islam of groups and individuals living further north, such as Almish, or the Ghuzz leader Lesser Yinal, alongside more immediate political considerations.[67] It would also have forced Khazar aristocrats to confront more directly the relationship between the older Tängri cults and the monotheistic beliefs and ritual practices associated with Judaism (as well as Islam and Christianity) that had been present among them for some time.[68] Moments of crisis put these questions into still sharper relief.

Just a few years before the mission, Rus war-bands had carried out a series of devastating raids on Muslim populations living along the southern and western coast of the Caspian Sea. Al-Masʿudi suggests that the Rus had been allowed or perhaps even encouraged to carry out these raids by the Khazar authorities.[69] The Khazars may have had various material motivations for such a course of action. The Rus were valuable trading partners and sources of revenue for many different actors, but they could also be a threat if not carefully managed. In allowing the Rus to carry out raids, the Khazar authorities may have hoped to recoup revenues from more peaceful trade that had been lost due to political instability in the Caucasus and northern Iran, as well as to set the terms for future trade with either the Abbasids or the local dynasties establishing themselves around the Caspian. The demonstrative violence of the raids might be compared to the Rus leader's funeral witnessed by Ibn Fadlan, in which a slave girl was gang-raped and murdered.[70] The violence was doubtless not a unique occurrence in a system involving the capture or purchase and forcible transportation of human beings across thousands of miles, but it may also have been designed to focus the minds of the visitors from distant Baghdad.

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[66] Richard Bulliet estimates that the majority of the Iranian population had converted to Islam by around the 860s: Bulliet (1979), pp. 23, 43–63. Meanwhile, on new conversions to Christianity in Khazaria, see Evans (forthcoming).

[67] The latter had been forced to renounce his conversion on return to his camp: IbnF[1] § 25, p. 206–7; IbnF[2], pp. 16–17. On conversions to Islam in northern Eurasia, see: Knutson and Ellis (2021).

[68] For a survey of the variety of religious beliefs in Khazaria, see Ludwig (1982), pp. 305–32.

[69] al-Masʿudi, *Muruj* § 450, ed. Pellat, vol. 1, p. 213. See also Hraundal and Jankowiak in this volume.

[70] IbnF[1] §§ 80–8, pp. 244–53; IbnF[2], pp. 49–54. See also Price in this volume.

In the context of the inherent violence of the slave trade, and the potential for conflict in the relations between Khazars, Abbasids and the other regional powers, growing adherence to Judaism and different forms of Islam could simultaneously provide a justification for violence and a means to establish moral limits. Al-Istakhri reports that the Khazars, as Jews, observed prohibitions on enslaving co-religionists, just as the Muslims and Christians did.[71] The patterns of mobility and resettlement discussed in the first section could produce religious solidarities that cut across multi-ethnic, multi-faith empires such as the Abbasid caliphate or the Khazar khaganate. While it is not necessary to take at face value al-Masʿudi's claim that the Muslim *al-larisiyya* always stood aside in conflicts with other Muslims, it is not implausible that the violence unleashed by the Rus raids in the Caspian in 912 genuinely shocked Muslims living in the khaganate, as al-Masʿudi also claims. This outrage in turn provided them with a justification for massacring the returning Rus, with the Khazar ruler's blessing.

In a similar manner, Ibn Fadlan gives the impression of having been genuinely chastened by Almish's criticisms of him and his party for their failings as Muslims. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his religious commitment, or the sincerity of Caliph al-Muqtadir, who sent the mission in response to an appeal from a distant co-religionist. However, there is equally little reason to assume either that the Abbasid authorities wanted to turn relations with the Jewish rulers of Khazaria into a zero-sum game, or vice versa. The passage in Yaqut traditionally and plausibly reconstructed as the conclusion of Ibn Fadlan's account, reports that in 922–3 (310 AH), the ruler of the Khazars learnt that Muslims had razed the synagogue in Dar al-Babunaj; he retaliated by razing the minaret in Itil and having the muezzins killed. The double negative in the following line of Arabic is ambiguous. It is unclear whether the ruler of the Khazars claimed to have had the mosque razed as a deterrent to prevent the destruction of all the synagogues in the land of Islam; or whether he claimed that he had stopped short of demolishing the whole mosque, to prevent retaliatory destruction of synagogues in Muslim lands.[72] Whichever way the passage is read, it points to an acknowledgement of the risks involved for both powers in unleashing sectarian violence.

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[71] al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, p. 223.

[72] Montgomery opts for the first reading, Lunde and Stone, Kovalevskii, and Togan, for the second: IbnF[1] § 97, pp. 256–9; IbnF[2], p. 58; Ibn Fadlan, *Kitab*, tr. Kovalevskii, p. 148; IbnF[3], pp. 103–4. Suggestions for the location of Dar al-Babunaj (the name means 'House of Camomile') have ranged from Baghdad (tr. Kovalevskii, pp. 273–4 n. 959) to Darband (IbnF[2], p. 229 n. 91) to Spain (IbnF[3], pp. 102–3 n.4).

In both international affairs and in the fractious court politics of early tenth-century Baghdad, appeals to sectarianism had their temptations, but also attendant dangers. Ibn Fadlan lays the blame for the failure of the mission to deliver the promised money from the estate of Arthakhushmithan to the Bulgar ruler on the Christian agent for its owner, the former vizier Ibn al-Furat. He also seems to imply that Abdullah ibn Bashtu al-Khazari may have been party to the plot, or was at least duped into encouraging the party to leave Bukhara before the money arrived.[73] However, these may all have been convenient excuses. As the Ghuzz tribesman suspected, the weakening of the Khazars was not necessarily in the best interests of the Abbasid central government: it could allow the consolidation of exchange networks outside Baghdad's control, increase the power of independent Muslim and Christian rulers living on either side of the Caspian, and open up new economic and political opportunities for the resurgent Byzantine empire. Articulating this clearly, however, was apparently not an option in the political climate of 920s Baghdad.

Conclusion

The Khazars form the 'hidden centre' of Ibn Fadlan's account, his mission sent partly to bolster a fearful Almish against their looming presence. Yet despite frequent references to them, he offers scant description, a reticence which parallels our Byzantine sources with their focus on which groupings to use in order to constrain and counter the Khazars – but again, no description. In the ninth and tenth centuries, there is evidence that individual Khazars in the caliphate were as common as were Muslims in the khaganate. Both these interdependent polities faced disruptions to traditional trade routes, with nomadic pastoralists and borderland warlords, slave-raiders and urban communities to the north starting to amass significant wealth. So were there broader geopolitical considerations behind Ibn Fadlan's mission? In the course of the ninth century, the Khazar elite's gradual adoption of Judaism may have been in response to Islam becoming more deeply embedded throughout Iran and the eastern Caucasus at all levels of society. In both the caliphate and the khaganate, monotheistic faith could frame arguments for coercion and for moral limits. Although wishing to support the recent converts on the Middle Volga, Baghdad was unlikely to have wanted relations with Khazaria to turn into a zero-sum game, and the same outlook probably held true on

[73] IbnF[1] §§ 3, 5–6, pp. 190–5; IbnF2, pp. 3, 5–6. On court politics and the risks and rewards of the position of vizier during al-Muqtadir's reign, see van Berkel (2013).

the Lower Volga, too. For both powers, to risk unleashing sectarian violence was to risk losing control over trade routes spanning the medley of warlords, nomads and others to the north – not to mention to the Byzantines. Ibn Fadlan's repeated explanations for his mission's failure obfuscate, but also point to, this central consideration.

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