

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# THE KHAZARS – Gender

## OVERVIEW

In the steppes, before women married they obtained the status of warriors, carried arms and participated in battles. This was the same for Khazar woman. Once a woman became the Khazar khagan's wife, khatun, she took off her sword and dagger, and assumed her royal prerogatives. After the khagan died, the khatun still maintained a certain ruling authority.

The Khazar khagan was a holy figure of the state, but women's role within Khazar society was not as clearly defined. Ibn Fadlan stated that the khagans were polygamous, with multiple wives and concubines. The only information about the women living in harem was that they were isolated.

Princesses were occasionally married to foreign nobles as part of political agreements. When the Khazars made an alliance with the Byzantine Empire in 732, the daughter of the Khazar khagan *Bihar*, Chichek (Tzitzak), was married to the future Byzantine emperor Constantine V, although the Byzantine royal families were against marriages with "barbarians", i.e. non-Christians.

## GENDER

The Khazars used a title of Persian origin, *khatun* (queen), for the khagan's wife. However, polygamy was a common practice among the Khazar khagans. According to Ibn Fadlan's travel account, the khagan had a harem of twenty-five wives, all of whom were daughters of rulers submissive to Khazaria; as well as sixty slave-girl concubines.

There were claims that the khagan lost his power to the beg, with the result that the status of the beg's wife changed, and she assumed the title of *khatun*, previously given only to the wife of the khagan. The Beg's wife and her women attendants and eunuchs lived apart from the camp. Each woman had a house of her own, a *qubba*, and each was guarded by an eunuch who kept her from being seen by others.

Information given in the *Armenian Geography* also implies that the khatun had royal prerogatives, and dynastic marriages became a prerogative of the Khazar begs.

## Discussion/Questions

1. What effect did the Khazar conversion to Judaism have on gender relations in Khazar society?

## Reading

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3-Brook, K. A., *The Jews of Khazaria*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

4- Zhivkov, B., "Khazaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries", Edited by Florin Curta, in *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (450-1450)*, Vol. 30, Brill Academic Publishers, 2015.

5- Ibn Faḍlān, A., *Mission to the Volga*, Translated by James E. Montgomery, New York University Press, 2017.

6- Dunlop, D.M., *The History of Jewish Khazars*, Princeton University Press, 1954.

7- *The Geography of Ananias of Širak*, Translated by Robert H. Hewsen, Wiesbaden : Rcichen,-1992.