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Barbarian Emperors? Aspects of the Byzantine Perception of the qaghan (chaganos) in the Earlier Middle Ages

As direct heirs to the Roman imperial tradition, Byzantine emperors had a strong claim to universal rule over the oikoumenē\(^1\) and according to a well-established tradition, they only acknowledged one ruler equal to them: the Persian king of kings, whose place was later accorded to the Muslim caliph.\(^2\) In the second half of the 6th century, however, the Constantinopolitan court came into contact with another type of “imperial” monarchs: the qaghans (or khagans) of the Eurasian steppe zone. These partly close, partly remote encounters have left their traces in a number of early and middle Byzantine sources,\(^3\) so that the Byzantine modes of perception of the steppe rulers can be discussed.\(^4\) Although the Eurasian nomadic polities of the earlier Middle Ages still occupy a rather marginal position in Medieval Studies in general,\(^5\) their relevance to the Byzantine civilization as more

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5 Notwithstanding the recent efforts to raise historical awareness of their important role in European Medieval history, cf. Curta, Florin (ed.): The Other Europe in the Middle Ages: Avars, Bulgars, Khazars and Cumans. (East Central
or less permanent neighbours has long been recognized.\textsuperscript{6} Research in this field does not only concentrate on the interaction between the nomads and Byzantium,\textsuperscript{7} but also on their perception in the East Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{8} On the other hand there is a flourishing tradition of profound turkological, archaeological and historical research specifically dedicated to the steppe peoples and their polities.\textsuperscript{9} Scholars have not only introduced and discussed


a wide range of sources, reaching from Chinese dynastic records and early Turkic inscriptions to literary testimonies in all major written languages of the Medieval Mediterranean world, but also developed structural concepts about the steppe empires, their economic base and their models of rulership, especially the qaghanate.\textsuperscript{10}

We shall not try to summarize the history of the qaghanal institution – as far as it is known – in this place, but only mention that the title qaghan (in Chinese \textit{ke-han})\textsuperscript{11} seems to occur in the Xianbei polity of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century CE for the first time and was later used by the Rou-ran, the supposed ancestors of the European Avars.\textsuperscript{12} When the Türk tribes\textsuperscript{13} successfully revolted against these overlords in 552, their leader Bumîn consequently claimed the qaghanate for himself.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the Avars retained the same in-
stitution when they established their control over Pannonia around 568. Avar domination over the Western margins of the Eurasian steppe zone proved much more persistent than the Türk Empire as the latter’s history is indeed troubled: de facto subdivided into an Eastern part under the direct rule of the qaghan from the Ashina-clan and a Western part headed by his relative, the yabghu, the strength of this empire depended on the shifting loyalties of tribes and tribal confederations and on its relations with powerful neighbours such as Tang China. The decomposition of the Western Türk polity led to the ascent of the long-lived and much studied Khazar qaghanate in northern Caucasus and the lower Volga region during the 7th century CE. The original structures of rulership in the Khazar polity seem to be derived from the Türk model.

The Türk tradition thus exercised a strong influence on patterns of rulership with various political forces of the Eurasian steppe zone. The Türk qaghanate has therefore been interpreted as the prototype of a specific model of sacralized monarchy in the steppe zone with strong imperial connotations. Among the criteria which gave steppe rulers a legitimate claim to qaghanal status, heavenly fortune (qut) surely played the central role. This became particularly visible by successful conquests. Further aspects having been proposed in research are e.g. the possession of sacred places (mountains or forests) and a direct connection to the charismatic Ashina

16 See Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), pp. 121–124 for a discussion of the origins of this probably non-Turkic name and related questions.
18 Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), p. 71: “the title qağan, which we may translate as ‘Emperor of the nomadic, steppe peoples’”; Pritsak, “The Distinctive Features” (as n. 10), p. 754: “The qağan was an autocrat (bilgä) and sole intermediary between the sedentary empire (China, Byzantium) and the ēl, both as a negotiator (peace, money, trade) and a war leader.”
clan (which does of course not apply to the Avar qaghans). These and other criteria can certainly be evidenced in several cases, but it should be stressed that the defining characteristics of a qaghan have never been fixed in written form by the nomads. Moreover, there were some powerful and long-lived political entities in the steppe zone which seemingly ignored the qaghanal institution, such as those of the Pechenegs and the Cumans. Their emergence in the 10th and 11th centuries in fact marks the very end of the occurrence of qaghans in the Byzantine sources.

Consulting Gyula Moravcsik’s Byzantinoturcica, one easily finds out that Byzantine historiographers used the term chaganos (χαγάνος) regularly with respect to rulers of three ethnika: the Turkoi (a rather ambiguous term), the Khazars and the Avars. A first group of authors comprises Menander Protector, Theophylaktos Simokates and the compiler of the “Chronicon Paschale”, all of them active in the later 6th and / or earlier 7th centuries and thus not yet acquainted with the Khazars. A second group consists of the “Short History” written by the patriarch Nikephoros and the “Chronography” attributed to Theophanes the Confessor, both of them were composed at the turn from the 8th to the 9th centuries. Most occurrences of the qaghan in later sources derive more or less directly from these texts.

20 For the political structure of these two polities see Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), pp. 264–281.
23 Ibid., pp. 334–339, pp. 344–347. The various discussions concerning the authorship and the sources of the “Chronography” are now concisely summarized by Conterno, Maria: La “descrizione dei tempi” all’alba dell’espansione islam-
The historical work of Menander Protector, which covers the years from 558 to 582, has only fragmentarily been preserved. Its author mainly uses the unspecific term *hēgemōn* when referring to a barbarian ruler such as Sandilchos, chief of the Utigurs, the ruler of the Hephthalites, but also the Merovingian king Sigibert. The same terminology can occasionally be found for the rulers of the Türk and the Avars, but Menander gives their titles more precisely. The Avar leader Baian is more often than not called *Chaganos* (*Χαγάνος*) (not necessarily specified by an ethnic attribute). As a major protagonist of diplomatic contacts and military confrontation with the Romans, he is often just called by his name: ὁ Βαϊανός. This implies, however, that the name of this qaghan was well-known in Constantinople, which stands in striking contrast to the fact that none of the subsequent Avar qaghans is mentioned by name in any historiographical record.


26 Menander, frg. 4,3, p. 46: ὁ Κάτουλφος κωλύων τὸν τῶν Ἑφθαλιτῶν ἡγεμόνι.

27 Id., frg. 11, p. 126: ἐσήμηνεν ὁ Βαιανὸς Σιγισβέρτῳ τῷ τῶν Φράγγων ἡγεμόνι.

28 Cf. Id., frg. 4,2, p. 44: ὁ Σιλζίβουλος ὁ τῶν Τούρκων ἡγεμόνι.

29 Id., frg. 8, p. 94: the Avar envoys sent to Constantinople refer to their qaghan as τὸν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἡγεμόνα; frg. 12,6, p. 138: ὁ Βαιανὸς ὁ τῶν Ἀβάρων ἡγεμῶν; frg. 21, p. 192: the emperor Tiberius sends an embassy to Βαϊανὸν τὸν ἡγεμόνα τῶν Ἀβάρων.

30 Cf. Id., frg. 5,3, p. 50; frg. 27,3, p. 240; frg. 12,5, p. 136: Bonus, the commander of Sirmium (perhaps *magister militum per Illyricum*) sends a message to Baian, addressing him ὁ Χαγάνε.

In a fragment concerning the Roman-Avar confrontations of 579, Menander nearly exclusively uses the term ὁ Χαγάνος to designate Baian, who is nevertheless characterized very negatively and accused of having broken the treaty with the Romans in a shameless, most barbarian way (βαρβαρώτατα). While the confrontation with the Avars usually plays on a local scene involving only generals or governors, in this passage the emperor (Tiberius II) is mentioned several times (as basileus or autokrator) and thus figures as the qaghan’s main antagonist. The relationship between the two monarchs is explicitly referred to in a previous fragment concerning the mission of the Avar envoy Targites to Constantinople. He declared to the emperor Justin II: “I am here, o basileus, sent by your son. For you are truly the father of our lord Baianos.” The idea of fictitious parental relationships between rulers is a common feature of ‘international’ relations in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, specifically associated with Byzantium. According to Menander, however, it is not the Byzantine side that proposed such a concept, but the Avar ruler who pursues an obvious goal: that the emperor should show his “paternal love” (στοργή) and give to his “son” what the son is entitled to: τὰ τοῦ παιδός. Besides this utilitarian logic,
Menander’s report seems to reveal that the Avar qaghan did not insist on his own hierarchical superiority with respect to the basileus, nor did he raise claims to universal rule.

The case of the Türk Empire is clearly different. Apart from two short fragments, Menander above all includes extensive accounts of two ambassadorial exchanges with them, which took place under changing political circumstances. The first exchange was initiated by Ištämi, the yabgu qaghan of the Western Türk called Sizabul in the Greek source, in about 567 in order to establish an alliance between the Türk and the Romans against Persia.36 The account on Valentinus’ mission around 576, however, shows clear signs of alienation since the Türk ruler had been informed about treaties between Byzantium and the Avars, whom he considered disobedient subjects who should be punished.37

In the account of the first Roman mission, led by Zemarchos,38 Menander refers to Sizabul usually only by his name, but he once states that Zemarchos arrived at his destination, the “White Mountain” (Ektag / Aqdagh)39, which was the place “where the qaghan personally was”.40 The reception

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38 For Zemarchos, his mission and its sources (besides Menander also in the “Ecclesiastical History” of John of Ephesos) see Dobrovits, Mihály: “The Altaic World through Byzantine Eyes: Some Remarks on the Historical Circumstances of Zemarchus’ Journey to the Turks (AD 569–570)”. Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 64, 2011, pp. 373–409; see also Carile, “I nomadi” (as n. 8), pp. 58–61.

39 Dobrovits, “The Altaic World” (as n. 38), pp. 386–387 shows that the term can refer to any snowy mountain.

40 Menander, frg. 10,3, p. 118, ll. 21–23: Τούτων δὲ ταύτῃ γεγενημένων ἔπειτα ἐπορεύοντο ξίν τοίς ἐς τὸ τοιόνδε τεταγμένοις, ἵνα ὁ Χαγάνος αὐτὸς ἦν, ἐν ὅρει τινὶ λεγομένῳ Εκτάγ, ως ὃν εἶποι χρυσοῦν ὄρος Ἐλλην ἀνήρ.
is described in detail. Sizabul was sitting on a golden wheeled “kathedra” in a tent when the ambassador officially greeted him and expressed the Romans’ desire of friendship with the “tribes of the Turks” (τῶν Τούρκων τὰ φύλα). The qaghan was addressed as “ruler of so many peoples” (ὁ τοσούτων ἐθνῶν ἴγμενῶν) instead of any specific title, but the fact that Zemarchos calls the Byzantine emperor “our Great emperor” [emphasis S.K.] (ὁ καθ᾿ ἡμᾶς βασιλεὺς ὁ μέγας) underlines the imperial connotation of this address. It is thus perhaps not accidental that at the onset of this chapter, Menander states that the growing fortunes of the Turks determined their Sogdian subjects to advise their (i.e. the Türk) basileus to send an embassy to Persia. The title basileus is usually strictly reserved for the two rulers of Rome and Persia in Menander’s work. Therefore, this passage clearly alludes to the imperial quality of the Türk qaghan or, more precisely, the yabghu qaghan, since Menander seems not to be aware of the existence of a supreme qaghan of even higher rank in the East. Instead, he certainly depended on the information given by Ištämi’s Sogdian envoy Maniach in Constantinople when being asked for the structure of rulership among the Türk and their territories (περὶ τῆς τῶν Τούρκων ἡγεμονίας τε καὶ χώρας). Maniach explained that there were four parts (ἡγεμονίαι) among them, but the supreme rule over the whole people (κράτος τοῦ Ξύμπαντος ἐθνους) lay in the hands of Sizabul alone. If this was not a bold lie, should we perhaps assume that the supreme rank among the Ashina clan had indeed (temporarily) devolved to Ištämi as senior ruler at some unknown date?

42 Cf. Menander, frg. 10,3, p. 118, ll. 27–42.
44 Menander, frg. 10,1, p. 110, ll. 2–5: ὡς γὰρ τὰ Τούρκων ἐπὶ μέγα ἤρθη, οἱ Σογδαῖαι οἱ πρὸ τοῦ μὲν Ἐφθαλίται, τηνικαῦτα δὲ Τούρκων κατηκοῦσιν, τοῦ σφῶν βασιλέως ἐδέοντο πρεσβείαν στεῖλαι ὡς Πέρσας.
45 Id., frg. 10,1, p. 114, ll. 68–73. Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), p. 128, interprets Maniach’s statement in another way: “the Byzantines learned that Σιλζίβουλος was the supreme ruler of the Western branch of the Türk Empire which appears to have been broken up into four administrative units.” The text, however, does
In the fragment concerning Valentinus’ mission, the image of Türk rulership is much more polycentric: Menander repeatedly refers to the leaders (hēgemones or proestōtas) of the Turks in plural, not using the term chaganos or any other title. Instead of a plurality of Turkic tribes or peoples, the Türk are now referred to as one Scythian tribe that has subdivided its land into eight parts (instead of four). The Roman envoy is received in audience by Silzibul’s (Sizabul’s) son Turxanthos, who later sends him to his brother Tardu residing at mount Ektal. Furthermore, a most ancient monarch Arsilas is mentioned. The imperial character of Türk rulership in Byzantine eyes is also confirmed by the content of the negotiations: Valentinus tries to convince the Türk to keep friendship with the Romans (implying equal standing), but Turxanthos invokes the “invincible might” of the Türk and purposefully declares that he knows where the rivers Danube and Dnepr are. The qaghan thus delineates potential territorial claims, especially if the Romans collaborated with the Uarhonitai who call themselves Avars, but were considered “slaves” of the Türk.

This deep antagonism between the Türk and the Avars – accused of having usurped the Avar name because of its prestige – is even more clearly not refer to a distinction between Eastern and Western Türk, and Golden also underlines (p. 131) that in the time of İstāmi the Western Türk Empire did not represent “an independent political entity”.

46 Menander, frg. 19,1, p. 170, ll. 15–16: Σκύθας ἄνδρας ἐκ τοῦ φύλου τῶν ἐπιλεγομένων Τούρκων, and p. 172, ll. 32–33: ἐν ὀκτὼ γὰρ μοίρας διεδάσαντο τὰ ἐκεῖνη ἄπαντα, οἷς γε τοῦ φύλου τῶν Τούρκων ἔλαχε προεστάναι.

47 Beckwith, Christopher: “The Frankish Name of the King of the Turks”. Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi 15, 2006/7, pp. 5–12, here pp. 7–8, has argued that this name in fact stands for the title *türkwać (ruler of the Türk) instead of a meaningless *türkšad. The title has also left traces in the so-called Fredegarc-chronicle.

48 Menander frg. 19,1, p. 178, ll. 133–135. For Tardu, son of İstāmi, ruler of the Western Türk empire (575–603) and finally even qaghan in the East (600–603), see Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), pp. 131–133; Scharlipp, Die frühen Türken (as n. 13), pp. 27–28.

49 Menander frg. 19,1, p. 172, l. 34: Ἀρσίλας δὲ ὄνομα τῷ παλαιτέρῳ μονάρχῳ Τούρκων. Arsilas has been identified with the dynastic name Ashina by Christopher Beckwith, see Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), p. 121.

50 Menander frg. 19,1, p. 172, ll. 35–49.

51 Ibid., p. 172, l. 50-p. 174, l. 74.
outlined by Theophylaktos Simokates, who continued Menander’s work in his “Oikumenikê Historia”. His famous excursus on the Scythian peoples has often been commented on and nevertheless remains partially cryptic. It is introduced by a letter sent “in this summer” to the emperor Maurikios by “the one who in the East is praised as Chaganos by the Türk”. The title “qaghan” is thus not explained to the reader, but it becomes clear that its holder is highly venerated. Theophylaktos furthermore cites the letter’s inscriptio (epigraphê) literally: “to the basileus of the Romans from the Chaganos, the great lord of the seven generations and ruler of the seven


53 The letter’s date is controversial, although it is generally agreed upon that the events mentioned by Theophylaktos in the surrounding chapters belong to 595. Therefore Schreiner, Theophylaktos (as n. 52), p. 341, n. 951, pleads for 595, but Whitby, Michael: The Emperor Maurice and his Historian. Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare. Clarendon Press: Oxford 1988, pp. 315–316 prefers a much earlier date shortly after 580 for the letter, as did Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 383–384 with regard to the oral victory reports, but not to the actual letter, which he dates to 600. Against such a rather unconvincing split Harmatta, János: “The Letter Sent by the Turk Qayan to the Emperor Mauricius”. Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 41, 2001, pp. 109–118, tries to show that all events mentioned in the letter can be dated to the years between 580 and 599, this last one serving as terminus post quem for the letter’s redaction (p. 118).

climates of the Oikumene”\textsuperscript{55}. This \textit{intitulatio} does not correspond to the usual style of Türk rulers – in contrast to the Orkhon inscriptions from the Second Eastern qaghanate, references to heaven as the source of legitimate rule are curiously absent – but it seems to reflect the Persian royal title.\textsuperscript{56} But with regard to the Byzantine perception it seems interesting that Theophylaktos quotes this part of the letter extensively,\textsuperscript{57} while he only gives a paraphrase of its main content, a message of various victories obtained by the qaghan over the Hephthalites, the (Eastern) Avar and Oghur peoples and finally against the “rebel” Turum.\textsuperscript{58} This last victory, the actual cause of the qaghan’s message to the emperor,\textsuperscript{59} now allows the qaghan to rule felicitously and conclude treaties with the Tabghast (i.e. Sui-China). The ideal state of perfect peace (\textit{βαθείαν γαλήνην}) and unshakeable rule (\textit{ἀστασίαστον ἀρχήν}) is invoked.\textsuperscript{60} All these characteristics seem to imply that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Theophylacti Historiae VII 7,8, p. 257, ll. 5–6: τῷ βασιλεὶ τῶν Ῥωμαιῶν ὁ Χαγάνος ὁ μέγας δεσπότης ἐπτὰ γενεῶν καὶ κύριος κλημάτων τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐπτά.
\item \textsuperscript{56} This has extensively been discussed by Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 317–325.
\item \textsuperscript{57} It should be noted that the name of the destinatary precedes the qaghan’s long \textit{intitulatio}.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Theophylacti Historiae VII 7,8–9 (Hephthalites and Avars), VII 7,13 (Oghur) and VII 8–11 (civil war). For historical interpretations of the external victories see Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 325–338, 344–345. Turum is identified with qaghan Dulan (588–599) of the Eastern Türk by both Harmatta, “The Letter” (as n. 53), p. 115 and de la Vaissière, “Maurice” (as n. 54), p. 223, independently.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 372–373, has made an important distinction between the external victories as representatives of the conquest of the four parts of the world (thus reflecting not necessarily personal victories of this qaghan, but of the Türk in general) and the recent defeat of the rebel as actual cause. Cf. Harmatta, “The Letter” (as n. 53), p. 111, who furthermore reckons the letter among the “literary genre” of triumphal reports familiar in the Near Eastern world. For the historical background of Nili’s victory see de la Vaissière, “Maurice” (as n. 54), pp. 222–224, for Tardu’s battles see Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 372–386; Harmatta, “The Letter”, pp. 115–118.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Cf. Theophylacti Historiae VII 9,1, p. 260, ll. 25–29: ὁ μὲν οὖν τῶν Τούρκων Χαγάνος τὸν ἐμφύλιον καταλυσάμενος πόλεμον εὐδαιμόνως ἐχειρισθέντα τὰ πράγματα, ποιεῖται δὲ καὶ συνήθης πρὸς τοὺς Ταυγήστα, ὧπως βαθεῖαν πάντοθεν τὴν γαλήνην ἐμπορευόμενος ἀστασίαστον τὴν ἀρχήν καταστήσατο.
\end{itemize}
the sender of this letter exercised monarchical power over the Türk, but such a conclusion is immediately contradicted by the mention of three further Great Qaghans who had helped the sender to obtain his victory. Their names are given, but unfortunately, there is no hint to their hierarchical position or place of residence. Nevertheless, Theophylaktos displays – like Menander – a vivid interest in the political structures of the Türk Empire and a certain appreciation for its rulers who were located far away from the actual Byzantine zone of influence.

Instead, the person usually alluded to by the title “qaghan” in the “Histories” is the ruler of the Avars, but Theophylaktos follows the Türk interpretation about their unlawful, usurped claim to the qaghanal title and the arrogation of the Avar name by some tribes among the Uar and Chunni on their flight to the west. The Avars’ nearly permanent confrontation with the Roman Empire is outlined in a long series of episodes, among them the legation of the physician Theodoros to the Avars who warned the qaghan not to push his military luck, referring to the classical tale about pharaoh Sesostris and the wheel. Theodoros thus manages to tame the ambitions of a ruler who is depicted as the prototype of a barbarian. In another situation, however, he is praised as an example of humanity when supplying the starving Roman army near Tomis with plenty of provisions for the Easter Days of 598. Instead, it is the Roman emperor Maurikios whom the chronicler

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61 Ibid., VII 8,9, p. 259, ll. 21–23: πρεσβεύεται ὁ Χαγάνος πρὸς ἑτέρους τρεῖς μεγάλους Χαγάνους· ταῦτα δὲ τούτοις ὀνόματα, Σπαρζευγοῦν καὶ Κουναξολὰν καὶ Τουλδίχ. Tuldich is identified with the Eastern qaghan Duli (599–608) by de la Vaissière, “Maurice” (as n. 54), p. 223; for further proposals of identification see Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 376–378 and Harmatta, “The Letter”, pp. 115–116, proposing two great grandsons of Tardu’s as his allies which obviously causes chronological difficulties.

62 Theophylacti Historia VII 8,1–6, pp. 258–259: Theophylaktos states that the Avars should rightly be called Pseudavars: οἱ Ψευδάβαροι (λέγειν γὰρ αὐτοὺς αὐτοὺς οἰκειότερον). For a critical analysis of this myth about the origin of the European Avars see Pohl, Die Awaren (as n. 15), pp. 28–37; Haussig, “Theophylakts Exkurs” (as n. 52), pp. 345–371.

63 Theophylacti Historia VI 11, pp. 242–244.

64 Ibid., VII 13, 3–5, pp. 267, leading to the conclusion: διὰ τοῦτο μέχρι τῶν χρόνων τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς τῶν παραδοξολογουμένων τὰ τῆς βαρβαρικῆς φιλανθρωπίας ταύτης καθέστηκεν. Cf. Pohl, Die Awaren (as n. 15), pp. 152–153.
Theophanes holds responsible for the horrible fate of Roman captives after the combats at Drizipera: they were massacred because the avaricious emperor did not pay the ransom demanded by the qaghan.\textsuperscript{65} Such episodes have repeatedly been cited by later Byzantine authors: Ioannes Tzetzes refers to the Theodoros-story in his monumental, but rather eclectic “Historiai”\textsuperscript{66} and Michael Psellos recounts the ransom-story in his “Short History” (\textit{Historia Syntomos}).\textsuperscript{67} For Tzetzes the barbarian ruler is just “the qaghan”, and Psellos seems to believe that this was a military leader. It is perhaps revealing that the “Suda Encyclopaedia”, compiled in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, cites episodes from Theophylaktos involving the \textit{chaganos} in several lemmata, but under the lemma “\textit{chaganos}” itself, this opus magnum of Byzantine scholarship fails to give a definition, and we only read: “this one was …”\textsuperscript{68}

In Theophylaktos’ account the term \textit{chaganos} is frequently used thanks to the fact that the Avar ruler is never called by his personal name. This is likewise the case in the so-called “Easter Chronicle” compiled probably still during the reign of emperor Herakleios (610–641). This work does not contain information on the Türk of Central Asia, but the Avar qaghan appears prominently, especially in the account on the siege laid to Constantinople in 626 by the allied Persian and Avar forces.\textsuperscript{69} Portrayed as archenemy of

\textsuperscript{65} De Boor, Carolus (ed.): \textit{Theophanis Chronographia}, vol. 1. Teubner: Leipzig 1883, AM 6092, pp. 279–280; see also Schreiner, Peter (ed.): \textit{Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken}, vol. 1: \textit{Einleitung und Text}. (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 12/1). Verlag der ÖAW: Vienna 1975, Chronicle 1, nr. 13, pp. 43–44. The qaghan is characterized as enraged, but not as a cruel barbarian in this context.

\textsuperscript{66} Leone, Petrus Aloysius (ed.): \textit{Ioannis Tzetzae Historiae}. Libr. Scientifica Ed.: Naples 1968, ch. III 240, p. 93 and IV 573, p. 149 – both verses also contain the word \textit{Chaganos}.


the Romans, the Avar ruler is often endued with insulting attributes, such as godless (ἄθεος) or accursed (ἐπικατάρατος),\(^{70}\) but he finally bears witness to the divine protection of the city, since he himself sees a woman – the Theotokos – appearing on the walls.\(^{71}\) With this crucial event the Avar qaghans practically disappear from the Byzantine sources. There is a last reference to them in the report on the year 677 (AM 6169) in Theophanes’ “Chronographia”: after the conclusion of a peace treaty with the Arabs, the basileus received a number of ambassadors from other rulers, who requested the confirmation of peace and friendship. These legates came from the various inhabitants of the West, from the kings, exarchs and gastaldi. But at the head of the enumeration we find the Avar qaghan,\(^{72}\) who is thus


71 *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 725, ll. 9–11: Καὶ τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν ὁ ἄθεος Χαγάνος τῷ καυρῷ τοῦ πολέμου ὅτι ἔγω θεωρῶ γυναῖκα συμφωνοῦσαν περιτρέχουσαν εἰς τὸ τεῖχος μόνην οὖσαν. The intervention of the virgin is also the leading motif in Théodore’s homily, who indirectly evokes the qaghan as a witness of the virgin’s deeds, see Makk, *Traduction* (as n. 70), ch. 34, p. 88 (text) and p. 32 (transl.). On liturgical repercussions of the virgin’s ‘intervention’ during the siege see Peltomaa, Leena Mari: “Role of the Virgin Mary at the Siege of Constantinople in 626”. *Scrinium. Revue de Patrologie* 5, 2009, pp. 294–309.

72 *Theophanis Chronographia* (as n. 65), AM 6169, p. 356: ταῦτα μαθόντες οἱ τὰ ἐσπέρια οἰκοδόντες μέρη, ὅ τε Χαγάνος τῶν Ἀβάρων καὶ οἱ ἑπέκεινα ῥήγες, ἐξαρχοὶ τε καὶ κάσταλοι καὶ οἱ ἔξοχοται τῶν πρὸς τὴν δύσιν ἔθνον, διὰ πρεσβευτῶν δόρα τῶν βασιλεῖ οὐκ ἀπελθοῦσιν ἐν ἰερημίαν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἀγάπην κυρωθῆναι ῥήματος. Pohl, Die

perceived as the most eminent among the Western barbarians, but not as a truly imperial ruler.

Emperor Herakleios did not only inherit the confrontation with the Avars in the West from his predecessors, he also renewed the ‘alliance’ between the Romans and the Türk in the East. 73 Their mutual military cooperation during the emperor’s long campaign against the Persians is first mentioned under the year 625 (AM 6117) 74 when Theophanes states that the “Turks from the east called Chazareis” 75 invaded the Persian lands from the North through the Caspian Gates. Their leader Ziebel is char-
acterized as second in dignity after the qaghan.\textsuperscript{76} He has now convincingly been identified with Sipi, the “\textit{xiao kehan}” (little qaghan), who later in 628 killed the \textit{yabghu qaghan} Tong (in 628) and was himself ousted in 629 and killed in 630.\textsuperscript{77} Theophanes gives a rather detailed report on Ziebel’s meeting with the \textit{basileus}: while the Türk leader did obeisance to Herakleios, his whole army stretched on the ground to honour the emperor,\textsuperscript{78} Ziebel presented his son to him and enjoyed the conversation.\textsuperscript{79} The patriarch Nikephoros basically refers to the same events in his “\textit{Short History}”, but he does not identify these Turks with the Khazars nor does he give the name of their lord (\textit{τὸν Τούρκων κύριον}).\textsuperscript{80} Nevertheless, his independent report on the meeting is more detailed than that of Theophanes. Nikephoros tells us that the emperor, having received the extremely great honour (\textit{τὸ ὑπερβάλλον τῆς τιμῆς}) of the prostration of the entire Türk army,\textsuperscript{81} responded by similar gestures: he called Ziebel his son, crowned him with his own crown (\textit{στέφανος}), presented him with rich gifts after a banquet, among them an imperial garment (\textit{στολῇ βασιλικῇ}),\textsuperscript{82} and finally

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\textsuperscript{76} Theophanis Chronographia, p. 316, ll. 2–3: \textit{σὺν τῷ ἐαυτῷ στρατηγῷ Ζιέβηλ, δευτέρῳ ὄντι τοῦ Χαγάνου τῇ ἀξίᾳ}.

\textsuperscript{77} De la Vaissière, Étienne: “Ziebel qaghan identified”. In: Zuckerman, Constantine (ed.): \textit{Constructing the Seventh Century}. (Travaux et mémoires 17). Association des Amis du Centre d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance: Paris 2013, pp. 761–768.

\textsuperscript{78} Theophanis Chronographia, AM 6117, p. 316, ll. 5–11, esp. ll. 8–10: \textit{πᾶς δὲ ὁ λαὸς τῶν Τούρκων εἰς γην πεσόντες πρηνεῖς, ἔκταθέντες ἐπὶ στόμα τὸν βασιλέα ἑτίμων τιμήν τὴν παρ’ ἔθνεις ξένην}.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 316, ll. 11–13: \textit{προσήνεγκε δὲ ὁ Ζιέβηλ καὶ τὸν ἑαυτὸν ύιόν ἀρχηγεύνειν τῷ βασιλέῖ, ἥδωνόμενος τοῖς τούτου λόγοις καὶ ἐκπληττόμενος τὴν τε θέαν καὶ τὴν πρόνησιν αὐτοῦ}.


\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p. 54, ll. 20–24.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 54, l. 25-p. 55, l. 32. The crowning of the Türk commander with the \textit{basileus’} own crown is a rather singular gesture in Byzantium. The close parallels between this encounter and the meeting between Bolesław Chrobry and Otto III at Gniezno in 1000 according to the description given by the Gallus Anonymus in the early 12th century have already been recognized by Wasilews-
even promised his daughter Eudokia in marriage to him. It is significant that Herakleios calls his daughter “Augusta of the Romans” (Ῥωμαίου Αὐγούστα), since Eudokia indeed bore this official title. She appeared on Byzantine coins together with her father and the co-emperor Herakleios the Younger, and her bust was only removed from the coins in 629 when Eudokia received her father’s order to depart from Constantinople and join her husband. The marriage project was, however, never actually put into effect due to Ziebel’s assassination. Theophanes perhaps deliberately omitted all these features of Roman-barbarian relations from his report on the events – the difference between his version, which shows the


Türk humbly obedient towards the emperor, and that of Nikephoros, who emphasizes symbolic elements of reciprocity in Byzantine-Türk relations, is too significant to be merely accidental.

The identification of the Turkic forces with the Khazars, though undoubtedly anachronistic, is not only found in Theophanes’ “Chronography”, but also in the “History of the Caucasian Albanians”, compiled some centuries later by the Armenian chronicler Ms’s Dasxuranc’i.85 Dasxuranc’i based these parts of his account on two sources. One of them is a rather contemporary report on the deeds of the Albanian katholikos Viroy, which denigrates the invaders and their atrocities, but actually does not call them Khazars.86 This account also mentions the genesis of the Roman-Türkic alliance in the war against the Persians via a Roman embassy sent to Ĵebu Xak’an (i.e. the yabghu qaghan),87 which established a treaty. This finally led to the campaign of the Türk army under the command of the šat’, the nephew of the “king of the north”,88 who is characterized as an imperial ruler of universal ambition.89 Dasxuranc’i’s

86 For the structure of the report see Zuckerman, “The Khazars and Byzantium” (as n. 75), pp. 404–410: the chapters II 12–16 belong to the report on Viroy; most notably his leading role in a large Albanian delegation to the Türk šat’ that obtained the restoration of peace from this ruler, cf. Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), ch. II 14, pp. 92–102 (all this happens after the death of Chosrau). Zuckerman, pp. 410–412, shows that the invaders are not identified as Khazars, but as “Turks” in this source.
87 Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), ch. II 12, p. 87. The yabghu is characterized as “viceroy of the king of the north who was second to him in kingship”. The “king of the north” is therefore identified with the Qaghan of the Eastern Türks, who does not actually enter the scene. The Roman embassy is dated to 625 by Zuckerman, “The Khazars and Byzantium” (as n. 75), pp. 412–414.
88 Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), ch. II 12, pp. 87–88. Although this campaign is dated to the “beginning of the thirty-seventh year [of Xosrov]”, i.e. summer 626, it obviously belongs to 627 as an immediate prelude to the fall of Chosrau: see Zuckerman, “The Khazars and Byzantium” (as n. 75), p. 415.
89 Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), p. 88, in a message of this “king of the north” to Chosrau: “the king of the north, the lord of the whole world, your king and the king of kings, says to you: [...]”. Chosrau directs his answer to “my brother Xak’an” whom he reminds of the long tradition of mutual respect and
second source only shortly mentions this first Northern invasion ("in great hordes the Khazars") and dates the second one, led by Ĵebu Xak’an himself, to the year of Chosrau’s end. During this campaign the Roman and the Türk rulers met outside the walls of the besieged town of Tiflis, but did not succeed to conquer the city and were instead mocked by its inhabitants. The Türk took their revenge in the following year, but their invasion likewise came to an end: after another victory over a Persian army in 629, terrible news arrived from Ĵebu Xak’an himself who had overdrawn his fortune. This apparently caused the invaders to withdraw from the Caucasian region.

The direct cooperation between Herakleios and the yabghu qaghan thus remained an episode, but since this episode concerned a relationship between the basileus and a nomadic ruler of imperial position, it could later easily be projected onto the Khazars as the new imperial factor in the Western steppe.

Alliances sealed by intermarriage: “for we were allied with each other through our sons and daughters”.

90 According to Zuckerman, “The Khazars and Byzantium” (as n. 75), pp. 407–410, this source comprises the chapters II 9–11 and can be identified as the initial part of the Eulogy of prince Juanšer of Albania continued from ch. II 18 onwards. The first Khazar attack is mentioned at the beginning of ch. II 11, pp. 81–82.

91 See Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), ch. II 11, pp. 83–86. The report ends with their withdrawal from Tiflis. The scene of mockery conveys some physical features of Ĵebu Xak’an: his typical facial features, accentuated by the pumpkin caricature, were missing eyelashes and beard and a paltry moustache – perhaps a striking contrast to Herakleios with his impressive beard emphasized on the coins.

92 In contrast to Zuckerman’s reconstruction, two sieges of Tiflis should clearly be distinguished, as has correctly been seen by Ludwig, Dieter: Struktur und Gesellschaft des Chazaren-Reiches im Licht der schriftlichen Quellen. University of Münster, thesis 1982, pp. 121–122: one in 627 that failed after the mockery and caused a temporary retreat of the Turks while Herakleios proceeded to Mesopotamia alone (all this is described in II 11, pp. 85–86), and another in 628 (or 629), which led to the fall of the city on the hands of the Turks (described in II 14, pp. 94–95, after the end of Chosrau). Theophanes is thus perfectly justified in likewise mentioning the Türks’ retreat before the actual Persian campaign in winter 627/8 (contra Zuckerman, p. 416). There is no reason to believe that the Türk army accompanied Herakleios to Persia in the decisive months.

93 On the last battle between Türk (“Khazar”) and Persian troops see Dasxuranci, The History (as n. 85), ch. II 16, p. 105; the news from the yabghu are mentioned ibid., p. 106.
Their polity actually took shape only in the second half of the 7th century at the expense of Kuvrat’s extensive but shortlived “Great Bulgaria” in the Ponto-Caucasian area and after the collapse of the Western Türk qaghanate, which had succumbed to the imperial Tang in 659. From that time onwards both Khazars and Bulgars became the principal political protagonists among the Northern peoples in contact with Byzantium for several centuries.

In contrast to the Avar rulers of the 6th and early 7th centuries, Khazar qaghans are rarely mentioned in Byzantine chronicles, but they also usually remain unnamed. The two most prominent situations concern the adven-

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97 The Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit. 1. Abteilung (641–867). De Gruyter: Berlin 2000/1 contains six qaghans of the Khazars. There are four anonymi among them: see vol. 5, #11103, p. 428 (the qaghan of the “Life of John of Gotthia”), #11187, p. 452 (a qaghan mentioned in “De administrando imperio”), #11573, p. 547 (the qaghan ruling in the 830s, demanding Byzantine help to build the fortress of Sarkel) and #12023, p. 658 (the qaghan of the “Vita Constantini”). The names of the two others depend on quite uncertain, non-historiographical sources: Theodoros or Virchor for the father-in-law of Emperor Constantine V (vol. 4, #7524, pp. 411–412) and Ibuzēros Gliabanos for that of Justinian II (vol. 2, #2654, p. 162).
tures of Justinian II after his deposition in 695, when he fled to the Khazar territory and was married to a daughter of the qaghan, and the marriage of Constantine V to another Khazar bride. Referring to these events, the patriarch Nikephoros uses a changing terminology with respect to the Khazar ruler, who is called ἰδειγμόν, ἀρχων or κύριος, but the author explains that the Khazars call their ruler chaganos. Theophanes instead regularly employs the title chaganos, sometimes with an ethnic denomination (tōn Chazarōn). He furthermore uses the territorial denomination Chazaria rather frequently in the context of events belonging to the 8th century.


99 This second Byzantine-Khazar marriage has received little attention in Byzantine sources, perhaps due to their bias against the so-called iconoclast emperors. See Dunlop, The History (as n. 98), p. 177; Artamonov, Istorija (as n. 98), p. 233; Noonan, “Byzantium and the Khazars” (as n. 98), p. 113.

100 Nikephoros, Short History (as n. 80), ch. 42, p. 100, ll. 8–9: αἰτεῖ δὲ τὸν τῶν Χαζάρων ἡγεμόνα (χαγάνους δὲ τούτους αὐτοῖς καλοῦσιν); ibid., l. 14: τὸν τῶν Χαζάρων δῆροντα; ch. 45, p. 110, l. 48: τὸ χαγάνως; ibid., l. 62: ὡς τὸν κύριον τῶν Χαζάρων; ch. 63, l. 130, ll. 1–2: ἐκπέμπει ὁ βασιλεὺς πρὸς τὸν τοῦ ἐθνοῦς τῶν Χαζάρων ἡγούμενον (with reference to the marriage negotiations for Constantine V). In one case (ch. 45, p. 110, l. 67) the qaghan is simply called “the Khazar” (πρὸς τὸν Χάζαρον).

101 The title is repeatedly used in the long account of Justinian II’s comeback and final downfall, see Theophanis Chronographia (as n. 65), AM 6196-AM 6203, pp. 372–380, and furthermore p. 407, l. 5; p. 426, l. 16 (both discussed in the following note). As far as I see, Theophanes does not substitute the title with other designations for rulers (as Nikephoros does), but when introducing the marriage of Constantine V he calls the qaghan “lord of the Scythians”, thus perhaps reflecting official terminology: AM 6224, p. 409, ll. 30–31: Νοῦτο τῷ Ἐτί Λέον ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς θυγατέρας Χαγάνως τοῦ τῶν Σκυθῶν δυνάστου, τῷ νῦν Κωνσταντῖνῳ ἐνυμφεύσατο.

102 Cf. Theophanis Chronographia, p. 373, l. 14; 375, l. 21; p. 378, ll. 22–23 (ἀπέστειλαν πρὸς τὸν Χαγάνων εἰς Χαζάριαν); p. 434, l. 16 (as a geographical area around the frozen Pontus). The perception of the qaghan as a territorial
It should be noted that the Latin equivalent of this term – together with the first Latin occurrence of “Bulgaria” – is already found in the “Life of Pope John VII” (705/707) in the “Liber Pontificalis” with regard to the exile of Justinian II.\textsuperscript{103} Although this slight shift in terminology should not be overestimated, we might conclude that Khazar rulership was perceived with relation to a specific territorial circumscription (above all referring to the lands beyond the Pontos and close to Crimea) in Latin and Greek imagination, at least more so than other steppe empires before.\textsuperscript{104} Due to the basically positive relations between Constantinople and the Khazars prevailing between the second half of the 7th and the middle of the 9th centuries (at least), the Khazar qaghans are not portrayed as prototypes of barbarian rulers in our sources as the Avar rulers were.\textsuperscript{105} In contrast, they remain rather marginal and shadowy figures in the Byzantine texts.


\textsuperscript{104} The difference is most notable with respect to the Avars, whose polity is only twice called \textit{Ἀβαρία}, namely in Theophanis Chronographia (as n. 65), p. 357, l. 24 and 359, l. 16 (in his digression on the early Bulgars), cf. Moravcsik, Byzantinoturcica II (as n. 3), p. 51. The frequency of \textit{Τουρκία} for the territory of either the Turks or the Khazars in Byzantine sources is likewise minimal, see ibid., p. 320. For the more common use of \textit{Βουλγαρία} see also Gjuzelev, Vassil: “Les appellations de la Bulgarie médiévale dans les sources historiques (VIIe-XVe s.).” In: Id.: Medieval Bulgarie – Byzantine Empire – Black Sea – Venice – Genoa, Baier: Villach 1988, pp. 5–9, here pp. 5–6.

\textsuperscript{105} A certain exception is the negative depiction of the \textit{Chaganos} in the “Life of bishop John of Gothia”; significantly, however, the author cannot portray him stereotypically as a persecutor of the Christian faith. In fact, the qaghan only punishes those who are unwilling to accept his rule, among them the bishop (§ 4). Nevertheless the qaghan is accused of putting innocent people to death (§ 4) and John calls him “my persecutor” (\textit{τοῦ διώκτου μου}, § 5), see Auzépy, Marie-France: “La vie de Jean de Gothie (BHG 891)”. In: Zuckerman, Constantin (ed.): \textit{La Crimée entre Byzance et le Khaganat khazar}. Association des
Another episode relating to a Khazar ruler mentioned in Byzantine historiography once again reinforces the impression of a positive relationship between the two powers: the so-called “Theophanes continuatus” reports that in 839 the qaghan of the Khazars and the Pech sent an embassy to the emperor Theophilos. They asked for Byzantine help in the construction of the fortress Sarkel on the river Don in order to secure the Khazar territories against the Pechenegs. The emperor granted the request and sent the spatharokandidatos Petronas Kamateros to the Khazars who duly put the work into effect and later (in 841) became strategos of the newly established thema of Cherson. This same contact is also mentioned in Constantine VII’s famous treatise misnamed “De administrando imperio” and in the chronicle of John Skylitzes from the second half of the 11th century, who attributes the legation uniquely to the chaganos Chazarias. Skylitzes thus fails to transmit the most interesting point, namely that a second

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107 The date of this mission is not explicitly given in any source; but see the excellent discussion by Zuckerman, Constantine: “Two Notes on the Early History of the thema of Cherson”. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 21, 1997, pp. 210–222. For the event see also Artamonov, *Istorija* (as n. 98), p. 298 within a chapter dedicated to the archaeological site of Sarkel (pp. 288–323); Dunlop, *The History* (as n. 98), pp. 186–187; Howard-Johnston, “Byzantine Sources” (as n. 98), pp. 169, 174–175.


The Byzantine Perception of the qaghan in the Earlier Middle Ages

ruler, called *beg*, acted together with the qaghan. The Sarkel-story indirectly reflects a fundamental but still somewhat obscure “constitutional change” in the Khazar polity, i.e. the establishment of a dual monarchy comprising the *beg* as actual political and military leader, whom Arab sources of the 10th century identify as king (*malik*), and the qaghan who retained his supreme sacral authority, but ultimately lost his political role and seems to have been strictly secluded in his palace. It seems that this was not yet the case in the late 830s, when the qaghan still played a role in political affairs: the Sarkel-story thus probably gives a *terminus post quem*. Nevertheless, there is no explicit repercussion of the political transformation in the Byzantine sources at all. Instead, they suggest a long-term continuity of traditional political structures among the Khazars: it is in the qaghan’s presence that Konstantinos the philosopher took part in the debate with representatives of the Jewish and Muslim faiths in 861, which is broadly described in his *Vita*. According to “De administrando imperio”, the

112 However, the process should not be understood as a secondary sacralization of the qaghanal position compensating the loss of effective power. The characteristics of qaghanal sacrality, as described above all in Muslim sources, were clearly inherited from the Turk qaghans of the Ashina clan and the adherence to Judaism could hardly be reconciled with the sacralization of a human, see Golden, Peter B.: “The Khazar Sacral Kingship”. In: Reyerson, Kathryn L. et al. (eds.): Pre-Modern Russia and its World. Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 2006, pp. 79–102 with further literature; Petrukhin, Vladimir Ya.: “A Note on the Sacral Status of the Khazar Khagan: Tradition and Reality”. In: al-Azmeh, Aziz / Bak, János M. (eds.): Monotheistic Kingship. The Medieval Variants. CEUP: Budapest 2004, pp. 269–275.

113 For an overview of the Muslim sources of the 10th century describing this powerless, but still venerated position of the qaghan in contrast to the king (*malik*, *beg* or *iša*) as actual ruler, see Dunlop, *The History* (as n. 98), pp. 89–115 and 204–214.

Khazar qaghan intervened repeatedly in the affairs of the Magyars in the later 9th century. And Chapter II 48 of the famous “Book of Ceremonies”, likewise attributed to Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos and compiled in the middle of the 10th century, only names the chaganos Chazarias (but no king or beg) among the foreign rulers who receive imperial letters. He is honourably addressed, though with a markedly Christian invocation, and the letter should be sealed with a golden trisoldia bull. The qaghan is thus

stantini”. In: Farrugia, Edward G. et al. (eds.): Christianity among the Slavs – The Heritage of Saints Cyril and Methodius. (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 231). Pontif. Inst. Studiorum Orientalium: Rome 1988, pp. 295–298 plainly dismissed the historical reliability of the Vita concerning Khazaria as the work of an uninformed author – this is probably a too simple way to cope with the contradictions between the Vita and other sources.

115 See De administrando imperio (as n. 110), ch. 38, pp. 170–174. There are several references to Khazaria and the Khazars within this account on the “genealogy” of the ethnus of the Τούρκοι, i.e. the Magyars. The Khazar ruler is termed ὁ χαγάνος ἄρχων Χαζαρίας (p. 170, l. 15; p. 172, l. 32, reduced to chaganos (Chazarias) only ibid., ll. 34, 36, 39, 46). This combination of chaganos and archōn might imply some uncertainty about the existence of still another ruler with the Khazars. But the qaghan is shown as the authority whose decision initiates the “making” of an archōn (of the Turks), following the custom (zakanon) of the Khazars, see ibid., p. 172, ll. 46–53. For Magyar-Khazar relations see inter alia Dunlop, The History (as n. 98), pp. 199–204; Róna-Tas, András: “The Khazars and the Magyars”. In: The World of the Khazars (as n. 17), pp. 269–278.


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ranked at the same level as the king of Armenia, slightly below the caliph, but quite above the subsequently mentioned archontes of Rhosia and of the Pechenegs. The title basileus is only accorded to the Bulgarian ruler.

Byzantine sources also fail to reflect the second major transformation in Khazar history: the conversion of the Khazars, or at least their political elite, to Judaism. The reconstruction and dating of this process is a particularly difficult problem in Khazar studies due to the either allusive or legendary character of the sources available, but it seems fairly established that the religious transformation was actively promoted by the emerging dynasty of the begs and thus intimately linked to the constitutional change that ousted the qaghan from power. While earlier studies on the question had

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118 The Abbasid caliph (ἀμερμομνής) is entitled to a golden bull of four soldia, see ibid., p. 686; for the king (ἀρχων τῶν ἀρχόντων) of Great Armenia see ibid. It is remarkable that the letters to Muslim rulers seemingly do not contain the Christian invocatio mentioned for the Khazar qaghan nor the formula proclaiming that the Holy Trinity is the only true God. These elements are, e.g., also mentioned in letters sent to Carolingian and post-Carolingian kings (ibid., p. 689), but in the Khazar context their use is quite provocative. For the addresses to Muslim rulers see Beihammer, Alexander: “Reiner christlicher König – ΠΙΣΤΟΣ ΕΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΩΙ ΤΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ. Eine Studie zur Transformation kanzleimäßigen Schriftguts in narrativen Texten am Beispiel kaiserlicher Auslandsbriefe des 10. Jahrhunderts an muslimische Destinatäre”. Byzantinische Zeitschrift 95, 2002, pp. 1–34, here esp. pp. 21–22.

119 The archontes of the Rus’ (Ῥωσίας), of the Magyars (τῶν Τούρκων) and of the Pechenegs (τῶν Πατζίνακίτων) are only entitled to bulls of two soldia, and the letters do not begin with an invocatio or intitulatio, but with the formula “letter (γράμματα) of [the emperors] to [the archontes]”, see De cerimoniis (as n. 117), pp. 690–691. For the Bulgarian ruler, whose address is given (ibid., p. 690) in an old fashion (as ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀρχων τοῦ χριστιανικοτάτου ἔθνους τῶν Βουλγάρων) with the said invocatio and a new form (as basileus without invocatio), see Dölger, Fanz: “Der Bulgarenherrschers als geistlicher Sohn des byzantinischen Kaisers”. In: Id., Byanz und die europäische Staatenwelt (as n. 34), pp. 183–196.

120 A very comprehensive overview of the Arabic as well as Hebrew accounts and their respective problems of authenticity and dating has already been furnished by Dunlop, The History (as n. 98), pp. 89–170.

121 This axiom is generally accepted but rests on shaky ground as it is not explicitly stated in any source. It can only implicitly be inferred from the Hebrew sources: the letter of king Joseph to Ḥasday b. Šaprūt credits king Bulan with the introduction of Judaism. He is presented as a direct ancestor
suggested that change took place before or around 800,\textsuperscript{122} two important recent contributions have come to different, mutually exclusive results. They fix the date of the conversion either to around 838 (based on numismatic evidence),\textsuperscript{123} or to around 861 (based on a new combination of the Hebrew sources, the “Vita Constantini” and a remark by Christian of Stavelot\textsuperscript{124} from around 864).\textsuperscript{125} Both arguments are indeed impressive, but neither of king Joseph. The ascent of the dynasty of kings and the introduction of Judaism were thus seemingly linked, cf. the German translation of the letter in: Pletnjowa, Swetlana A.: \textit{Die Chasaren: Mittelalterliches Reich an Don und Wolga}. Koehler & Amelang: Leipzig 1978, pp. 151–158, here pp. 153–155. The person of the qaghan is only incidentally mentioned in this account (not by the title) as he initially had to give his consent (p. 153). The Cambridge document, instead, seems to reflect a tradition according to which the office of qaghan as a supreme judge had only been introduced together with Judaism; see Dunlop, \textit{The History} (as n. 98), pp. 158–159. The interpretation of the qaghan as judge is clearly an assimilation to the biblical tradition and thus serves to keep the legitimacy of a non-Jewish institution in the new religious context, see Shapira, Dan: “Two Names of the first Khazar Jewish Beg”. \textit{Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi} 10, 1998/99, pp. 231–241, here p. 236.

\textsuperscript{122} For example Dunlop, \textit{The History} (as n. 98), pp. 169–170; Pritsak, Omeljan: “The Khazar Kingdom’s Conversion to Judaism”. \textit{Harvard Ukrainian Studies} 2, 1978, pp. 261–281, here pp. 271–280. The debate is outlined by Golden, Peter B.: “The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism”. In: \textit{The World of the Khazars} (as n. 17), pp. 123–162, here pp. 151–157. The conversion is often understood as a process comprising several steps, a first around 740 (based on a rather approximative date given by Juda ha-Levi), a second around 800 (identified with the ‘reform’ of Obadiyah) and a third step in the 830s.

\textsuperscript{123} Kovalev, Roman K.: “Creating Khazar Identity through Coins: The Special Issue Dirhams of 837/8”. In: \textit{East Central and Eastern Europe} (as n. 10), pp. 220–253.


\textsuperscript{125} Zuckerman, Constantin: “On the Date of the Khazar’s Conversion to Judaism and the Chronology of the Kings of the Rus Oleg and Igor”. \textit{Revue des Etudes Byzantines} 53, 1995, pp. 237–270; here pp. 237–254; followed by Shepard, Jonathan: “The Khazar’s Formal Adoption of Judaism and By-
of them seems to be strictly conclusive.\footnote{Kovalev, “Creating” (as n. 123) bases his argument entirely on a coin emission dated exclusively to 837/38, which obviously propagates the Mosaic religion (pp. 226–230). The growing external threats of these years (Sarkel) form the background for the rise of the beg Bulan, who was able to oust the qaghan from power before 843 (Abbasid letter to Ṭarḥān malik al-ḥazar). However, the open problem – why the new coins were no more struck afterwards – remains; this seems quite strange if a permanent religious change was implied and not only an unsuccessful (first) attempt. Zuckerman, “On the Date” (as n. 125), pp. 242–245, is perhaps too hasty in equating the religious debate mentioned in the Khazar tradition about the people’s conversion with that of the “Vita Constantini”. He conclusively confutes the dating of the conversion to the 8th century and the historicity of king Obadiyah (pp. 245–250), but he slightly overloads the passage by Christian of Stavelot (p. 245), which cannot serve as evidence for a recent (!) conversion of the Khazars. Instead, according to Christian’s phrase the conversion could likewise have happened some decades earlier.} In any case, the nearly complete silence of Byzantine sources about the new religious situation in Khazaria and their continuing fixation on the qaghan as ruler instead of the king is indeed remarkable, and it certainly requires caution not to overestimate the consequences of the conversion for Khazar-Byzantine relations. Even if the Khazar king reacted sharply on anti-Jewish measures taken by Romanos I Lakapenos in Byzantium around 931,\footnote{See Zuckerman, “On the Date” (as n. 125), p. 255; Shepard, “The Khazar’s Formal Adoption” (as n. 125), pp. 30–31.} it is nevertheless out of question that Christian communities were tolerated in the Khazar state. Two letters by the patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos from the early 10th century seem to imply that the patriarchate was able to reorganize clerical structures and regular spiritual life in Chazaria by nominating a new archbishop to Cherson.\footnote{Jenkins, Romilly J. (ed.): Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople, Letters. (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 6). Dumbarton Oaks Library: Washington 1973, nr. 68, p. 314; nr. 106, pp. 388–390. For the role of Christianity in the Khazar polity see also Ludwig, Struktur und Gesellschaft (as n. 92), pp. 318–325; Noonan, Thomas S.: “The Khazar-Byzantine World of the Crimea in the Early Middle Ages: The Religious Dimension”. Archivum
land of the Khotzirs in Eastern Crimea instead of the qaghanate. Khazar-Byzantine relations did probably deteriorate considerably in the later 9th and 10th centuries, but the reasons for this development should primarily be sought in the circumstances of changing political contexts due to the emergence of new powerful players in or at the margins of the steppe zone during the 9th century: the Pechenegs and the Oghuz (Torki), the Magyars and the Rus’, not to forget the key role of Bulgaria in the Balkans. Notwithstanding this new plurality, the supreme head of the Khazars remained the only chaganoς in the horizon of Byzantine sources from the late 7th century onwards.

For Carolingian authors, in contrast, the prototypical qaghan was still that of the Avars whose state had been defeated by Charlemagne in 796, but seemingly continued to exist in a rudimentary way well into the 9th century, as several mentions of leading Avar representatives in the Frankish Annals suggest. The Khazars occur only incidentally in the Frankish

\[\text{Eurasiae Medii Aevi 10, 1998/99, pp. 207–230 (who also discusses Mystikos’ initiative, pp. 226–228).}\]


130 This line of interpretation has been followed by Thomas S. Noonan, “Byzantium and the Khazars” (as n. 98), esp. pp. 115–117 and 128–132. Noonan attempts to explain, “how Khazaria and Byzantium tried to use each other to serve their own interests in a constantly changing environment” (p. 128).

131 This is well reflected in the information on antagonistic attitudes between peoples of the steppe and other parts of the “north” in “De administrando imperio”, cf. Howard-Johnston, “Byzantine Sources” (as n. 98), pp. 176–192; Huxley, George: “Steppe-Peoples in Konstantinos Porphyrogennetos”. Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 34, 1984, pp. 77–89.

132 Neither the reemerging Eastern Türk Empire after the 680s nor the Türgeş qaghans succeeding to the former Western qaghanate nor the Uyghur Empire (744–840) have left any traces in Byzantine sources. This certainly reflects the shrinking Byzantine horizon towards Inner Asia. For these polities see Golden, Introduction (as n. 9), pp. 136–141, 155–163; Scharlipp, Die frühen Türken (as n. 13), pp. 30–44, 93–105; Kljaštornyj / Sultanov, Staaten und Völker (as n. 9), pp. 118–123; Stark, Sören: “On Oq Bodun. The Western Türk Qağanate and the Ashina Clan”. Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi 15, 2006/7, pp. 159–171.

133 See Pohl, Die Awaren (as n. 15), pp. 320–323.
This difference of perception is reflected in a short passage of the famous letter to Basileios I written almost certainly by Anastasius Bibliothecarius in the name of the Carolingian Emperor Louis II in 871 after the Frankish conquest of Bari. In order to refute the basileus’ claim to be the unique legitimate holder of the *basileia*, i.e. the (Roman) imperial title, Anastasius had to prove that the ‘correct’ translation of *basileus* actually was “king” or *rex*. He found his arguments for this claim not only in the Scriptures, but also in more recent Greek books (*Graecos noviter editos codices*), where the rulers of the Persians, Epeirots, Indians, Goths and other nations were called *basileis*. But Basileios had pointed to the existence of other proper titles for foreign rulers, such as *protosimbulus*.

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134 See Aalto, Pentti / Pekkanen, Tuomo: *Latin Sources on North-Eastern Eurasia* (Asiatische Forschungen 44). Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 1975, vol. 1, pp. 5–6, s.v. Acatziri, Agazari, (A)gaziri, referring to passages in Cassiodorus, Iordanes and the Ravenna Cosmographer; see also ibid., p. 149 s.v. Chazari, Chaziria and Chazaria in contrast to ibid., pp. 79–98 s.v. Avar, Avarae, Avari, Aba.- The Khazars are furthermore mentioned in a letter by Anastasius Bibliothecarius (nr. 15) to bishop Gauderic of Velletri, in: *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, vol. 5 (MGH Epistolae VII). Weidmann: Berlin 1928, pp. 435–438, here p. 437, ll. 14–16, where he states that Constantine the philosopher had been sent by the emperor Michael III in *Gazaram pro divino praedicando verbo, directus eum Cersonem, quae Chazarorum terrae vicina est*. They are probably also listed as *Caziri* in the so-called Geographus Bavarius. For the information transmitted by Christian of Stavelot see above, note 124.


136 “Ludovici II Epistola” (as n. 135), p. 386, l. 36-p. 387, l. 11.
for the caliph of the Arabs, which induces Anastasius to discuss the “accuracy” of these designations.\textsuperscript{137} It is at this point that the qaghan briefly appears. Anastasius declares that \textit{chaganus} should be used for the ruler (\textit{praelatum}) of the Avars, but not for the \textit{Gazani} and \textit{Nortmanni} nor the princeps \textit{Vulgarum} who is rightly called \textit{rex} or \textit{dominus} of the Bulgarians.\textsuperscript{138} This phrase is revealing as it seems to imply that the Byzantines used the term not only to designate the heads of the Khazars (\textit{Gazani}), but also for Norman (i.e. Rus’) and Bulgarian rulers. Such an indirect evidence has to be used with great caution, the more so as the preceding letter of Basileios is lost, but it is not devoid of any fundament. There are indisputable traces that the title “qaghan” was used for princes of the Rus’ (although the clearest among them belong only to the 11\textsuperscript{th} century).\textsuperscript{139} The actual title of the Bulgar rulers, on the other hand, remains

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., p. 388, ll. 11–15.

\textsuperscript{139} The interpretation of the phrase \textit{rex illorum chacanus} in the eldest Latin source mentioning the Rus’, a passage in the “Annales Bertiniani” (for 839), is far from certain, see Garipzanov, Ildar: “The Annals of St. Bertin (839) and Chacanus of the Rhos”. \textit{Ruthenica} 5, 2006, pp. 3–8, who raises doubts about the interpretation of \textit{chacanus} as qaghan, but the spelling \textit{cacanus} is also often used for the Avar qaghan by Paulus Diaconus, see Aalto / Pekkanen, \textit{Latin Sources} (as n. 134), p. 139. References to “our kagan” in the sermon “On Law and Grace” by Ilarion of Kiev and in an 11\textsuperscript{th}-century graffito from Saint Sophia in Kiev leave little space for doubts that the title qaghan was used at least occasionally for the Ryurikid princes, see Szili, Sándor: “Kagan – A Ruler’s Title in Early Eleventh-Century Kievan Rus’? Ilarion’s “On Law and Grace” as a Historical Source”. \textit{Canadian-American Slavic Studies} 47, 2013, pp. 373–385. The existence of a Khâqân Rûs is furthermore attested by various Muslim authors, among them Ibn Rustah and Gardîzî, see Golden, Peter B.: “The Question of the Rus’ Qâğanate”. \textit{Archivum Eurasiae Medii...
quite unknown to us.\textsuperscript{140} Greek sources often call them \textit{kyrios} or \textit{archōn}, and there are Latin authors who use the term \textit{rex}.\textsuperscript{141} The title \textit{chaganos} in combination with Bulgaria appears only in one Byzantine text, but it


\textsuperscript{140} Although early Bulgarian rulers are usually called “khan” by modern historians, it should be stressed that there is no explicit source evidence to support this assumption, see Curta, Florin: “Qagan, Khan or King? Power in Early Medieval Bulgaria (Seventh to Ninth Century)”. \textit{Viator} 37, 2006, pp. 1–31; esp. pp. 1–3; see also the careful discussion of titles by Stepanov, Cvetelin: \textit{Vlast i autoritet v rannosrednovekovna Bālgarija} (VII – sr. IX v.). Agatō: Sofija 1999, pp. 77–78 and 80–82. Instead, Bakalov, Georgi: \textit{Sredno-vekovnijat bālgarski vladetel (titulatura i insignii)}. Nauka i izkustvo: Sofija 1985, p. 85 starts his discussion of the evidence with the affirmation that “it is known” that the early Bulgar rulers bore the Central Asiatic title \textit{khan}, without giving any evidence for that; more cautiously Golden, \textit{Introduction} (as n. 9), p. 249. Beševliev, \textit{Die protobulgarische Periode} (as n. 95), pp. 333–334, assumes that all early Bulgar rulers held the title \textit{kanasybigi}, and hence \textit{khan} as first part of that. Though based on Bulgar tradition, the Bulgarian Prince List is of limited value for this question: written in Slavonic language, it calls the princes (explicitly only Asparuch and Kormisoš) \textit{knjaz}, see Pritsak, Omeljan: \textit{Die bulgarische Fürstenliste und die Sprache der Proto-bulgaren}. (Ural-altaische Bibliothek 1). Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 50, 76–77 and Tafel 1.

\textsuperscript{141} Cf. Bakalov, \textit{Vladetel} (as n. 140), pp. 86–87; Curta, “Qagan” (as n. 140), pp. 2, n. 5; 10–19; Stepanov, \textit{Vlast} (as n. 140), p. 79; Beševliev, \textit{Die protobulgarische Periode} (as n. 95), pp. 334–336. Introducing the lemma \textit{kavāc}, Moravcsik, \textit{Byzantinoturcica II} (as n. 3), pp. 148–149, suggests that this term appears in Greek sources for the Bulgarian rulers, but nearly all references adduced there refer to \textit{kanasybigi} in various ways (and thus to the Protobulgarian inscriptions of a very limited timespan).
is an obvious misattribution. The actual meaning of the title *kanasybigi* used by Omurtag (814–831) and his son Malamir (831-c.836) in official inscriptions remains a debated issue. It undoubtedly marks a substantial raise of prestige of the Bulgarian ruler in the early 9th century, but it seems to be clearly distinct from the title “qaghan”.

The conversion to Christianity offered new reference frames to both Bulgarian and Rus’ princes for the expression of their potential imperial ambitions. While Symeon of Bulgaria did not hesitate to claim the title *basileus* for himself and ultimately achieved the Byzantine recognition of this title for his son and successor Peter, the Ryurikid princes did not...
undertake any efforts to obtain such an advance in titular prestige within Christian schemes of royalty for many centuries. This circumstance might raise some doubts if the concept of qaghanate, which is well attested for the early Rus’, but not for the Bulgars, did always imply imperial status.

Our concern here is, however, with the Byzantine perception of the qaghan.145 In this respect a seemingly obvious aspect should not be ignored, namely that the basileus never adopted the qaghanal title for himself as the Tang emperor Taizong (626–649) did when he considered it appropriate.146 The qaghan thus always remained a phenomenon belonging to the world outside of Byzantium, but chroniclers of the earlier Byzantine period generally were well familiar with this title used by the rulers of some, though not all of the “barbarian” ethnika living in the Eurasian steppe zone. The term chaganos appears rather frequently in their texts. However, the qaghanate has not been perceived as a specific concept of rulership such as the basileia. The usual image of Avar qaghans as prototypical barbarian rulers with mainly treacherous and avaricious traits differs significantly from the rather neutral but shadowy perception of the Khazar qaghans, while only Türk qaghans are sometimes delineated with truly imperial connotations (and once even called basileus147). These divergences in perception are par-
ially due to the different quality of political relationships the Byzantines upheld towards these peoples in certain phases. But at the same time the discrepancies might also reflect differences and developments in the actual notion of the qaghanate as royal, imperial or sacral rulership with the various steppe peoples. In this respect the 9th and 10th centuries offer the most blurry vision: qaghans are still referred to in Greek as well as Latin texts – also with regard to the rulers of Rus’ and Bulgaria – but these appellations are far from clear and uncontroversial, as is the actual role of the qaghan among the Khazars at this time. These ambiguities are perhaps a sign of change and transition, since the period of qaghans now approached its end in those parts of the steppe that stood in closer contact with the Byzantine oikoumenē.