ICONOCLASTS AND KHAZARS, A NOTE

The date of the Khazar conversion to Judaism has been a matter of debate for a long time.1 Now we can date the conversion more or less precisely, for recently Khazar dirhams minted in 837–838, found in Sweden, which bear the Arabic inscription la Ilâha illâ-LLâh wa Mûsâ rasûlu ALLâh (“there is no god but God, and Moses is his messenger,” instead of wa Muhammada rasûlu ALLâh, “and Muhammad is his messenger”) and a tamga, intended for circulation in the Caliphate and proclaiming the Biblical identity of the Khazars,2 assure that the conversion to Judaism took place not later than the first half of the ninth century. This disconnects the date of the conversion with the mission of the Thessalonica / Solun’ brothers (861).3

However, a Byzantine Iconoclast dimension of the Khazar conversion to Judaism should be considered.4 Emperor Leo III the Isaurian (r. 717–741) had special connections with the Khazars throughout almost all of his career, beginning with his service under Justinian II (who had a Khazar wife) starting in 705 and his mission to Lazica, in order to forge a coalition against al-Walid I; while an Emperor, he fought the


(4) I am grateful to Kassia Senina, who drew my attention to this aspect.
Arabs as an ally of the Khazar Qağan. Leo initiated conversions of Jews and heretics in 722 and Iconoclasm in 726–729, apparently aiming, *i.a.*, both to attract the forcibly converted Jews to a non-image-worshipping form of Christianity and being influenced by the military successes of the Muslims who did not worship images. During the period of 730–780 (corresponding to the first Iconoclastic Period in Byzantium), many Iconodule monks found themselves in areas beyond Byzantium on the fringes of the Empire, including Georgia, Khazaria and the Crimea; as for the Jews, they may have fled following the forced conversion of 722. Following the great Khazar invasion into the lands of the Khalifate and their victories at Ardabîl, Diyâr Bakr and Mosul (730), Leo chose

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(6) It is curious that more than two centuries later, the battle of Ardabil (730) was seen by the Khazar king as a turning point in the conversion to Judaism. According to the Long Version of the Reply of King Joseph sent to Hisdai ibn Shaprut in Cordoba, Spain, after Bulan and the Khazars converted 340 (!) years ago, God spoke to Bulan and ordered him to build a temple in the name of God to dwell therein; Bulan answered that he had no silver and gold, then God spoke to Bulan ordering him to be strong and firm and to go with all his army to the path of Dar-i Alân (Darial passage) to the earth of Ardewil (Ardabil), where God had prepared for Bulan two treasures, one full of silver and one full of gold; Bulan did as he was told (albeit the Arab sources name the commander of the 730 invasion Barjik, the son of the Qağan), waged many wars and destroyed the city, taking much booty; he sanctified this booty / dedicated it to God and built from this booty the tabernacle (*ohel*), the ark (*aron*), the menorah, the table and the holy vessels, which, by the mercy of H’ and by the strength of Shaddai (note the correct distribution of the aspects of the mercy and power between two names of God used), are still held and kept with the author of the Reply, King Joseph. It was *thereafter* that the King of Edom (Rome, Byzantium) and the King of the Ishmaelites sent their ambassadors to the Khazars and a religious dispute followed, in which a Rabbi won. The chronology and the sequence of events are heavily distorted here, and no mention is made
for his son and co-ruler, Constantine V (s.c. Copronymus, r. 718–775), a Khazar wife, daughter of the Qağan; originally named Tzitzak, she was baptized as Irene in 732. Some five years later, after having been defeated on the shores of the Volga by Marwân ibn Muhammad, her father (or brother?) forcibly accepted Islam for a short while, certainly not longer than until 746 or even earlier. Leo’s victory over the forces of Hishâm ibn Abd al-Malik at Akroinon in 740, together with that of Charles Martel in 732 at Poitiers / Tours and the Khazar stand in 737, stopped the Arab advance into Europe, and Constantine, together with his Khazar relatives and allies, went on offensive against the Arabs in 746–752 and against the Bulgars, in 754–775. Tzitzak-Irene bore Constantine V one son, Leo IV the Khazar (co-ruler of his father from 751, r. 775–780). His death marked the end of the First Iconoclastic Period, and it was about the end of the First Iconoclastic Period that Muslim Abo of Tbilisi was able to convert to Christianity in the midst of shamanistic Tänri-worshipping Khazars. In the description of Khazar ways of life about 780 as found in Abo’s Vita are the following observations: the “Khazars Sons of Magog” were Mongoloid (sašinel p’irita, “with horrible faces”), pagan (“having no religious law”), blood-eating and savage (k’ac velur). However, there is no bias in this description; they worshipped the Creator (šemokmedi), the Turkic God of the Heavens Tänri, and there is no word about their Judaism.

of a conversion to Islam in 737. The Hebrew text and Russian translation are in: П. К. КОКОВЦОВ, Еврейско-хазарская переписка в X веке (Ленинград, 1932).


(8) The name is generally explained as Turkic *čičok, “flower;” some explain it as a Hebrew word for the fringes attached to the ritual shawl.

(9) On Bulgaria and Byzantium, see R. BROWNING, Byzantium and Bulgaria (London, 1975), and OBOLENSKY, The Byzantine Commonwealth...

Emperor Leo V the Armenian initiated the Second Iconoclastic Period in Byzantium (815–842) after a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of the Bulgarian Khan Krum,\textsuperscript{11} and after a group of soldiers broke into the imperial mausoleum, opened the sarcophagus of Con-
stantine V (the husband of Tzitzak-Irene), and implored him to return and save the empire; the successor of Leo V, Michael II the Amorian, or Psellos (r. 820–829; sometimes described — wrongly — as of Judeo-Christian background\(^{12}\)), was an Iconoclast, who in 824 even lamented image veneration in a letter to the Carolingian emperor Louis the Pious; and it was during this Second Iconoclastic Period — when all three Monotheistic religions of the East shared Iconoclastic tendencies — that the Khazar elite converted to Judaism.

The Iconoclasm came to an end during the reign of Michael III (r. 840–867), after the iconodule Methodius was appointed the Patriarch of Constantinople in 843. Michael III was successful in waging a war against the Abbasids in Anatolia and in 859 he laid siege on Samosata, but these efforts were brought to naught by the first recorded Rus’ assault on Constantinople in June 860 (ironically, a century later, Syria and Palestine were spared from a successful Byzantine Crusade by a Svjatoslav-led Rus’ invasion into Bulgaria). The actual text of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* containing dates begins with the phrase that it was in the days of Michael that the name of Rus’ first became known,\(^{13}\) an echo of the remarks of Patriarch Photius in his Second Homily, 2.\(^{14}\) Guided by Photius, thought by some to have a Khazar ancestry,\(^{15}\) Michael exerted considerable effort in reconstructing church life and opening closed monasteries, reorganizing the imperial university and going on a project to christianize the Bulgars, Slavs and Khazars. This was the background for the mission of the Thessaloniki (Solun’\(^{\text{\dagger}}\)) brothers Cyrill and Methodius, sent to the Khazar Qağan in 861 in order to stop the recent expansion of Judaism in Khazaria and to gain the Qağan’s support against possible attacks by Rus’.

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(13) “Въ лѣто 6360 индикта 15 день начишелъ Михаилу царствова-ти нача ся прозывать Руска земля о семь бо увѣдахомъ яко при семь цари приходиша Русь на Царьгородъ яко же пишется въ лѣтописаны греческой.” The date given by the editor of the Chronicle (852CE) is notoriously wrong, as are almost all the dates prior to the rule of St. Vladimir.


that there was some connection between the end of the Iconoclasm and the sending of the brothers on their Khazar mission. The *Vita* of St. Cyril\(^{16}\) does not say implicitly that the Khazars were already Judaized, nevertheless, in the religious disputation described in this text — one of the many debates imprinted on the memory of generations of Christians, Jews, and Muslims of Western Eurasia\(^{17}\) — the Qağan said to the brothers, among other things, that “we all speak of the same things: the only difference between us is that you worship the Trinity, and we, the One God, as we have been taught by our books.” This conciliatory tone is reminiscent of the well-known tolerance in questions of religion displayed by the Khazars after their Judaization, although the mention


of “teaching by books” sounds strange coming from a nomadic Qağan in 861 and brings to mind the motifs of the “cave of books” in Sefer Kozari of Yehuda Halevi and the finding of Jewish books in a cave in the Letter of King Joseph, both still insufficiently explained. On the other hand, the Khazars boast before the missionary brothers of carrying their wisdom in their bellies, unlike the Greeks who find their wisdom in books. Finally, the Khazars pride themselves on the fact that all power in their country reposes in a single family, unlike the Greeks with their constantly changing dynasties. Moreover, the description of the mission in the Qağan’s capital suggests that a certain advisor to the Qağan already enjoyed a very different status from all other subjects; it is not hard to identify this advisor with the bek, who would soon eclipse the Qağan. All this suggests that the rulers of Khazaria had already been Judaized, at least, to some extent.

Probably this silence about the Judaism of the Khazars in all the Byzantine literature, including the Vita of St. Cyril, was due to embarrassment over the fact that the brothers failed exactly when the veneration of icons and the restoration of Orthodoxy had been achieved. Although the religious part of their mission was a failure, their next mission in 863 secured the conversion of Great Moravia / Slavic Pannonia, where the brothers devised a Slavic alphabet (Glagolitic, not “Cyrillic”) and established a school of translation. About this time Khan Boris I of Bulgaria converted, too, first to the Roman rite, and then to the Byzantine one, after Michael III and the Caesar Bardas invaded his country in 864.¹⁸

So, it seems that there was at least some overlapping of the Khazar-Byzantine entente, directed against the Khalifate, with the periods of Iconoclasm in Byzantium. However, further Byzantinist research in this direction is a desideratum.

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¹⁸ The manoeuvrings of Boris / Bogoris / Michael I of Bulgaria between Constantinople and Rome provoked the so-called Photian Schism. About 864, a Benedictine monk in Corvei, Westphalia, called Christian Druthmar, or Christian of Stavelot, wrote in his commentary on Matthew 24:14: “At the present time we know of no nation under the heavens where Christians do not live. For [Christians are even found] in the lands of Gog and Magog — who are a Hunnic race and are called Gazari ... are circumcized and observing the whole of Judaism (quae sunt gentes Hinnorum, quae ab eis Gazari vocantur... circuncisa est et omnen Judaisnum observat). The Bulgars, however, who are of the same seven tribes [as the Khazars], are now becoming baptized” (Expositio in Mattheum Evangelistam, in: PL, ser. 2, t. 106, col. 1456).