In the Fârsnâma of Ibn al-Balhî, a twelfth-century Seljuk-era historian and geographer whose work was commissioned by one of the Iranian Seljukids, the story is related that the Sâsânid Shâh, Ḫusraw I Anûšîrvân (531–579) placed at the right of his throne, “a seat of gold and (two) other seats of gold on the left and behind (his throne). Of these three seats, one was reserved for the King of China, the other for the King of Byzantium and the third for the King of the Khazars, so that should they come, they would sit on these seats. They were kept all year long and no one else could sit on them.”¹ Although it might be argued that this late source has garbled the tale and that the throne was reserved for the Western Türk Qağan (Anûšîrvân was married to a daughter of the Türk Qağan,² yet other manuscripts have the Hephthalite monarch), this is not crucial. As we shall see there was, most probably, a relationship between the Khazar ruling house and that of the Western Turks. Even more importantly, the Khazar Qağan, anachronistically or not, was considered worthy enough to take his rightful seat alongside the other major superpower emperors of Eurasia.

One of the great colossi of medieval Eurasia, a state whose borders encompassed the Dnepr zone in the West, the Middle Volga in the North, the trans-Volgan steppe approaches to Khwârazm in the East and the Crimea and North Caucasian steppelands in the South, the Khazar Qağanate was one of the more long-lived steppe empires, lasting some 300 years (ca. 650–ca. 965–969).³ It contained an ethnically variegated...

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³ The case for 969 as marking the completion of the Rus’ conquest of the lower Volga, the core Khazar territory has been made by I.G. Konovalova, "Padenie Xazarii v istoričeskoj pamjatì raznyx narodov" Drevnejšie gosudarstva Vostočnoj Evropy 2001 (Moskva, 2003), pp. 171–190.
population of Turkic, Iranian, Finno-Ugrian, Slavic, Palaeocaucasian peoples and Jewish communities of some antiquity in the Crimea and Caucasus. In the economic realm, Khazaria included populations that were pastoral nomadic, semi-nomadic, agriculturalist, viniculturalist as well as those engaged in fishing, hunting and gathering. There were also significant urban populations, both of indigenous and immigrant origins consisting of merchants and craftsmen. The judicial system provided for the legal practices of Jews, Muslims, Christians and pagans in ways that presage the later millet system of the Ottoman Empire. Khazaria had and largely retains an enviable reputation for religious toleration. In this regard, it was typical of many of the early Turkic nomadic polities. The Qağanate also possessed a formidable military machine, the foundation upon which the whole of this imperial edifice rested. The ruler maintained a salaried personal army/comitatus numbering some 7000–10,000 mounted warriors. On those occasions when the Qağan sallied forth, all prostrated themselves before his awesome majesty.

The Khazar Qağanate was, indeed, one of the great powers of the age. It played an important role in Rus’ history (the extent of which is still hotly debated), in early Hungarian history and in the history of the Caucasus. It halted the penetration of the Volga and Black Sea steppes lands by the expanding Umayyad Caliphate. It was a leading player in international trade, both east-west and north-south, becoming one of the major trading partners of and conduits to the ‘Abbâsid Caliphate, contributing in this way to the remarkable efflorescence of ninth century Baghdad. It may be classified as one of the “trade-tribute empires” of the period 551–907, extracting tribute from and trading with its subject populations and sedentary neighbors. Such states also included their progenitors, the Türks, as well as their contemporaries, the Uyğur, Tibetans and

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