

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE KHAZARS – Government

### OVERVIEW

Khazar society was hierarchical. The supreme ruler of Khazaria was the *khagan* who was not only the supreme ruler but also a military commander. This status was later reduced to a spiritual figurehead, a nominal king as a result of the conversion of the nobility to Judaism, which left real power in the hands of his military commander, the *beg*. The Khazar rulers had enough authority to claim tribute from other nomads and their subjects.

### GOVERNMENT:

The dynastic leader of the Khazars was the *khagan*. The khagan was a divine, religious figure who lived isolated from the general public and was believed to bring good fortune to the Khanate. He was also a military commander, although his power was more symbolic than political. He established traditional law and had the authority to claim tribute from other nomads and their subjects. The office of khagan was hereditary and the legitimacy of the title belonged to a particular family which had a genealogical link with the dynasty. In the Persian treatise *Hudud al-alam* the Khazar rulers were called “*Tarkhan Khagan*”.

The Khazars had a dual monarchy. Some sources claim that the dual monarchy arose in the Khazar Khanate as a result of the conversion of the nobility to Judaism, while others claim that it was inherited from Turkic tradition. The claims which connected the Khazar government system to the Turkic one were based on the notion that the origin of the Khazar khagans came from the Ashina clan.

Besides having a supreme ruler, a khagan, they had a co-monarch, the *beg* (*bey* – a Turkish title), a military leader. However, the status of the beg was lower than that of the khagan. During the second half of the 9th century the Khazar khagans' status was reduced to a spiritual figurehead, and the *beg* became responsible for exercising secular state affairs in Khazaria and leading the army on all military expeditions. The beg had to consult the khagan before he made a decision, and the khagan's word was final.

After the Khazars were converted Judaism by the Khazar khagan Bulan, only Jews were allowed to become the Khazar khagan. According to the *Geniza Letter* (the Schechter Letter), the first khagan was a sage of Israel appointed by the Khazars.

The *Kender-Khagan* (deputy beg) was the third in command, the Kender's deputy, and was believed to be selected from Magyars in the Khazar government, and the *Javshighar* was the fourth in the stratum who might have been the person leading the *chavish* (sergeant - Old Turkish) men. The next position in this stratum was occupied by the *Tarkhan* who was the commander of regiments in the Khazar army or auxiliary troops.

There were also provincial governors called *Tudun* in the Khanate. They controlled the border fortresses in parts of the Crimea, Cherson and Doros and collected taxes from the merchants.



In Khazaria, government officials known as *baliqchi* (“fishermen”) monitored the Black Sea ports. They ruled Kerch and Samkarsh.

Vassal kings in Khazaria were titled *El-teber*. Besides the Khazars, El-tebers ruled the Magyars, North Caucasian Huns, Volga Bulgars, Suvars, Onoghurs, and Burtas.

The legal issues of Itil’s Muslim community were handled by the *Vizier*. The viziers were selected from the slave soldiers, *ghulams* who served in the Khazar army.

#### Discussions/Questions:

1. Why did the Khazars establish a dual monarchy?
2. Why did the khagan’s power decrease over time?

#### Readings:

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