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ETHNIC STRUCTURE OF THE JEWISH PROSELYTE COMMUNITY IN THE KHAZAR KHAGANATE¹

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Usually, many scholars connected the Jewish proselytism only with the Khazars in the Khazar Khaganate. It is widely known that the Jewish proselytes of the Khazar Khaganate were only a part of the Khazar urban population and were in direct relation to both the ruling stratum and merchants. However, the Khazars were formed from two ethnic groups: the Turkuts as newcomers and the “natural Khazars”. The first ethnic group became the ruling stratum. The second one was the Turkophone native population. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the ethnic belonging of the Khazar merchants who were the Jews.

The analysis of the Khazar-Hebrew documents allows us to identify other groups of the Jewish proselytes in the Khazar Khaganate. For instance, according to the “Schechter’s document”, the part of the North Caucasian Alans were the Jews. Probably they were deeply connected with the Khazar-Hebrew trade circles. In addition, Yahuda by the nickname of SWRTH was mentioned in the “Kyivan Letter of the Jews”. It is more likely that the term SWRTH was used in reference to a subgroup of the ancient Hungarians – the Savarts-Asfals – described by Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

In the 13th century, a Western European traveler Plano Carpini mentioned the Brutaques, who were the Jews in the North Western Caucasus, among the conquered by Mongols nations. I assume that they were neighbors of the Jewish Khazars in the Taman peninsula. As a result, a part of them became Jews.

Therefore, it is possible to consider Judaism as an international religion in the Khazar Khaganate.

Keywords: proselytes; Jews; Khazars; Khazar Khaganate; Khazar-Hebrew documents; Alans; Savarts; Brutaques

Introduction

Today, the Khazar theme remains one of the most popular in historical medieval studies of Eastern Europe and the North Caucasus. The history of the Khazars was traditionally studied by the orientalist historians, as well as by the researchers of the history of the ancient Rus’ and later archaeologists. Despite this, the use of sources of different nature led only to various assumptions about Khazarian history. Precisely the inability of science to answer unequivocally the key question of Khazar history contributed to the spread among the many readers and some researchers of the various stereotypes about the Khazars, sometimes even very fantastic ones. A lot of scholar and popular literature has been written about the Khazars, but it did not provide answers to many questions from the Khazar history. One of them is the scope of the Judaization of the Khazar society.

At present we do not have a clear picture among the scholars about the scales of spreading of Judaism in the Khazar Khaganate. Already a long time ago nobody did not

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doubt, that in the 9th–10th centuries AD the Hebrew community was rather significant in the Khazar state. It was known as well, that the Jewish proselytes were among the Khazars. Besides, the modern data allow to consider that Judaism became to spread also among other ethnic groups of the Khaganate.

Even now it is not a single opinion concerning the scales of Khazar Judaisation. Two approaches exist on that score. According to the first one, Judaism was spread among not only the ruling stratum but also other parts of Khazar society. This opinion was shared, for example, by A. Koestler, N. Golb, O. Pritsak, V. Petrukhin, K. Brook and some other researchers [Кестлер 2001; Golb, Pritsak 1982, 125–144; Голб, Прицак 1997, 53–61; Петрухин 1997, 194–223; Brook 1999, 136–141]. According to the second one, Judaism was spread only among the elite of the Khazars – Khagan, Bek and a part of the aristocracy. D. Dunlop, M. Artamonov, S. Pletneva, B. Zakhoder, A. Novoseltsev, T. Kalinina and some other scholars thought so [Dunlop 1954, 222–236; Артамонов 1962, 262–282; Плетнева 1986, 62–64; Заходер 1962; Новосельцев 1990; Калинина 2000, 15–16].

Scholars interested what social groups of the ethnic Khazars confessed Judaism. At the same time, no one doubted that in the 9th–10th centuries AD the Hebrew community in the Khazar Khaganate was quite significant. However, some researchers admitted that such a phenomenon as the conversion of non-Hebrews to Judaism could spread not only to the Khazars, but also to other ethnic groups of the Khaganate. The modern data allow to consider that it could have happened.

However, written sources contain rather contradictory information about it. Therefore, the main goal of this article consists in comparing the data from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian texts on the spread of Judaism in Eastern Europe outside the Hebrew communities in the Early Middle Ages.

Main part

Usually, the adherents of the first opinion use “The Kyivan Letter”, written in the 10th century AD, as evidence of wide spreading of Judaism among the Khazars. There are the names of signers of this letter which have not only Hebrew origin but also Turk (Khazar) one [Pritsak 1982, 35–41; Голб, Прицак 1996, 53–61]. Besides, some evidences of Muslim authors were used as well. So, Ibn Fadlan wrote: “All Khazars and their king are the Jews” [Ковалевский 1956, 148]. Other Muslim authors – Jakut, al-Fakih, Ibn Hordadbeh – confirmed this information as well. According to al-Fakih and Ibn Hordadbeh, “the Khazars are all Jews who accepted Judaism recently” [Brook 1999, 138; Артамонов 1962, 280].

In opposition to it, their opponents use the data of some medieval sources where it's written that Jews were only the ruling stratum of the Khazar Khaganate and other Khazars were the Pagans, Muslims and Christians. Usually these scholars use the next information by Mas'udi: “The Jews are the king (malik), his surrounding (his court) and the Khazars of his clan (gins)”² [Минорский 1963, 193]. The researchers see in term “malik” (king) designation for the deputy of Khagan but not for Khagan. Ibn Ruste confirmed this information: “Their leader (Khagan) hears confession of Judaism; standing near him Isha (king), the military chiefs and grandees hear confession of this religion as well; other Khazars hear confession of religion which is similar to the Turks religion”³ [Хвольсон 1969, 17]. Al-Istahri gave more complete description: “The Khazars are the Muslims, Christians and Pagans; the least part of them are the Jews but the largest one are the Muslims and Christians” [Заходер 1962, 165–170]. Some Muslim authors repeated similar information as well.

In this situation, it should be noted that supporters of the opinion about the wide spread of Judaism among the Khazars focused only on the data of the so-called “Kyivan Letter” and few fragments from the books of Ibn Fadlan, Jakut, al-Faqikh and Ibn Khordadbeh. The data of other authors were ignored. At the same time, adherents of the opinion

that the spread of Judaism among the Khazars was limited based their conclusions only on the data of well-known medieval Muslim geographers, who had never been in Khazaria, but constantly received fresh information from merchants who had been there. They ignored not only the content of the “Kyivan Letter”, but, for example, the information of Ibn Fadlan, who visited Khazaria. Therefore, it is necessary to involve and compare the arguments of both sides. As a result, data from all the mentioned sources should be involved.

The data of some Muslim texts suggest that not all representatives of the Khazar ethnos adhered to Judaism. Among the Khazars were also the Muslims, Christians and Pagans. This situation even gave rise to an anecdote in medieval historiography contained in the books of Ibn Ruste and Gardizi. According to Ibn Ruste, the ruler of Sarir, the Dagestan region, went to a mosque on Fridays, to a synagogue on Saturdays, and to a church on Sundays. Gardizi repeats this story in his book, but notes that this tradition was continued not by the local ruler, but by the inhabitants of the Sarir region [Заходер 1962, 159].

Some researchers still doubt that all of the clan of Khazar Khagan adhered to Judaism. Usually, they referred to the information of al-Istakhri according to which there was a young man, selling bread in the market in Itil; after the death of the ruling Khagan, this young man almost became a Khagan, because there was no one more worthy. Only one thing prevented him: the young man was a Muslim, and the Khazars do not put anyone in the Khagan who does not confess the Jewish faith. Ibn Haukal follows the information of Istakhri [Заходер 1962, 146]. We know even less about the spread of Christianity among the Khazars. We must remember the information of al-Istakhri that “The Khazars are the Muslims, Christians and Pagans; the least part of them are the Jews but the largest one is the Muslims and Christians” [Заходер 1962, 165–170]. The confession of monotheistic religions by the Khazars, who lived in cities, makes us remember that the cities of Khazaria were not only administrative, but also trading centers. Those groups of the Khazar ethnos that were economically and politically closely connected with Jewish, Muslim and Byzantine merchants could confess monotheistic religions.

It is very important to know the religious situation in the Khazar capital for the understanding the positions of Judaism among the Khazars. The data of some Muslim authors can give information of the quantitative ratio of representatives of various confessions in the Khazar capital – Itil city. So, in the first half of the 10th century AD al-Mas‘udi reported: “In the Khazar capital, according to the rule, there are seven judges (qadi); two of them are for the Muslims; two – for the Khazars, who judge in accordance with the Torah; two – for the Christians who judge in accordance with the Gospel and one for the Saklabs, the Rus’ and other Pagans who judge according to pagan [custom]” [Минорский 1963, 194]. According to the information by al-Mas‘udi about the judges in Khazar capital (Itil city), we can believe that the Khazars were the majority of local Jewish community in Itil city. Therefore, we can explain why Ibn Fadlan wrote, “All Khazars and their king are the Jews” [Ковалевский 1956, 148]. Exactly, the specificity of the Judaic community in Itil city, presented mainly by the Khazar aristocracy and city dwellers, allowed to forget about that in Itil city, excepting the Jewish Khazars, the Muslim and Christian Khazars lived also. However, they were not noticeable in the Muslim and Christian communities in Itil city, because they were minorities there. The remark of Ibn Ruste – “other Khazars hear confession of religion which is similar to the Turks religion” [Хвольсон 1969, 17] – should be interpreted that the Khazar population, who lived outside Itil and continued to lead a traditional way of life, adhered to paganism.

Thus, we can believe that Khagan and his deputy – Bek with their clans were the Jews. Representatives of noble clans, close to Khagan and Bek, were the Jews as well. Unfortunately, we have no a detailed information about the spreading of Judaism among other Khazars.

Already a long time ago the historians paid attention to the ethnic heterogeneity of the Khazars. In this connection, it is necessary to remember the conception of A. Krymsky on the circumstances of forming of the Khazar nation. This Ukrainian scholar considered that in the 7th century AD the Turkish newcomers became the ruling stratum among the “natural Khazars” in the North-Western Caspian coast. So, the Khazar nation was formed finally [Кримський 2018, 54–57]. Besides, M. I. Artamonov believed that the charismatic clan Ashina was under all of them and therefore Ashina governed in the Khazar Khaganate as well [Артамонов 1962, 170–171].

Thus, since the 7th century AD the Khazar nation was the tribal confederation where the ethnic and social features intertwined closely. Therefore, the Jewish Khazarian ruling stratum had another origin than the “Ethnik” Khazars. Unfortunately, we have no evidence concerning the spreading of Judaism among the last ones.

Besides, the data of some written sources allow to consider that in the Khazar Khaganate the Judaism was spread not only among the Hebrews and a part of the Khazars but also among parts of some nations which were under the Khazars direct protectorate in the 9th–10th centuries AD. So, among them were the Iranophone Alans in the Northern Caucasus and Eastern Europe. There is the original fragment about Alans religion of border of the 9th–10th centuries AD in the Schechter’s Text. According to translation by O. Pritsak and N. Golb, this fragment is the next: “[But in the days of Benjamin] the king of all the nations were stirred up against [Qazar], and they besieged the[m with the aid of] the king of Maqedon. Into battle went the king of “SY” and TWRQ[Y’...] [and] ‘BM and PYYNYL and Maqedon; only the king of Alan was in support of [the people of Qazar, for] some of them were observing the Law of the Jews⁴. These are the king [who] fought against Qazar[ia] but the king of Alan went against their and de[stroyed] it, so that there was no recovery” [Коковцов 1932, 117; Golb, Pritsak 1982, 125–144; Голб, Прицак 1997, 136–137, 140–141]. According to this written source, some time later the king of Alans went under the protectorate of Byzantium and then he refused the union with this Christian state in a benefit of the Khazars. Al-Mas‘udi confirmed this event: “After 320 AH (AD 932) they (the Alans) renounced Christianity and expelled the bishops and the priests whom the Byzantine emperor had previously sent to them” [Минорский 1963, 204].

Exactly, according to this information, O. Pritsak, V. A. Kuznetsov, K. Brook and some others researchers considered that during the certain periods of their history a part of the North Caucasian Alans heard confession of Judaism [Golb, Pritsak 1982, 125–144; Голб, Прицак 1997, 160; Кузнецов 1984, 114–115, 197–198; Brook 1999, 171]. Thus, the king of Alans was not the Jew during the Benjamin’s ruling. Only different surrounding groups of Alanian king (aristocrats and merchants) could be the Jews. In the beginning of the 10th century AD the king of Alans was looking for the religion yet and as a result he became under influence of the Khazar party of Alania where Judaism was spread.

The philological data confirms this supposition. So, according to V. I. Abaev, in Ossetian and Kabardian languages the term “Khazar” means “avaricious”, “valuable”, “tradesman” [Абаев 1968, 216–218]. V. A. Kuznetsov saw here the “people estimation” for “the Khazarian Jews who settled in the cities of Khazaria and subrepaired countries” [Кузнецов 1984, 114–115]. It is known that Alania was located near the Darjal Gate, where the important trade communications passed. It must have attracted the attention of the Khazar-Hebrew merchants. Exactly, this factor could promote to the participation of a part of the Alania cities population in the transcontinental trade where the Khazar-Hebrew trade groups had control. As a result, the certain Alanian social groups and the Jewish merchants could unite together and therefore the Jewish Proselytism took place and concerned a part of the Alanian society as well.

The further fate of them is of a special interest. So, in the 12th century AD Benjamin from Tudella wrote about the “Jews” in Alania where the local habitants were called by him the “Alans” [Три еврейских путешественника... 1881, 80–82]. It may be thought that Benjamin could use the term “Jews” not as an ethnic name but as the denotation for

the North Caucasian Alans who continued practicing Judaism. However, Alania is mentioned by the traveler only among the many lands whose Jewish population is subject to the authority of the Babylonian exilarch, without Binyamin having reached it himself.

The “Kyivan Letter” is of a special interest as well. Some modern scholars do not believe in authenticity of the “Kyivan Letter”. They think that this text was written several centuries later after the 10th century AD. However, other researchers have no doubts about the authenticity of this document. So, S. Yakerson, for paleographic reasons, set only an upper limit (12th century AD), mainly due to a lack of sufficient comparative material [Якерсон 2014, 208]. C. Zuckerman believed that the “Kyivan Letter” was written in the early 960s [Zuckerman 2011, 24]. A. Torpusman also believes in the authenticity of the “Kyivan Letter”. In spite of the pessimism of some scholars, he proposes his hypothesis of document origin several years ago. So, according to his arguments, the “Kyivan Letter” was written by a Jewish author in 960–962. Then this letter got to Egypt. A. Torpusman thinks that this written monument is still not fully understood [Торпусман 2019, 117–152].

There is “Judah, called SWRTH”⁵ among the signers of this letter [Golb, Pritsak 1982, 35–41; Голб, Прицак 1997, 31]. O. Pritsak considered that the carrier of this nickname was a descendant of the Savir people from the Eastern Caucasus who had a noticeable role in the early history of the Khazars in the 6th century AD [Golb, Pritsak 1982, 35–41; Голб, Прицак 1997, 56]. However, they were not mentioned already in the written sources in the 10th century AD. Therefore, the alternative explanation could be possible.

So, the term SWRTH may be connected with the “Sawartes-Asfales” from the 38th chapter of “De administrando imperio” by Constantine Porphyrogenitus. According to this information, after the Pecheneg invasion against the Ancient Hungarians in the end of the 10th century AD the first part of Hungarians migrated to the East in “Persia”. They were called by him the “Sawartes-Asfales”. The second group moved to the West in Atelkuzu land. During Constantine Porphyrogenitus the Western Hungarians sent the merchants to the Sawartes in “Persia” [Константин 1991, 158–161]. Maybe, these Sawartes were the “Sawardia” people in the Southern Caucasus mentioned by some Muslim and Armenian authors in the 9th–10th centuries AD [Marquart 1903, 37; Баладзори 1927, 1–42; Новосельцев 1991, 83; Минорский 1963, 214; Иованнес 1986, 112, 162].

Thus, according to the data of the “Kyivan Letter”, after the Pecheneg invasion against the Ancient Hungarians in the steppes of Eastern Europe some part of the Hungarian Sawartes could remain in the Khazar Khaganate. Some time later they could fill up an urban population, integrating into one local Judaic community. Then one descendant of these Sawartes could migrate to Kyiv with the Hebrews and Khazars together as a merchant from Khazaria.

The similar data were in the West European written sources as well. So, in the middle of the 13th century AD a West European traveler John de Plano Carpini mentioned the Jewish Brutaches twice among the peoples conquered by Mongols in his “Historia Mongalorum”. Firstly, this author located them among the Comans and Mordva: “Sassi, Iacobiti, Alani, siue Assi, Obesi siue Georgiani, Nestoriani, Armeni, Cangiti, Comani, Brutachi, qui sunt Iudaei, Mordui, Torci, Gazari”. Here we can see the next fragment: “Brutachi, qui sunt Iudaei” – the Brutaches who Jews [The Texts... 2008, 68; Карпини 1957, 57]. Secondly, Plano Carpini localizes clearly the Brutaches in the Caucasus: “A meridie habet Alanos, Circassos, Gazaros, Graeciam, Constantinopolin, ac terram Iberorum, Cathos, Brutachios, qui dicuntur esse Iudaei, caput radentes per totum, terram quoque Cithorum atque Georgianorum, Armeniorum, Turcorum” [The Texts... 2008, 97; Карпини 1957, 72]. So, the next word-combination is of a special interest: “Brutachios, qui dicuntur esse Iudaei, caput radentes per totum” – the Brutaches who are said to be Jewes shaving their heads all over.

Unfortunately, many scholars can not determinate the origin of the Brutaches. So, M. I. Artamonov considered that these Brutaches were the North Caucasian Jewish Khazars [Артамонов 1962, 611]. However, Plano Carpini mentioned also the Khazars

separately. The commentator of “Historia Mongalorum” N. P. Shastina believed that the Brutaches were the Burtases people who lived in the Middle Volga [Карпини 1957, 57, прим. 139]. Some researchers even had located the Burtases not only in the Middle Volga but also in the Caucasus. The grounds for it are, for example, the information of the Russian Chronicles about the Burtases in Mamai khan’s army among other nations from the North Eastern Black Sea region in 1380 [Попов 1973, 115]. According to N. M. Karamzin, the Burtans, who lived in Kuban basin in the 18th century, were the descendants of Brutaches. They were not the Jews but the “Hebrews” lived near them. N. M. Karamzin believed that these Burtans were the “Burtases” who took part in Kulikov battle in 1380, according to the Russian Chronicles [Карамзин 1992, 34, прим. 61]. The last supposition is fully plausible because the written sources did not mention directly the Burtases in the Northern Caucasus and also as the Jews. A Swedish traveler Tunmann had confirmed N. M. Karamzin’s information about the Burtans and their neighbor Jews in the end of the 18th century [Тунманн 1991, 65–66].

Therefore, in the second case, the Plano Carpini’s Brutaches were not a nation in the Middle Volga basin but they could be an ethnic group in the North Western Caucasus. N. M. Karamzin was the first who saw a consonance of two different ethnic names – the Brutaches and the Burtases. Maybe, the information about many Jews in the land of Brutaches allowed to Plano Carpini to consider that all Brutaches were the Jews. However, it was mistake.

The presence of Jews among the Brutaches of the North Western Caucasus compels to consider that a part of this nation could convert to Judaism in a certain historical period. The 9th–10th centuries AD were most favorable for it. Exactly, in this period the land of Brutaches was included in the Khazar Khaganate and many Jews lived in the neighboring Taman’ peninsula.

Conclusion

Thus, it was possible that in the Khazar Khaganate the Judasim was spread among not only the Hebrews but also the Khazar elite, who were the descendants of the founders of the Great Turk Khaganate, and a part of the “Natural” Khazars from merchants, and also a part of the North Caucasian Alans, the Hungarians-Sawartes, who survived in lands of the Khazar Khaganate, and the mysterious Brutaches of North Western Caucasus. As a result, we can believe that Judaism began to become an international religion in the Khazar state. The cause of it was the social status of its carriers that made the conversion to Judaism very prestigious.

¹ The basis for this article was a report “Ethnic Structure of the Jewish Proselyte Community in Khazaria” read in August 2017 in Jerusalem during the “17th World Congress of Jewish Studies”.

² فا اليهود فاملك و حاشيته و الخزر من جنسه

³ ورءيسهم الاعظم على دين اليهود وكذلك ابشا ومن يميل ميله من القواد والحظماء والبقية منهم على دين شبيه دين الاتراك

⁴ רק מלך אלן היה בעזרת אנשי קור כי

מקצתם היו שומרים תורת היהודים

⁵ יהודה המכונה סורטה

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**Етнічний склад юдейської прозелітської громади
в Хозарському каганаті**

У статті зосереджено увагу на тому, що в Хозарському каганаті в першій половині X ст. юдаїзм сповідували не лише євреї та частина хозарів, а й представники інших етнічних груп. Проте немає чітких уявлень про особливості поширення юдаїзму серед хозарів, бо

вони були етнічно строкаті. Принаймні відомо, що на чолі хозарського етносу були нащадки аристократів тюрків. З їхнього числа були каган і його заступник-бек. Завдяки інформації мусульманських авторів відомо, що вони сповідували юдаїзм. Проте про поширення юдаїзму серед власне хозарів можна висловлювати лише припущення. Цілком можливо, що із числа “справжніх” хозарів юдаїзм могли сповідувати купці, які в Києві становили одну громаду разом з етнічними євреями. Про це свідчать дані “Київського листа”. За відомостями Документа Шехтера, на межі IX–X ст. частина північнокавказьких аланів сповідували юдаїзм. Немає жодних підстав зараховувати до числа юдеїв царя аланів, хоча більш логічно вважати, що частина аланських купців могли наблизитись до хозарів і перейти в релігію останніх. Ще більший інтерес становить згадка в “Київському листі” Іуди на прізвище SWRTH. Цілком імовірно, що цей термін являв собою позначення для частини угорців, яких Костянтин Багрянородний назвав “саварти-асфали”. Не виключено, що один з їхніх нащадків залишився на території Хозарського каганату, де перейшов у юдаїзм. Але особливо увагу слід приділити брутахіям, яких у середині XIII ст. Платон Карпін охарактеризував як юдеїв, які мешкали на Північно-Західному Кавказі. У результаті вдалося дійти припущення, що найбільш сприятливим періодом для навернення брутахіїв до юдаїзму були IX – початок X ст., коли їхня територія перебувала під контролем хозарів. Отже, можна говорити про те, що в першій половині X ст. юдаїзм у Хозарській державі почав ставати інтернаціональною релігією.

Ключові слова: прозеліти; юдеї; хозари; Хозарський каганат; хозарсько-єврейські документи; алани; саварти; брутахії

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