The Byzantine Empire and the Khazar Kaghanate share about three hundred years of common history. The links between the two states were initially very close. The emperor Justinian II married, ca. 700, a sister or, according to a different tradition, a daughter of a Khazar kaghan. In 732/3, the emperor Leo III betrothed his son, the future emperor Constantine V, to another Khazar princess. The offspring of this marriage, Leo IV nicknamed the Khazar, ruled Byzantium in 775–780. The military collaboration culminated, in 840–841, in the construction of the great Khazar fortress of Sarkel on the Don under the guidance of Byzantine engineers and craftsmen. All these features are quite exceptional. Byzantine emperors were in no habit of marrying foreign princesses or of putting the Empire's engineering skills at the service of a far-away foreign power. This idyllic relationship contrasts sharply with the picture projected ca. 952—fifteen years before the Kaghanate's collapse—by the Byzantine diplomatic manual De administrando imperio. There, Khazaria is perceived as a dangerous enemy and several peoples are named as potential allies, capable of fighting it on the Empire's instigation. Likewise, a contemporary Khazar source, the anonymous Letter from the Genizah of Cairo, depicts Byzantium as enticing neighboring peoples to attack Khazaria.

* This paper was submitted to the organizers of the Khazar Symposium in the fall of 2000, reviewed and resubmitted after minor editing in the fall of 2001. It has circulated with my approval (as the publication was announced as imminent) and was translated in Russian: Hazarija i Vizantija: pervye kontakty, Materialy po arxeologii, istorii i etnografii Tavrii, 8, Simferopol 2001, pp. 312–333. The text is printed here as submitted in 2001, with only a few bibliographical updates added in square brackets in the notes.


The watershed in the relations between the two countries is clearly marked. Judaism was adopted as the state religion of Khazaria very soon after the failed mission of Constantine the Philosopher, the future apostle to the Slavs, to the kaghan’s court in 861. This act, though never mentioned in any Byzantine source, was perceived by the Byzantines as a slap in the face and, of course, as a theological challenge. No later than 872, the emperor Basil I launched a vast campaign aimed at converting the Jews of his realm to Christianity, preferably by conviction, eventually by force. This campaign lingered for a while, was suspended by Basil’s son, Leo VI, and then rekindled, in an emphatically anti-Khazar context, by the emperor Romanus Lecapenus towards 930. There was, doubtless, more than one factor that drove the former allies apart. The Hungarian tribes invaded the Pontic steppe in the late 830s and weakened the Kaghanate considerably, depriving it of its western part. The Hungarian factor, largely overlooked by the scholars, had a major impact on the inner development of the Khazar State, undermining the kaghan’s power and prompting the creation of a parallel dynasty of kings by the kaghan’s deputy, the bek. More importantly in the present context, the Hungarian occupation of the steppe north of the Black Sea drove a wedge between Khazaria and Byzantium and reduced the former’s value as ally. Yet, this spatial separation would justify a downgrading in relations, not the extreme animosity to which attest both the De administrando imperio and the Genizah Letter. There is no reason, therefore, to contest the Letter’s claim that Byzantium’s sudden hostility towards Khazaria was due to the latter’s conversion to Judaism.

While keeping this general framework of byzantino-khazar relations in mind, I will only touch in this paper on their earliest stage, well before they were clouded by religious discord. When did Byzantines and Khazars first meet? This question goes far beyond the Byzantine context.

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