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 tamğa, 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-Walîd 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


(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, the altars 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