YIDDISH EVIDENCE FOR THE KHAZAR COMPONENT IN THE ASHKENAZIC ETHNOGENESIS

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Two areas of research that can promise immediate and indisputable contributions to our understanding of Khazar civilization are the archaeology of the sites in the Empire and the reanalysis of extant historical documentation. A third topic, the fate of the Judaized Khazar population after the collapse of the Empire in the late 10th century at the hands of Kievan Rus’ and specifically the possibility of a Khazar component in the Ashkenazic ethnogenesis, has for a long time greatly excited the curiosity of scholars and laymen alike but suffered from a dearth of convincing evidence (see e.g. Koestler 1976). It is, however, unlikely that the first two areas of research cited above will significantly elucidate the third question.

I believe that there are two major and three minor avenues of research available for uncovering the whereabouts of the Khazar Jews: the major avenues are linguistics and toponymics. The relatively minor avenues of research are numismatics, history and the archaeology of Khazars outside their Empire; a potentially promising avenue of research is genetics. Searching for Khazarisms or Hebraisms in languages presumed to have been in contact with Khazar Turkic is not very revealing of the fate of the Khazar Jews since the linguistic contacts could have taken place in situ before the collapse of the Khazar empire and the evaluation of the data is complicated by our ignorance of the Khazar language (see references in Wexler 1987: 72, 211–212; 2002: 515). Toponymic evidence, on the other hand, can show the extent of Khazar settlement both before and after the 10th century, e.g. a recent study by Lewicki (1988) shows Turkic Khazars (including Jewish Khazars) prior to the 10th century accompanying other ethnic groups into Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Poland, Moravia, Slovakia, and Austria (see also Wexler 2002: 219, 530 ff.).

I believe that there is one unexpected source, yet untapped, that can confirm a Khazar component in the Ashkenazic ethnogenesis: the Yiddish language. This suggestion may come as a surprise since Yiddish lacks typical Turkic linguistic features, such as vowel harmony and a
basically agglutinative structure. Nor does the Yiddish lexicon reveal a rich corpus of unique Turkic or Iranian elements unattested in the coteritorial and contiguous Eastern Slavic languages or Polish (for examples, see Wexler 2002: 87–88, 124–5, 150, 166, 171, 310–311, 359, 467, 510, 513, 519–520, 522; Poljak 1951: 315–323, intriguingly, had a brief chapter on the genesis of the Yiddish language in his book claiming that the Ashkenazic Jews were descended from Khazars, but gave neither convincing evidence nor analysis). Given the fact that most of the Ashkenazic territory, along with a great many Jewish communities from the Middle East to China, were under Mongol domination during the 13th century, some putative Yiddish Khazarisms may prove to be of some other Turkic or Mongolian provenience. However, one possibly Khazar Turkic feature in Yiddish may be the so-called “periphrastic” conjugation, whereby indeclinable Hebrew verbal elements are usually combined with the Yiddish auxiliary verbs ‘to be(come)’, as in Yiddish bojdek zajn ‘to examine’ (< Hebrew bōdeq ‘examining; he examines’ + the German ‘to be’). This pattern might ultimately be of Khazar origin, since Turkic and Iranian languages also have this conjugation for the integration of Arabic verbal material; it is lacking in Western Yiddish (i.e. Judaized German) and in German and German-derived slang lexicons (such as Hungarian and Slavic) that utilize a sizeable Hebrew component (primarily of Yiddish origin) but is attested in Judaized variants of Eastern Slavic in the 17th century (Wexler 1987: 98–99; 2002: 522–524). The geography of the construction thus suggests an Eastern origin.

I do not accept the common view that Yiddish is a form of German. I believe that Yiddish arose approximately between the 9th and 12th centuries when Jews in the mixed Germano-(Upper) Sorbian lands of present-day Germany “relexified” their native Sorbian, a West Slavic language, to High German (and to a lesser extent, Hebrew or Hebroid and unique, mainly Balkan Romance) phonetic strings (on the process of relexification, a factor in the genesis of many creole and non-creole languages, see below and Horvath and Wexler 1997). I strongly suspect that the Sorbian Jews descend primarily from Balkan, and possibly also Caucasian, Slavo-Avar and German Slavic converts to Judaism. “Sorbian Yiddish” was brought to the Kiev-Polessian lands in the 15th century (in modern terms, northern Ukraine and southern Belarus’), where it was not adopted blindly by the indigenous Slavic Jews. Rather, the latter adapted it, by relexifying a second time, this time from Eastern Slavic to Yiddish vocabulary. In the process, they also accepted new German words that were not originally licensed for Yiddish and