CHAPTER 1

The Ideology of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries: The Difficult Reconciliation of Steppe Traditions with Judaic Monotheism

In the tenth century, the religion practiced by the Khazar ruling dynasty and possibly by quite a significant part of the nobility was Judaism. At the same time, the majority of the population, subject to the khagan, continued to adhere to its pagan beliefs. Both the written records and the results from archaeological research indicate the presence of quite a few Muslims and Christians. Usually, the Khazar elite’s conversion to Judaism is interpreted in light of the practice, widespread in the contemporary to Khazaria “barbarian” lands, whose nobility imposed Christianity or Islam on its subjects. This practice is viewed as a deliberate attempt to unify into an ethnic whole the often multilingual and multi-ethnic population that professed different cults. The adoption of a common religion is thus considered one of the important conditions for the formation of a nation, and for the blurring of tribal and ethnic differences. According to this point of view, since the Khazar elite failed to spread Judaism among the majority of the population, Khazaria could not become a unified cultural and ethnic whole.1 This fact contributed to the dissolution and, ultimately, led to the collapse of the khaganate in the middle of the tenth century. Along with this, the religious tolerance in Khazaria is also emphasized, although it was coercive, or in other words a conscious political act in the name of preserving the integrity of the state.2

The main problem regarding the presentation of the Khazar Khaganate’s ideology is how exactly the khagan’s authority among the khaganate’s pagan, Christian and Muslim population was sustained. Here, the offered solution is generally only one—by coercion, with military force.3 However, military force does not explain, for example, why a numerous Bulgar population remained under the rule of the Khazar khagan, since it can be assumed that it had the

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2 See for instance Artamonov 1962, 266, 334, and 412; Stepanov 2005a, 77, 122, and 124.
3 Dunlop 1967, 233–235; Golden 1980, 111. L. Gumilev is one of the most ardent supporters of the idea that the Judaized Khazar nobility maintained its power by force and coercion (Gumilev 2003, 126 and 1997, 168–176).
opportunity to resist, especially with a strong Bulgarian state nearby. The question, therefore, is whether the Khazar population’s notion of authority and of the ruler himself continued to be related to pagan beliefs and practices despite the latter’s professed Judaism. Or, seen from another angle—whether and to what extent the Khazar nobility followed the Judaic views on authority. Also, to what extent the pagan notions were preserved, since they could explain the influence of the khagan among a multiethnic population that professed different religions and cults.

An argument in favor of the assertion that even after the Judaization of the khagan and his closest entourage the general notions of power continued to adhere to pagan beliefs is the prevalent issue of the Khazar dual kingship. Ts. Stepanov assumes that “the justification of the sacral sovereignty of the khagan after this period (861 AD—Author’s note) includes many preserved Central and Middle Asian elements (in which it is logical to look for Irano-Turkic, or more precisely, Turanian roots), while the emphasis in the justification for the power of the reigning king-bek is perhaps leaning more towards Old Testament models and archetypes. Moreover, the king/priest pair is well-known in Ancient Israel as well and its appearance in Khazaria precisely in this aspect is not surprising, especially in light of Judaism being the “state” religion of the khaganate […] The Irano-Turkic roots of Pax Nomadica, preserved in the person of the khagan also in the tenth century (cf. “the sacral regicide”, of which there are accounts in the Arabic written tradition) show the difficult balance between tradition and innovation and the preservation of some patriarchal notions and elements in the power and its justification in Khazaria, in spite of the fact that in the ninth century Judaism was finally imposed as a “state” religion”.

According to M. Artamonov and T. Noonan, the authority of the khagan ensured the regime’s legitimacy. It is difficult to understand how the pagan and Judaic notions of power (which were closely related to both the Christian and Muslim ones) interacted and “reconciled” with each other. Nevertheless, even if numerous religions were professed in Khazaria, this does not mean that there was no unity of the religious (or more likely, the mythological) ideas among the population.

According to S. Pletneva, “a unifying factor for the entire population was the consensus of religious concepts”. It is hardly a coincidence that the nomads (the steppe peoples) themselves were the spreaders of ideas, concepts and

4 Stepanov 2003a, 221–222.
6 Pletneva 1982, 104.