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RUS AND KHAZARS

Abstract. The southern thrust of the Rus in the ninth–tenth centuries is to be explained not only by Viking hunger for wealth and glory, but also by the large, rapidly growing market for furs in the Caliphate. In order to reach that market, the Rus had to cross the Khazars’ sphere of influence in the steppes and wooded steppes of the Volga and Don regions. The khaganate was a great power, which presided over many client peoples. It was perhaps awareness of the potential threat posed by the Rus which prompted the Khazars to improve their northern defences in the 830s. There is clear evidence that they then extended their authority over the Rus, their khagan being acknowledged as Rus ruler. The subsequent history of the Rus, up to their successful rebellion in 965, can only be understood if account is taken of Khazar influence and of wider geopolitical circumstances. The following propositions, all to some extent conjectural, are put forward: (1) that the first Rus attack on Constantinople in 860 was a show of force, timed to coincide with several Arab raids on Byzantine territory, and that it was initiated by the Khazars at the urging of the central Abbasid authorities; (2) that Byzantium was seeking a useful ally both against the Balkan Bulgars and against the Sajids of Azerbaijan, when it offered substantial trade concessions to the Rus in 911, that no objection was made by the Khazars, who had recently faced problems from the Oghuz Turks and their Pecheneg clients, and that the treaty resulted in a damaging Rus raid in the Caspian region after 912–913; (3) that there was a serious deterioration in Khazar-Byzantine relations in the 920s; (4) that the second Rus attack on Constantinople in 941 (this time in great force) was instigated by the Khazars, in response to an abortive Rus rebellion; and (5) that the Rus subsequently patched up relations with the Khazars, who allowed them to invade Azerbaijan in 944–945, and made peace with the Byzantines, signing a new trade treaty in 944. Apart from some evidence of assimilation of Khazar customs, it was the division of the Rus into twenty or so distinct principalities which was the principal longterm outcome of Khazar influence.

Keywords: Rus, Khazar, Byzantium, history, 9th–10th century

There is something miraculous about the early history of Russia. Not the sort of bolt from heaven that transformed the Middle East in one generation in the seventh century¹. The advance of the Scandinavian Rus over tracts of forest and

¹ J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, Oxford 2010, p. 461–510.

marshland to the rivers that run south to great seas could not match that of the Arabs over the Roman and Persian provinces of the Middle East. Movement was more difficult. The heroic ethos of a warlike northern people could not generate the same drive as a new, galvanizing religion. But from small isolated bridge-heads in the north the Rus succeeded in colonizing much of what is now European Russia, Belarus and Ukraine between the middle of the ninth and the end of the tenth century. Not only that – they set in motion a process of economic, social and political development which, over the following century, brought into being a multitude of distinct, cohesive and competitive territorial principalities. They would endure and form the nodes around which the future history of Russia would swirl².

The intervention of an extraneous cultural force acted as a catalyst. It sped up the slow process of evolution of supratribal institutions among the Baltic, Finno-Ugrian and Slav peoples of the deep forest and wooded steppe zones. It triggered a reaction between the extraneous Scandinavian and indigenous cultures which resulted, by the middle of the eleventh century, in a fusion of the two and the knitting together of the colonial centres and their extensive hinterlands. The Rus remained a ruling elite, but could not impose their *mores* and language on the mass of Slavs and others in the territories over which they exercised a light authority. Those territories were so large that the extension and intensification of Rus authority could not proceed without the collective consent of the Slavs and others, and, it turned out, without assimilation of the culture of the elite into that of the population at large³.

The rise of the Rus

There are three elements, then, in the miracle – first, the geographical scale of Rus colonizing, second, a marked increase in the speed of development of the eastern Slavs as compared to the western and southern groupings (roughly one century instead of three), and, third, the crystallization of a distinctive Russian culture and the articulation of a large, inaccessible part of the west Eurasian continent into a set of regional power-blocs which were to be the principal *dramatis personae* in medieval Russian history. It is not my object in this paper to delve deep into likely explanations, but to subject the sparse evidence on Rus-Khazar relation to close scrutiny. Plainly, though, before entering a fraught field of study which has generated much controversy, some suggestions should be made, if the Rus are to be understood rather than simply be viewed as a violent force of nature⁴.

² S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*, London 1996, p. 3–180.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 279–291, 313–319.

⁴ I am very grateful to Dr. Mirela Ivanova for reading through and commenting on this paper. She has subjected the arguments propounded to the sort of sceptical scrutiny which any adept of Darwinian scepticism welcomes.

Tangible, material evidence in the form of silver coins, dirhams minted in the Caliphate and especially the eastern lands of Khurasan and Transoxiana, documents the extraordinary extent of Rus outreach in the ninth and tenth centuries. It was the Rus, we know from Arab sources, who sailed down the Volga to Bulgar, capital of the eastern Bulgars, and traded slaves and furs in exchange for dirhams (and, we may presume, goods) from Arab lands. Around 800, it was they who established for the first time good, direct connections (down the Don as well as the Volga) between the active northern market which had been developing gradually over the preceding two centuries in the Baltic and North Seas, on the one hand, and, on the other, the richest economy of contemporary western Eurasia, that of the highly urbanised Caliphate in the south⁵. The rapid growth of exchange attested by dirham finds, reaching an apogee in the first half of the tenth century, is inexplicable in terms of conventional commerce – say that of slaves or amber or honey or wax for southern goods (notably glass beads [documented archaeologically] and cloth). There was more to the phenomenon than the opening of two markets to each other. Something galvanized north-south trade. Something triggered a sudden and growing boom in exchange, and, to judge by the dirham flow north, generated large profits for the northern traders, the Rus. That something was fur.

The south, from the Mediterranean lands to the Middle East, had been averse to fur-wearing in antiquity. The use of raw animal pelts to encase the human body was viewed as a defining characteristic of the uncivilized peoples of the north. This antipathy lasted into the early middle ages, despite the usefulness of fur as clothing and bedding in the coldest months of the year⁶. But attitudes changed in the eighth century – a small, apparently insignificant change, which had ramified historical consequences. Like many other apparent historical mysteries, it originated in the human mind, the ultimate well-spring of new ideas. Identification of fur as a valuable commodity cannot, of course, be compared to a scientific discovery. It was simply a recognition of something obvious and the pushing aside of traditional prejudice. We pick it up first in an incident which took place in the Abbasid court in Baghdad in the late eighth century. It is included in a set of miscellaneous reports at the end of al-Tabari's account of the caliphate of al-Mahdi. A senior figure appeared *clad in furs*. This tells us that the red light barring the entry of furs

⁵ J. CALLMER, *From West to East: The Penetration of Scandinavians into Eastern Europe ca. 500–900*, [in:] *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, ed. M. KAZANSKI, A. NERCESSIAN, C. ZUCKERMAN, Paris 2000, p. 45–94, at 59–74; M. JANKOWIAK, *Dirham Flows into Northern and Eastern Europe, and the Rhythms of the Slave Trade in the Islamic World*, [in:] *Viking-Age Trade. Silver, Slaves and Gotland*, ed. J. GRUSZCZYŃSKI, M. JANKOWIAK, J. SHEPARD, Abingdon 2021, p. 105–131.

⁶ J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Trading in Fur from Classical Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, [in:] *Leather and Fur. Aspects of Early Medieval Trade*, ed. E. CAMERON, London 1998, p. 65–79.

into the southern world had turned green⁷. Once it did so there was an *explosion* of demand in what was a rich world. The urban bourgeoisie, headed by merchants and religious scholars, the apparatus of government in the different regions of the caliphate, the courts of regional governors and of the caliph himself, could and apparently did develop, in a short period, a taste for fur-wearing. This demand, more concentrated than for any other natural product (given the hundreds of pelts needed for individual garments), had to be met by an extraordinarily dispersed system of supply, relying on the most primitive form of production, that of the hunter-gatherer, over vast tracts of forest in the north⁸.

Hoards of dirhams document economic activity associated with the fur-trade in the north. There was a huge influx over the course of the ninth and the first half of the tenth century, reaching much of the Baltic and Poland as well as Russia. The larger the quantity of dirhams found in any place, the more important was its role in the commercial network handling furs. The island of Gotland, with much the largest concentration of hoards, can be seen to have been the financial centre. While there is no regular, direct correlation between dirham finds and fur trade routes, they do document some Rus forays away from the main river valleys to outposts where furs were exchanged for southern products. For traces of contact with the wider world in the deep forest where trappers operated, we can turn to occasional finds of beads⁹.

There are enough of these occasional finds of dirhams and beads to show that the Rus were ready to venture out from their colonial centres, as well as settling in their immediate vicinity. This is confirmed by an invaluable Byzantine text, the so-called *De administrando imperio*, put together in its final form in the middle of the tenth century, which reports that the Rus went on winter circuits in the hinterland of Kiev. These circuits took them well away from the main waterways into alien worlds, populated in the main by Slavs. The Slav tribes may have acknowledged Rus authority (they are described as tributaries) but there was no question of the Rus' imposing their authority by force and of extracting furs as tribute. The balance of power, both in terms of numbers and familiarity with the forest environment, lay with the Slavs. Moving in small parties through the forests, the Rus traded on equal terms with Slavs and other tribesmen, as we know from the *De administrando imperio*, which reports that they *bought* the hulls of river boats built by the Slavs in the winter months. The forests of Russia

⁷ AL-TABARI, *Ta'rikh*, rec. M.J. DE GOEJE et al., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, vol. III.1, Leiden 1879–1901 (cetera: AL-TABARI), p. 508.5–6, trans. H. KENNEDY, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XIX, *Al-Mansur and al-Mahdi*, Albany NY 1990, p. 225.

⁸ M. LOMBARD, *La chasse et les produits de la chasse dans le monde musulman: VIII^e–XI^e siècles*, [in:] IDEM, *Espaces et réseaux du haut moyen âge*, Paris 1972, p. 177–204, at 186–195; J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Trading in Fur...*

⁹ J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *The Fur Trade in the Early Middle Ages*, [in:] *Viking-Age Trade...*, p. 57–74.

compelled a militarily superior, intrusive people to consort largely as equals with the indigenous peoples¹⁰.

It is the scale and ramifications of the fur-trading network which help explain the accelerated development of supratribal institutions among the Slavs of the Volga, Oka, Don and Dniepr river basins. Ideas as well as goods made their way up the waterways, great and small, of Russia into its remote recesses. The symbiosis with Slavs forced on the Rus by brute geographical and demographic facts explains the receptivity of each to the influence of the other, and, in particular, the general acceptance by Slavs of Rus leadership, notwithstanding a few episodes of open conflict in the second half of the tenth century. The coming of Christianity in the late tenth century also helped in the mixing and combining of cultures¹¹.

The Khazar khaganate and the Rus

The Rus probably came to the attention of the Khazars, the hegemonic power of the west Eurasian steppes, once they began pushing inland from the Baltic coast up the valley of the Volkhov river and came within reach of the headwaters of the Don, Oka and Volga – around 800. It was obvious from the first that they posed a potentially serious military threat, since they were formidable warriors and could use the waterways to penetrate deep into the wooded steppe and steppe zones¹². Before looking at Khazar responses, though, something should be said about the khaganate which they had established, with its heartland in the north Caucasus steppes.

The Khazars had been one of two leading nomad peoples in the western half of the Turk khaganate which had straddled Eurasia in the second half of the sixth and first third of the seventh century. When Turk power imploded as a result of a decisive Tang victory in the east (629), Khazars and Bulgars competed for supremacy in the west. By the 660s the Khazars had prevailed, the Bulgars splitting and withdrawing north to the middle Volga basin and west to the Balkans. Twenty years later the Khazars had consolidated their position north of the Caucasus and were able to launch (in 685) the first of several attacks on Transcaucasia¹³. They

¹⁰ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *De administrando imperio*, c. 9.9–16, 104–113, rec. Gy. MORAVCSIK, trans. R.J.H. JENKINS, Washington D.C. 1967 [= *CFHB*, 1] (cetera: CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*).

¹¹ A. POPPE, *The Political Background to the Baptism of Rus': Byzantine-Russian Relations between 986–89*, *DOP* 30, 1976, p. 195–244; D. OBOLENSKY, *Cherson and the Conversion of Rus': An Anti-Revisionist View*, *BMGS* 13, 1989, p. 244–256.

¹² S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 12–27, 33–38, 46–50.

¹³ P.B. GOLDEN, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples. Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*, Wiesbaden 1992 [= *Turc*, 9], p. 232–239; C. ZUCKERMAN, *The Khazars and Byzantium: The First Encounter*, [in:] *The World of the Khazars. New Perspectives*, ed. P.B. GOLDEN, H. BEN-SHAMMAI, A. RÓNA-TAS, Leiden 2007 [= *HOS.CA*, 17], p. 399–432, at 417–431.

proved dangerous northern antagonists of the Caliphate in the 720s and 730s, and later, despite suffering a serious defeat in 737. The Caliph al-Mansur had to strengthen his northern defences after a successful Khazar invasion in 764, rather than resume fighting on the prime *jihad* front, that facing Byzantium¹⁴. Just as Byzantium halted the Arabs at the mountain chains of the Taurus and Antitaurus, the Khazars confined the Arabs to the lands south of the Caucasus, and, unlike Byzantium, ceased to be troubled by them in the ninth and tenth centuries¹⁵.

The Khazar khaganate was a polyethnic state, organized around an inner nomadic core in the Kuban and Terek steppes north of the Caucasus. There were numerous subordinated peoples who acknowledged the suzerainty of the khagan. Ibn Fadlan who served on an embassy to the Volga-Bulgars in 922, put their number at twenty-five¹⁶. They included sedentary peoples in the north Caucasus (principally Alans), Huns living north of the Caspian Gates (probably semi-sedentarised), Slavs living between the Dniepr and the Don, Alans resettled in the wooded steppe zone of the middle Don, Crimean Goths, and two powerful nomadic peoples, shielding the inner Khazar lands south of the lower courses of the Don and the Volga – Pechenegs to the west and Volga-Bulgars to the north¹⁷. There were also substantial communities of Christians and Muslims living in the capital, Itil, on the lower Volga, each subjected to their own law and courts. By that stage perhaps a majority of the Khazars had converted to Judaism¹⁸.

The title *khagan* born by the supreme, sacral ruler, was taken over from the Turks. It encapsulated a claim to universal power, an earthly analogue to the limitless rule of Tängri, the supreme sky-god. There could be no questioning of its legitimacy in the case of the Khazars, any more than in those of the eastern Turks

¹⁴ IBN AL-A'THAM AL-KUFI, *Kitab al-Futuh*, ed. M.J. ABU SA'DAH, Cairo 1987, p. 231.2 – 233.5; *Patmut'iwn Lewondeay metsi vardapeti hayots'i*, ed. I. EZEANTS', St. Petersburg 1897, c. 31, trans. B. MARTIN-HISARD, J.-P. MAHÉ, LEWOND VARDAPET, *Discours historique*, Paris 2015; *Theophanis chronographia*, ed. C. DE BOOR, vol. I, Leipzig 1883–1885, p. 433.26–28 and 435.20–22, trans. C. MANGO, R. SCOTT, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284–813*, Oxford 1997.

¹⁵ D.J. WASSERSTEIN, *The Khazars and the World of Islam*, [in:] *The World of the Khazars...*, p. 373–386, at 375–380; J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantine Sources for Khazar History*, [in:] *The World of the Khazars...*, p. 163–193, at 163–168.

¹⁶ IBN FADLĀN, *Risalat*, rec. et trans. A. ZEKI VELIDI TOGAN, *Ibn Fadlāns Reisebericht*, Leipzig 1939 (cetera: IBN FADLĀN), p. 44.11–12, trans. P. LUNDE, C. STONE, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness. Arab Travellers in the Far North*, London 2012, p. 56.

¹⁷ P.B. GOLDEN, *Khazar Studies. An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars*, vol. I, Budapest 1980 [= BOH, 25], p. 86–97, 255–263; C.A. ПЛЕТНЕВА, *Очерки хазарской археологии*, Москва 1999, with critique of G.E. АФАНАС'ЕВ, *Where is the Archaeological Evidence of the Existence of a Khazar State?*, *AAE* 57.3, 2018, p.166–189, at 170–173.

¹⁸ Al-Māsūdi and other Arab sources are discussed by D.M. DUNLOP, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, Princeton 1954, p. 89–115. Cf. P.B. GOLDEN, *The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism*, [in:] *The World of the Khazars...*, p. 123–126, at 139–157.

who resuscitated a rump eastern khaganate in the late seventh century or their Uyghur and Kirgiz successors¹⁹. The Khazar khagan was a superordinate ruler, whose superior status was not challenged by other nomad rulers, certainly not by those who acknowledged his suzerainty, nor by the Balkan Bulgars. The only other west Eurasian khagan known to us was the khagan of the Avars, the fugitive remnant of the Rouran in the Carpathian basin, the 'Turks' imperial predecessors on the steppes facing China²⁰.

News of the appearance of a new northern people was doubtless picked up by the Volga-Bulgars through their contacts among the peoples living on or close to the watersheds of the great rivers, and passed on to the Khazars. Of the Khazar reaction we have good evidence. They took precautions to secure their position as the great power of the western steppes, instituting programmes of investment in military infrastructure for which they received Byzantine aid and of radical ethnic re-engineering. Their object was to establish firm control of the steppes of Ukraine, from the lower Don to the lower Danube, and thus to prevent the Rus from bypassing the zone on the middle Volga controlled by the Volga-Bulgars. The breakdown and reassembly of ethnic components in new combinations was a fraught process, which seems to have been completed around 830. The programme of fortress-construction took much longer, probably a generation or so, from *ca.* 820 to *ca.* 850.

The process of creating new peoples out of amalgams of old ones and the constitutional arrangements subsequently introduced to ensure that they remained responsive to Khazar management can be observed in greater detail in the cases of two peoples they created, the Hungarians and the Pechenegs, than in any other cases in antiquity and the middle ages before the Mongol era. For this we are indebted to the same tenth-century Byzantine source as reports Rus winter circuits among the Slavs. Seven Finno-Ugrian (Hungarian) tribes were moved from the Volga-Ural steppes and relocated in those of Ukraine on either bank of the Dniepr. Two were singled out and allowed to keep their Finno-Ugrian names, while the other five were given Turkic (Khazar) names. A new tribe (Kavars), itself an amalgam of three clans, was grafted on and given the leading role. The Kavars were *Khazar*, and their ruler was given authority over all eight tribes. The Khazars were thus ensuring effective control of the Hungarians who were responsible for the defence of Ukraine. They designated them Turks (which they were not), perhaps in the hope that over two or three generations the culture of the leading tribe would absorb that of the Finno-Ugrian majority²¹. The Pechenegs took over an

¹⁹ P.B. GOLDEN, *Imperial Ideology and the Sources of Political Unity amongst Pre-Čingisid Nomads of Western Eurasia*, AEMA 2, 1982, p. 37–76.

²⁰ W. POHL, *The Avars. A Steppe Empire in Central Europe, 567–822*, Ithaca NY 2018.

²¹ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 38.3–55, 39.2–14, 40.3–7. Cf. J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantine Sources for Khazar History...*, p. 186–188, 190–191.

even more important defensive task, that of guarding the eastern Volga frontier of the khaganate which faced onto a turbulent steppe world. This had been the function of the Finno-Ugrian tribes for many generations before they were split up and the majority transferred west. The Pechenegs were given a military structure along with a new name (previously they were called Kangar). They were organized in eight divisions (*tümän*), each given an artificial name, a combination of a rank and horse-colour. The command rotated around an elite kin group in each division, moving from cousin to cousin. No overall commander was designated, that being a function clearly reserved to the central Khazar authority²².

The fortification programme produced two defensive lines, designed to deter hostile forces (1) from raiding the rich farmlands of the Donets and middle Don basins (settled by Slavs and Alans) which were overseen from a large fortified settlement near Bititsa²³, and (2) from advancing against the most vulnerable sector in the approaches to the core territory of the khaganate – namely the large salient which forces the Don east before it reaches the Sea of Azov. Fortresses were built on the lower course of the river, to back up a line of forward defence running west-south-west from the middle Don to the northern end of the Donets range of hills²⁴. They included at least one built by a Byzantine military mission at Sarkel on the lower Don. The fortresses were built to *impress*. This was particularly true of Sarkel (built with bricks fired on site). Their purpose was as much psychological as physical, to advertise Khazar power to all who passed by, and, of course, to impose it on the Hungarians guarding the northern approaches to Ukraine. The fortresses were the fixed bases from which the Khazars could project their authority west as well as north. Far to the west another fortress seems to have been built at a strategic junction of river and land routes on the Dniepr, upstream from the rapids which made navigation hazardous to the south. For the site which was to become Kiev in the tenth century seems to have had an earlier Khazar name, Sambat (a combination Turkic *sam* [‘high’] and *bat* [‘strong’]). There is also evidence for the exercise of Khazar authority at Kiev in the 930s, in the form of a round-robin appeal for money to free a Kievan debtor, which reached a Jewish community in Egypt and which was franked by a local Khazar official²⁵.

²² CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 37.15–33, 68–71, 38.19–31. Cf. J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantine Sources for Khazar History...*, p. 188–190.

²³ V.Ja. PETRUKHIN, *Khazaria and Rus’: An Examination of their Historical Relations*, [in:] *The World of the Khazars...*, p. 245–268, at 247–248, 252–253.

²⁴ G.E. AFANAS’EV, *Where is the Archaeological Evidence...*, p. 175–183 envisages Slavs rather than Rus as the threat. Two lines of defence created an arena of combat, where the enemy could be attacked from front and rear.

²⁵ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 9.8–9. *Kievan Letter*, [in:] *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century*, ed. N. GOLB, O. PRITSAK, Ithaca NY 1982, p. 10–15, with comments at p. 33–71. C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Kievan Letter from the Genizah of Cairo*, *Ru* 10, 2011, p. 7–56, at 8–14, 19–25 shifts the representative of Khazar authority from Kiev to Sarkel or Itil, and redates the letter to late 961 or early 962.

Let us now return to the Rus who were beginning to venture into the Khazars' sphere of influence in the first half of the ninth century, drawn by the trading opportunities of a large, single market to the south of the khaganate, with a rapidly growing appetite for furs. However strong the drive of a heroic ethos, however highly prized a reputation for martial exploits in southern lands, there was very little prospect of achieving striking successes in an alien environment against nomad horsemen. Independent, non-Russian evidence – Byzantine, Armenian and Arab – suggests, mainly by its silence, that there was little fighting between Rus and Khazars, but that the prime concern of the Rus was to gain southern goods and southern silver in return for northern products, above all for furs. If so, they had to acknowledge Khazar authority to some degree, since there would be no question of the Khazars' allowing them to sail down the Don or the Volga unless they were absolutely assured of their loyalty, as they were of that of the Volga-Bulgars.

It follows then that when a delegation of Rus arrived in Constantinople in 838, it had been authorized to travel there by the Khazars. We hear of it, because it travelled west in 839 – on the pretext that the journey home across the steppes would be dangerous – and was introduced by an accompanying Byzantine embassy to the Emperor Louis the Pious at his court in Ingelheim on the Rhine on 18th May. A notice about this in the *Annales Bertiniani* is based on an official record of the time, and is therefore a source of the highest quality. The Rus delegation told Louis that they were Swedes and that they had been sent by the khagan (*capcanus*). Whatever the suspicions about their role as a reconnaissance party, they were eventually released and allowed to go on to Scandinavia²⁶.

The khagan must surely be the Khazar khagan. That is the only construction to be put on the mention of *capcanus* without further qualification. The *Annales Bertiniani* thus corroborates the inference that the Rus must have acknowledged the authority of the Khazar khagan to engage in large scale commerce with the southern world. It hardly needs saying that the Scandinavian traders and adventurers who were establishing themselves in the north, mainly in the valley of the Volkhov river between Lakes Ladoga and Il'men, could not conceivably have claimed a title pregnant with the universal claims of a khagan, let alone have been invested with it²⁷. The fortified core of their chief centre, Gorodishte (the predecessor of Novgorod), by the mouth of the Volkhov on Lake Il'men, measured no more than six or seven hectares in the middle of the ninth century²⁸.

²⁶ *Annales Bertiniani*, rec. G. WAITZ, Hanover 1883 [= *MGH.SRG*], p. 19–20, trans. J.L. NELSON, *The Annals of St-Bertin*, Manchester 1991, p. 44.

²⁷ Cf. M. WHITTON, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025*, London 1996, p. 250–253. Contra P.B. GOLDEN, *The Question of the Rus' Qaghanate*, АЕМА 2, 1982, p. 77–97; S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 32–38; C. ZUCKERMAN, *Deux étapes de la formation de l'ancien état russe*, [in:] *Les centres proto-urbains...*, p. 95–120; V. Ja. ПЕТРУКХИН, *Khazaria and Rus'...*, p. 255.

²⁸ Е.Н. Носов, *Новгородское (Рюриково) городище*, Ленинград 1990, p. 147–154.

There are only three pieces of evidence which might be construed as supporting the extraordinary notion that there was a Rus khagan. Two, however, date from the eleventh century, postdating the collapse of the Khazar khaganate at the hands of Rus and Oghuz in 965. The title could have been formally appropriated by Svyatoslav, as had been that of the Turkish khagan by the second Tang emperor after his decisive military victory over the Turks in 629. It is more likely, though, that it was used loosely by others to glorify the leading prince of Rus, one being responsible for a graffito saying 'God save our khagan' in St. Sophia, Kiev, the other, Hilarion, future Metropolitan Bishop of Kiev, lauding Vladimir, the first Christian ruler, as an amalgam of Old Testament king, Roman emperor, and 'great khagan of our land'²⁹. We are left then with an Arab report, dating from the late ninth century, picked up by Ibn Rusta at the beginning of the tenth century, as the sole text to refer to a Rus khagan during the lifetime of the Khazar khaganate. The Rus centre, Ibn Rusta wrote, 'is an island around which is a lake, and the island in which they dwell is a three days' journey through forest and swamp covered with trees, and it is a damp morass [...]. They have a king who is called Khaqan Rus... they make raids against Saqaliba (Slavs) [...]'³⁰. There is nothing wrong with Ibn Rusta's information, but just with his phrasing (or, possibly, his understanding): Gorodishte was embedded in a waterlogged land of shallow lakes and bogs; and the Rus *did* acknowledge the authority of a khagan, but he was the Khazar khagan.

No reputable source of information, apart from Ibn Rusta on a literal reading, can provide any support for the notion, accepted by a majority of historians of Russia, that there was a separate khagan of the Rus. So grand a title in the hand of a distant people, scarcely known to the southern world, would have leapt out before the eyes of the first Arab geographer, the high-ranking Ibn Khurradadhbih who oversaw the post and information service of the Caliphate in the ninth century. He simply classified the Rus as Slavs and reported that Rus merchants travelled south to the 'Roman sea' and the Caspian³¹. Nor is there any hint in the *Golden Meadows* of al-Ma'sūdī, a fine hybrid work of history, geography and curiosities, which includes a section on the Caucasus and northern peoples, including the Rus. Al-Ma'sūdī is a good authority, having visited the Caspian area in the 930s.

Byzantine sources have nothing to say about so extraordinary a phenomenon as a Rus khagan of the Rus. It would have disturbed their whole, ordered world view. For their chancellery, the Rus were headed by an *archon*, a plain ruler or

²⁹ S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 213–215.

³⁰ IBN RUSTA, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥḥīya*, rec. M.J. DE GOEJE, Leiden 1892 [= BGA, 7], p. 145.10–14, trans. G. WIET, *Les atours précieux par Ibn Rusteh*, Cairo 1955, p. 163.

³¹ IBN KHURRADADHBIH, *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik*, rec. et trans. M.J. DE GOEJE, Leiden 1889 [= BGA, 6], p. 154.9–16 (trans. p. 115–116).

prince, without honorifics³². He belonged to the lowest tier of earthly rulers recognized by them. Finally there is an explicit denial that the Rus had a khagan in a somewhat rambling letter, probably drafted by the papal librarian Anastasius for the Emperor Louis II, which was sent to Basil I in 871. The letter, mainly a long disquisition on the history of the distribution of titles indicating superordinate status, was deliberately offensive at a time of heightened tensions between Carolingians and Byzantines. It includes an incidental denial that either the Khazars or the Northmen had a chagan. This should not be taken to represent the considered view of the Carolingian chancellery. It looks like a rhetorical turn from a well-read, wordy scholar, aware perhaps of the notice in the *Annales Bertiniani* and unwilling to credit it. It is not a text that can bear much of the weight of the thesis that the Rus had a chagan³³.

The Rus, I am confident, joined the variegated company of peoples subordinated to the khagan of the Khazars soon after they impinged on the Khazars' sphere of influence. This assuredly reached far beyond the limits of the steppe zone in western Eurasia, encompassing wooded steppe and forest zones and reaching the watershed of the rivers draining into the Baltic in the north-west and the *taiga* in the far north. It is true that the chief natural enemy of nomad forces was the forest – providing as it did so an infinity of potential ambushing points when trees were in leaf. Nonetheless the Huns, the greatest steppe power known to Europe up to the fifth century AD, were able to extend their authority over outer, northern Europe, and to make a durable impression on the culture and religion of Scandinavia. They were emulated by the Avars who established their hegemony over the Slavs of central Europe and the lower Danube in the 570s, and by the Mongols whose first campaign north in winter 1237–1238 induced enough shock to render the Russians responsive to nomad authority for many years³⁴.

A similar effect, submission to the higher-order nomad power, was, I submit, achieved by the Khazars, without a resort to brute force. The adventurous spirit of the Rus brought them into the Khazar sphere, rather than *vice versa*, and

³² CONSTANTIN VII PORPHYROGÉNÈTE, *Le livre des cérémonies*, ii.48.114–116, vol. III, ed. G. DAGRON, B. FLUSIN, D. FEISSEL, M. STAVROU, Paris 2020 [= *CFHB*, 52] (cetera: CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *Liber de cerimoniis*), p. 372–373.

³³ *Ludovici II. imperatoris epistola*, rec. W. HENZE, Berlin 1928 [= *MGH.E*, 7], p. 385–394, at 388.15–17. Cf. C. WICKHAM, *Ninth-Century Byzantium through Western Eyes*, [in:] *Byzantium in the Ninth Century. Dead or Alive?*, ed. L. BRUBAKER, Aldershot 1998, p. 245–256, at 253–254.

³⁴ PRISCUS, fr. 11.2.590–593, rec. et trans. R.C. BLOCKLEY, [in:] *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Late Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. II, Liverpool 1981–1983, p. 276–277; L. HEDEAGER, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality. An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400–1000*, London 2011, p. 50–58, 61–80, 177–190, 191–211, 214–228; M. WHITBY, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian. Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*, Oxford 1988, p. 80–86; J. MARTIN, *North-eastern Russia and the Golden Horde*, [in:] *Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. I, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, Cambridge 2006, p. 127–157, at 127–140.

the lure of wealth kept them there. Khazar creation of defensive shields to west, north and east of their north Caucasus heartland, and their development of an inner zone of hard-point fortresses shifted the balance further in their favour. The Rus were, in effect, mastered, subordinated to a light but persistent authority, which resembled more that exercised over clients (allowed considerable freedom of action) than that over subjects. The Khazars acquired in their new clients a valuable resource, not available from any of their existing clients and subjects – a fleet, manned by Vikings, which would enable them to launch strikes across the Caspian and Black Seas and, possibly, to exercise some influence over Mediterranean affairs.

Rus-Khazar relations

It was perhaps a desire to flaunt this new naval capability which lay behind the Khazar decision to dispatch a Rus mission on a tour of the west in 838, beginning with a visit to Constantinople. It was the first public display to the wider world of the Khazars' ties with the Rus. In future diplomatic calculations Byzantium would have to reckon that the Black Sea was no longer secure and that the Khazars would be able to call up Rus naval forces to back their negotiating position. At a stroke the khaganate ceased to be an important but distant power, and showed that it was of direct concern to governing circles in Constantinople.

At the same time, the Rus were not *subjects* of the Khazars. They could not be used as simple agents in Khazar dealings with their neighbours. Policies would have to be explained. Commands, backed by the threat of force, might be effective, in the short run, but would sour relations in future. Reasoning was necessary. Independent-minded Vikings would have to be persuaded or cajoled into accepting Khazar direction. Inducements might have to be offered, if there were not enough common interests involved. The Rus, for their part, if only by virtue of their remoteness from Khazar power-centres, retained the ability to take initiatives of their own, to pursue policies likely to strengthen their position, political as well as commercial, in the southern world. They would simply have to make sure that they would not harm the interests of the superordinate authority. It was vital for them not to antagonize the Khazars. They might think it prudent, in some cases, to get authorization in advance. In others, they might be confident that there would not be serious repercussions.

It is therefore difficult for the modern historian, looking back across more than a millennium at the early phase of Russian history, to know what to make of the four armed interventions of the Rus in the south between the middle of the ninth and the middle of the tenth century – two direct attacks on Constantinople (860 and 941), and two raids into the Caspian and adjoining coastlands (*ca.* 915 and in 944–945). As the attacks were directed against great power rivals of the Khazars, the driving force might well have been Khazar, the Rus acting on both occasions

as Khazar agents. On the other hand, the Rus could have been pursuing interests of their own, with a necessary minimum of regard for those of the Khazars. Ideally, Rus initiatives should be distinguished from Khazar initiatives, with a further distinction perhaps being drawn between Rus actions which were authorized from above and those which were not.

We are better informed about Rus actions than the thinking behind them. As might be expected, it is from the great powers of the south that we learn about the Rus attacks. Neither Byzantine nor Arab eyewitnesses were in a position to determine what the motives were or what part was played by Khazar higher authority. The texts which capture southerners' observations are of many different sorts – contemporary homilies by Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople in 860, chronicle entries, vivid memories of a diplomatic visitor to Constantinople in 941 (relayed by his stepson, Liudprand Bishop of Cremona), a tenth century Arab intellectual... Most are brief and inclined to play up the savagery of the Rus, who are assumed to be bent on conquest and the acquisition of booty.

For an inside view, we naturally turn to Rus sources, but there is but a single extant narrative of early Rus history preserved in marginally different written versions and it is far from informative about Rus aims or their relations with the Khazars. This text, the *Povest' Vremennykh Let* (*Tale of Bygone Years* or Russian Primary Chronicle – cited henceforth as *PVL*), was put together in stages between the early eleventh and early twelfth century³⁵. Rus oral tradition was amplified and given a chronological armature with material taken from a translated Byzantine chronicle. To this basic narrative was added ethnographic and hagiographic material (Byzantine in origin), together with the texts of a grant of privileges and two treaties agreed with Byzantium. The Rus view of the past, in particular the account of Rus ventures overseas, was thus to a considerable extent Byzantine. The most important independent material came from the version of oral tradition current in eleventh-century Kiev, but that did not reach back much more than three generations. It could present the main features of the reigns of Olga (945–962), Svyatoslav (962–972) and Vladimir (978–1015), but what happened previously had mutated into semi-legend, short on detail, merely recalling the northern origins of the Rus, the coming of Rurik to Kiev, and the military successes of his son Oleg. Were it not for the list of privileges and texts of treaties reproduced (with minimal changes) in the text, it would provide no additional insight into Rus-Byzantine relations in the ninth and first half of the tenth century. As for Rus-Arab relations, they were passed over in silence. For the text was narrowly focused on Kiev, neighbouring Rus settlements and the Slav tribes of the Dniepr basin. It was a thoroughly local, myopic history, which passed over the Rus colonization of the upper Volga-Oka

³⁵ *Повесть временных лет*, гес. Д.С. ЛИХАЧЕВ, Москва–Ленинград 1950 (cetera: *PVL*), trans. S.H. CROSS, O.P. SHERBOWITZ-WETZOR, *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1953.

region and Rus commercial activity down the Don and Volga. Hence it can cast no light on the background, or indeed the unfolding of Rus ventures into the Caspian³⁶.

It is from Rus actions and Khazar reactions (where reported, as they were for the first Caspian raid) that we must try to determine where lay the impetus for these bold ventures in the south. Careful attention must also be paid to circumstances – for example to recent and contemporaneous events in other diplomatic arenas which may have impinged on the Rus and the Khazars, and to subsequent developments which may have been connected with individual expeditions. Thus it may not be fortuitous that the first major Rus expedition against Constantinople in 860 took place at a time of multiple Arab attacks on Asia Minor, or that an important Byzantine embassy, including a certain Constantine, who would go on to become the apostle of the Slavs, was directed in 861 to the Khazar capital, Itil on the lower Volga. Again, the first Byzantine-Rus treaty negotiated in 911 should be placed in a wide geopolitical context. We need to look out north, north-east and east from Constantinople to understand why the Byzantines sought to engage the Rus in southern affairs at that particular time³⁷. It is also important to remember that the Khazars were operating in a small concert of great powers – the khaganate, Byzantium and the Caliphate. The end of large-scale warfare between Khazars and Arabs, marked by an important Arab victory in 737, may have inaugurated an era of peaceful co-existence, but the Khazars were still ready to invade Transcaucasia, if circumstances were propitious – as they were in 764, when the new Abbasid dynasty was consolidating its position, and in 800, when there were political divisions at a high level in the administration of Armenia and Azerbaijan³⁸. Relations with Byzantium were good while both powers were conscious of the Arab threat. They peaked in 733 when the heir to the throne, Constantine, married a Khazar princess. It was only in the Crimea that intersecting interests might cause tension, as they did in 784–787.

What has been said so far applies to the role of Rus in the ninth and early tenth century. For their campaigns in 941 and 944–945 the Byzantine and Arab

³⁶ I. SORLIN, *Les traités de Byzance avec la Russie au X^e siècle*, CMRS 2, 1961, p. 313–360, 447–475; S. FRANKLIN, *Borrowed Time: Perceptions of the Past in Twelfth-Century Rus*, [in:] *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. P. MAGDALINO, London 1992, p. 157–171, at 157–163; C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion to Judaism and the Chronology of the Kings of the Rus Oleg and Igor. A Study of the Anonymous Khazar Letter from the Genizah of Cairo*, REB 53, 1995, p. 237–270, at 259–260; A. RUKAVISHNIKOV, *Tale of Bygone Years: The Russian Primary Chronicle as a Family Chronicle*, EME 12, 2003, p. 53–74, at 54–64, 73; S. GRIFFIN, *The Liturgical Past in Byzantium and Early Rus*, Cambridge 2019 [= CSMLT, 4.112], p. 39–55.

³⁷ See pp. below.

³⁸ 764: see n. 14 above. 800: AL-TABARI, vol. II.3, p. 648.1–14, trans. C.E. BOSWORTH, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XXX, *The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, Albany NY 1989.

sources can be supplemented from a text written in Hebrew, known as the *Geniza Letter*. Its provenance – the Cairo Geniza – and the hand (eleventh century) leave no doubt about its authenticity. It presents – in highly abbreviated form – the official Khazar view of the two campaigns as stemming from a Rus attack with Byzantine encouragement on Phanagouria (modern Kerch). The Rus leader, Helgo (Oleg), was later acting under duress when he sailed against Constantinople. It appears to be a clear case of the Rus' acting as Khazar agents³⁹.

The first Rus attack on Constantinople

Before turning to the four major naval and military ventures of the Rus in the south between the middle of the ninth and the middle of the tenth century, something should be said about the background to the Khazar embassy to Constantinople in 838. There had, of course, been diplomatic contact since the emergence of the khaganate as a great power, and relations were generally good, with the notable exception of the Crimean crisis in the 780s. So it is no surprise to find that an embassy had arrived a few years earlier, perhaps in 832, with a request for military aid, and that the Byzantines had agreed to provide it⁴⁰. The potential Rus threat to Byzantium as well as the khaganate was doubtless a key Khazar argument. The aid sought was expertise in fortress-construction. In response, a party of military engineers was dispatched to the lower Don, where, as has been noted above, they built the fortress of Sarkel out of bricks made on site. There is evidence of Byzantine influence on construction techniques at several other sites – in the dimensions of bricks and the units of measurement used for cutting limestone blocks and for the lay-out of defences⁴¹. The impressive appearance of the fortresses and the visible evidence of Byzantine backing added a psychological element to the physical strength of the defences built under the programme. The security of the khaganate would be greatly improved if potential northern adversaries were deterred from attacking and encouraged to engage peacefully with the khaganate. It was the success of this policy which was advertised by the 838 embassy.

³⁹ *Geniza Letter*, [in:] *Khazarian Hebrew Documents...*, ed. N. GOLB, O. PRITSAK (cetera: *Geniza Letter*), p. 106–121.

⁴⁰ *Chronographiae quae Theophanis continuati nomine fertur Libri I–IV*, iii.28.3–20, rec. et trans. M. FEATHERSTONE, J. SIGNES CODOÑER, Berlin 2015 [= *CFHB*, 53]; CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 42.20–38. Date: J. SIGNES CODOÑER, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829–842. Court and Frontier in Byzantium during the Last Phase of Iconoclasm*, Farnham 2014, p. 337–343, contra C. ZUCKERMAN, *Two Notes on the Early History of the thema Cherson*, *BMGS* 21, 1997, p. 210–222, at 210–215.

⁴¹ Г.Е. АФАНАСЬЕВ, *Донские аланы*, Москва 1993, p. 134–141, and *О строительном материале и метрологии Хазаро-аланских городищ бассейна Дона*, *ПАРХ* 2, 2012, p. 29–49.

The attack on Constantinople a little over twenty years later caused real shock. A fleet, said to number 200 ships, appeared in the Bosphoros on 18th June 860⁴². For the first time since the wide-ranging naval raids of Goths in the third century, the city was directly threatened by formidable fighting-men from the north. It was particularly vulnerable at the time, because the Emperor Michael III and his guards regiments (*tagmata*) were away in Asia Minor. The Patriarch Photios gave vent to the shock in two sermons, the first preached while the Rus were nearby, the second when the danger was just past. So sudden and unexpected an attack was plainly authorized by God, a clear signal that the Byzantines should do penance for their sins. The Rus were appropriate agents of divine wrath. Photios portrayed them as quintessential northern barbarians, insatiable in their desire for booty and captives, merciless in their treatment of living creatures. They are reported to have devastated the Bosphoros region, the suburbs, and the nearby Princes Islands in the Sea of Marmara, but to have made no attempt on the powerful walls of the city. After a week or a little more, they withdrew, loaded with booty, vanishing as suddenly as they had appeared⁴³. Nothing more is heard of them, save for one subsidiary operation on the return voyage, when Amastris was raided and an attempt made on the shrine of a local holy man, George, who had died in 806⁴⁴.

This venture of the Rus has the hallmarks of a Viking raid, familiar from those launched against Normandy, East Anglia, the Western Isles and Ireland – a sudden violent assault, bloodlust, the plundering of rich, vulnerable targets, and careful timing, in this case to coincide with the emperor's departure for the eastern frontier⁴⁵. There was also a display of the warlike spirit of the Vikings, when the ships' crews paraded past Constantinople with raised swords⁴⁶. But we should be given pause by the distances involved in this eastern venture. Could the Rus really have received intelligence of what was being planned in the southern world in time to exploit it? Voyages across the North and Irish Seas to attack a weak point were one thing, to make one's way upstream, over portages, downstream hundreds and

⁴² *Anecdota Bruxellensia*, vol. I, rec. F. CUMONT, Ghent 1894, p. 33.16–21; *Symeonis magistri et logothetae chronicon*, 131.29, ed. S. WAHLGREN, Berlin 2006 [= CFHB, 44.1] (cetera: SYMEON LOGOTHETE), trans. S. WAHLGREN, *The Chronicle of the Logothete*, Liverpool 2019 [= TTB, 7].

⁴³ PHOTIOS, *Homilies* 3 & 4, rec. B. LAOURDAS, Thessaloniki 1959 (cetera: PHOTIOS), p. 29–52, trans. C. MANGO, *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, Cambridge Massachusetts 1958, p. 82–110; THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, iv.33; NICETAS DAVID, *Vita Ignatii Patriarchae*, c. 28.9–19, rec. et trans. A. SMITHIES, with notes by J.M. DUFFY, Washington D.C. 2013 [= CFHB, 51].

⁴⁴ *Vita Georgii episcopi Amastridis*, [in:] *Русско-Византийские исследования*, vol. II, rec. В. ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ, Ст.-Петербург 1893, p. 1–73, at 64.3 – 69.17. Cf. A. MARKOPOULOS, *La Vie de Saint Georges d'Amastris et Photius*, JÖB 28, 1979, p. 75–82 dates the raid to 860 but places it before the attack on Constantinople.

⁴⁵ E. CHRISTIANSEN, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*, Oxford 2006, p. 168–188.

⁴⁶ PHOTIOS, *Homily* 4, p. 44.2–9 (trans. p. 100–101).

hundreds of kilometres along a great continental river, and then across the Black Sea was more hazardous and much more time-consuming. This would have been a venture into the unknown, fraught with unforeseen dangers.

As it is, surmising as we may with confidence, that the Rus were subordinated to the Khazars and could be deployed as their clients, it is surely more plausible to regard this first major thrust against Byzantium as a *Khazar initiative*. The knowledge of the wider world and intelligence about current events necessary for such a venture were Khazar. Confirmation comes from Byzantium's diplomatic response. This was not to send an embassy into the forests of Russia to some putative organising centre in the far north, but to Itil, capital of the khaganate, on the lower Volga. The Byzantine authorities realized that the Khazars were arbiters of northern affairs, and that the Rus could not have sailed south down the Don – it was presumably the Don route which they used, since it avoided the portage from the Volga and the portages round the rapids on the lower Dniepr. We know a certain amount about the embassy because it forms the background to the central scene in the Life of St. Cyril, future proselytizer in Moravia, namely his long disputation with rabbis at the Khazar court. The attempt to promote the Christian faith failed despite the saint's learning and sagacity, but what were probably the embassy's main aims – to repair relations with the Khazars and to recover Byzantine prisoners-of-war (two hundred) were achieved. There would be no further crisis until the 920s⁴⁷.

But what did the Khazars *gain* from the attack on Constantinople? What interest of theirs was involved? Were they nervous of Byzantine encroachment on their sphere of influence – in the Crimea, in the steppes on either side of the Dniepr, or in the Caucasus region? Was the Rus attack intended to deter them? It is conceivable that they feared a putative expansion of Byzantine influence in the western Caucasus, say the cultivation and winning over the Abasgians. But one of the guiding principles of Byzantine foreign policy in the east was caution, governed by a concern to avoid all provocations to the great powers, Khazar as well as Arab. Another was to concentrate diplomatic and military efforts on a single front. It is therefore doubly improbable that they should have antagonized the Khazars in the 850s when the war with the Arabs was reaching a climax. I infer therefore that the Khazars were *not* reacting to any Byzantine provocation.

Unless the Khazars had become prey to wishful thinking on a gargantuan scale and had entertained hopes of taking Constantinople (where Avars had failed in 626 and Arabs in 654 and 717–718), the incentive for the expedition must have

⁴⁷ *Vita Constantini*, c. 8–11, [in:] *Constantinus et Methodius Thessalonicenses. Fontes*, rec. F. GRIVEC, F. TOMŠIČ, Zagreb 1960 [= RStI, 4], p. 109–126, trans. M. KANTOR, R.S. WHITE, *The Vita of Constantine and the Vita of Methodius*, Ann Arbor Michigan 1976. Cf. M. IVANOVA, *Inventing Slavonic. Cultures of Writing between Rome and Constantinople*, Oxford 2020 (D.Phil), p. 65–72.

come from elsewhere. It was not Rus nor Khazar. Whence then? There are two clues. First, the short period spent by the Rus in the metropolitan region and their restraint in not making any attempt on the walls of Constantinople. Their expedition looks very much like a *show of force* – hence the parade past the walls and the damage inflicted on the surroundings of the city. If there was an objective apart from the gathering of booty and prisoners, it was to induce the shock which it did and to prompt the emperor to return as quickly as possible (also achieved). Second, the circumstances, the launching of four concerted Arab attacks that summer on Asia Minor, three by land and one by sea. Two out of the three *jihad* bases in the marches fronting Byzantium were involved – Tarsos and Melitene – together with the outpost recently established by Paulicians, dualist heretics, at Tephrike, a small fortified town west of the Euphrates, shielded on all sides by broken, desiccated hills. Whatever plans had been made in Byzantium to co-ordinate their defences and to launch an offensive of their own were nullified, when the high command, exercised that year by the emperor in person, ceased to function, and the metropolitan forces were withdrawn⁴⁸.

The chief beneficiaries of the Rus attack on Constantinople were without doubt *the Arabs*. On the assumption (questionable but plausible) that the Abbasid authorities had a hand in the planning of operations for 860 or, at the very least, were kept informed, it was they who had every incentive to organize a diversionary attack on Constantinople. It was not as if the Arabs' strategic position in the Middle East was improving. Byzantium's military power was growing. It was at peace with the Bulgars. In the immediately preceding years, it had been using its naval striking power to good effect, launching successful attacks on Damietta, the main Arab base in Egypt in 853 and 859. A counterblow was needed, and was indeed struck in 860, along with the three land attacks, when an Arab fleet attacked and captured Attaleia, base of Byzantium's largest provincial fleet. The Arab offensive would be sustained over the following years, culminating in a large-scale invasion in 863.

By a process of elimination, and by taking account of wider circumstances, we are left with only one plausible initiator of the Rus attack of 860 – the *central authorities of the Caliphate*. They had the diplomatic capability to reach out to the Khazars. They had plenty of inducements to offer, above all a guarantee of peace on the Caucasus front and continuing trading opportunities. They would be the principal beneficiaries in the short term, and would gain in the longer term if they were able to entice the great power of the north into a closer alliance, especially as there was now the possibility of opening a naval front in the north. At the very least they would break up the Byzantine-Khazar entente formed in 838.

⁴⁸ A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. I, *La dynastie d'Amorium (820–867)*, Brussels 1935, p. 244–247.

Byzantine-Rus treaty of 911 and its consequences

This putative Arab plan was foiled by the Byzantine embassy to Itil. The balance in the Middle East continued to shift in Byzantium's favour through the 860s and 870s. The Caliphate was beset by troubles: vicious internecine fighting among the elite Turkish units cantoned in Samarra; a secessionist movement in the outer reaches of its territory in south-east Iran; and a rising of African slave labourers on the large estates of lower Iraq⁴⁹. The Arab marches had to fend for themselves, without the prospect of back-up from the centre. After the raiding army of Melitene was trapped and annihilated near the northern edge of the Anatolian plateau in 863 in a well coordinated operation by several provincial armies, Byzantium was able to seize the initiative. The usurper Basil I (867–886), who seized power in a bloody *putsch*, took personal command of a series of campaigns into the frontier zone, making substantial inroads into the Anti-Taurus. He overreached himself with a direct assault on Tarsos in 883, but had been able to take the war to the Arabs in southern Italy in alliance with the Franks and to reduce the Paulicians to impotence after their raiding army was intercepted and defeated⁵⁰.

The pendulum began to swing back in the reign of Leo VI (886–912). While he built on Basil's successes in the eastern borderlands and southern Italy, he overreached himself elsewhere, with serious consequences. In the Balkans he broke the peace with the Bulgars which had lasted thirty years since their conversion to Christianity. He allied with the Hungarians and attacked in 894. The following year an invasion on a grand scale ended in a crushing defeat. Although peace was made (on humiliating terms for the Byzantines), Leo had managed to sour the mind of the new Bulgar khan Symeon. At the same time, in the 890s, he provided strong backing for the aggressive policy of Smbat, the Bagratid prince of princes, in Transcaucasia, thereby antagonizing the powerful Sajid emirs of Azerbaijan⁵¹. As the tenth century opened, Byzantium was once again on the defensive, in the Balkans, where Symeon was in a commanding position, and in Transcaucasia, where the Sajid emirs were dominant, after containing Smbat's aggression and then setting about the subjugation of the whole of Armenia⁵².

⁴⁹ H. KENNEDY, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates. The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh century*, 3 Abingdon 2016, p. 147–155.

⁵⁰ M. WHITTOW, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium...*, p. 306–314.

⁵¹ J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantium, Bulgaria and the Peoples of Ukraine in the 890s*, МАИАСТ 7, 2003, p. 342–356, at 348–355; A.N. TER-GHEVONDYAN, *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia*, Lisbon 1976, p. 60–63, 67.

⁵² J. SHEPARD, *Symeon of Bulgaria – Peacemaker*, [in:] IDEM, *Emergent Elites and Byzantium in the Balkans and East-Central Europe*, Farnham 2011, no. III, p. 8–18; A. MAHÉ, J.-P. MAHÉ, *Histoire de l'Arménie des origines à nos jours*, Paris 2012, p. 131–137.

The Khazars went through their own time of troubles in 890s. Their Hungarian clients, we may assume, had long been allowed some licence, like the Rus, to pursue policies of their own, especially in the west, far away from the central lands of the khaganate. There were tempting targets in central and eastern Europe – (1) the eastern lands of the Carolingian empire and its satellite in Moravia, (2) to the south, Bavaria and Carantania, and (3) Bulgaria, close at hand, across the lower Danube. Other interested parties were also keen to involve the Hungarians – Byzantium in 862, when intelligence came of a high-level Frankish-Bulgar meeting (result – a first raid into Frankish territory), Moravia in 881 (another attack on the Franks), Bavaria in 892 (attack on Moravia) and Byzantium in 894 (devastation of the Bulgar heartland south of the Danube, while Byzantine forces made a diversionary feint in Thrace). It was this last venture which seems to have had serious repercussions. The Bulgars were able to make contact with the Pechenegs and to establish a common front against the Hungarians⁵³. The Pechenegs may have been receptive because of pressure from the Oghuz, themselves under pressure from the Samanids who, in the 890s, were establishing a powerful emirate, independent of the Caliphate, in Transoxiana and Khurasan⁵⁴.

The outcome was a convulsion in the west Eurasian steppes in the 890s, which left the Khazar khaganate considerably weakened. It is only the westernmost spasm, affecting Europe, that can be observed, as the Hungarians, after a devastating Pecheneg attack timed to coincide with the absence of the main fighting force on a raiding expedition, moved *en bloc* into the Carpathian basin, and then set about raiding far and wide in Europe for half a century⁵⁵. We also know, from the *De administrando imperio*, that the Khazar response to this conflict between subordinated peoples was to cultivate the Oghuz and launch a pincer attack on the Pechenegs from west and east. Defeated, the Pechenegs were relocated in the steppes of Ukraine vacated by the Hungarians, and replaced on the eastern marches of the khaganate by the Oghuz⁵⁶. There was no restructuring of the Oghuz. The eastern shield of the inner lands of the khaganate was therefore less solid than it had been before the 890s. The Pechenegs too, though rendered temporarily docile, could not be relied upon as before.

This *tour d'horizon* has been necessary. It is only by taking account of circumstances in the north and the Middle East that we can make sense of the next development in Rus relations with the wider world. In 911 they managed to extract

⁵³ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 40.7–22. Cf. J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantium, Bulgaria and the Peoples of Ukraine...*, p. 348, 355–356.

⁵⁴ L. TREADWELL, *The Samanids: The First Islamic Dynasty of Central Asia*, [in:] *Early Islamic Iran*, ed. E. HERZIG, S. STEWART, London 2012 [= *IoI*, 5], p. 3–15.

⁵⁵ J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantium, Bulgaria and the Peoples of Ukraine...*, p. 355–356; K. LEYSER, *The Battle at the Lech*, [in:] *Idem, Medieval Germany and its Neighbours 900–1250*, London 1982, p. 43–67.

⁵⁶ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 37.2–14.

important trading concessions from Byzantium. A short document, incorporated in *PVL*, granted Rus merchants the right to stay for six months, with free accommodation in the St. Mamas quarter and free board (bread, wine, meat, fish and fruit). They were to have access to baths and were to be given supplies of food and equipment (anchors, cordage, sails etc.) for the return voyage. They were exempted from payment of trade taxes. The only conditions were that they should bring goods for sale and should not cause trouble *en route*. This grant, probably in the form of a golden bull, was sealed with a formal peace treaty, duly signed by fifteen representatives of Rus prince and dated 2nd September 911. The treaty document included detailed stipulations for regulating relations between Byzantium and the Rus (criminal punishments, aid for ships forced to shore by bad weather, compensation for lost cargoes, recovery of prisoners-of-war, return of escaped slaves, disposal of property of the deceased, extradition of criminals) and a clause allowing individual Rus to serve as Byzantine mercenaries⁵⁷.

The commercial privileges were clearly of value to the Rus, especially so after a period of difficulty in their trade with the Caliphate signaled by a marked decline in the northward flow of dirhams in the 880s and 890s⁵⁸. Sajid operations in Transcaucasia had disrupted one route south, while the fighting between Khazars, Oghuz and Pechenegs which eventually resulted in the expulsion of the Pechenegs from steppes between the Volga and Ural rivers had impeded commerce with Khwarezm. The Dniepr route to the Black Sea was being opened up. The natural hazards posed by the river (a series of rapids downstream from Kiev) would be outweighed by the prospect of a lucrative market in Constantinople. This was a valuable alternative to routes leading south and south-east to the Caliphate, and would, in the course of the tenth century, grow steadily in importance, as can be seen from the development of a new commercial quarter in the river plain (Podol) at Kiev. Increasing wealth and the prince's role as manager of the trade with Byzantium (in the treaty of 944 this would be made explicit, with a system of formal licences to trade in Constantinople issued by the prince) explain the emergence of Kiev as the chief rival to Novgorod in the south and the preeminent Rus centre west of the Volga⁵⁹.

So far so good. But what did Byzantium gain from the treaty and the grant of privileges? It was not as if Byzantium was eager to buy furs. There is no evidence for anything akin to the explosion of demand in the Arab world or the fur craze which swept over northern Europe in the 11th century. Nor was there anything more than a moderate appetite for the other exports of the north – slaves, honey,

⁵⁷ *PVL*, p. 24–29 (trans. p. 64–68). Cf. I. SORLIN, *Les traités...*, p. 329–360; S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 103–105; M. STEIN-WILESHUIS, *A Viking-age Treaty between Constantinople and Northern Merchants, with its Provisions on Theft and Robbery*, *SSL* 37, 1991, p. 39–47.

⁵⁸ M. JANKOWIAK, *Dirham Flows...*, p. 116–117.

⁵⁹ S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 91–100, 129–133.

wax, amber. It is hard to see what could have offset the obvious danger of encouraging the Rus to come to Constantinople and to see for themselves the wealth of the southern world, given their known warlike and predatory instincts. For the eleventh and twelfth century compilers of *PVL* there was only one conceivable explanation: the Rus must have launched a second, larger, more successful expedition against Constantinople. A whole fictitious scenario was conjured up: a fleet of 2000 warships, which, with crews of forty per vessel, gave a fighting strength of 80,000; wholesale destruction and slaughter around the city; a mass attack overland on the city, the ships being put on wheels and using their sails for propulsion; terror in Constantinople, as a result of which the Emperors Leo and Alexander sued for peace; Rus demands for a one-off payment for each Rus in the expeditionary force and for the trading privileges detailed in the emperor's grant⁶⁰.

If there is any medieval *non-event* of which we can be certain, it is this Rus expedition against Constantinople, either in 907 (the year to which the attack and grant of privileges are assigned in *PVL*) or in 911 (the date of the treaty document). Suspicion is roused by the obvious element of fantasy (the ships on wheels) and the arbitrary splitting of a single narrative between two entries four years apart. Apart from the *PVL*, there is a deafening silence. No mention of the attack in the *Antapodosis*, Liudprand of Cremona's history of Christendom which is centred on Constantinople⁶¹. Muslim historians, who never lost interest in the fortunes of Byzantium, wrote nothing about it. Nor was a word of it breathed in any extant contemporary or later Byzantine source, whether saint's life, homily, letter, or history. Whatever the failings of Byzantine sources – and there are terrible *lacunae* – it is inconceivable that so dangerous an assault on the capital would not have been reported.

Why then did Byzantium offer these privileges to the Rus? What did they hope to gain by engaging the Rus more closely in southern affairs? What did they expect in return for the inducements which they offered? If it was not in the expectation of commercial gain, attention should turn to diplomatic benefits which might flow from close, friendly ties with Rus. The crucial question to ask is – what were the interests of Byzantium which the Rus might be able to further at that time? The answer is already plain. There were, as has been noted above, two principal foreign policy concerns in the last years of Leo VI's reign: the possibility that war might break out again in the Balkans, where the Bulgars under Symeon's leadership would be formidable adversaries; and the worsening crisis in Armenia,

⁶⁰ *PVL*, p. 23–24 (trans. p. 64).

⁶¹ LIUDPRAND, *Antapodosis*, [in:] *Liudprandi opera*, rec. J. BECKER, Hanover–Leipzig 1915 [= *MGH. SRG*] (cetera: LIUDPRAND, *Antapodosis*), p. 1–158. Cf. K. LEYSER, *Liudprand of Cremona: Preacher and Homilist and Ends and Means in Liudprand of Cremona*, [in:] IDEM, *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe. The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries*, London 1994, p. 111–142, at 120–124, 131–135.

where the Bagratid principality was being battered into submission and where, after the execution of the Bagratid ruler Smbat in 912, Yusuf, the Sajid emir, would turn his attention to the subjection of the other leading principality, that of the Artsrunis in Vaspurakan⁶². The Rus could be viewed and, I suggest, *were* viewed as useful northern allies, both because they were well placed to apply diplomatic pressure on the Pechenegs (to detach them from their old alliance with the Bulgars) and because they could bring the southern and western Caspian coastlands and Azerbaijan within range of Byzantine-sponsored military and naval attack.

Of course, most of the many strands in Byzantine foreign policy are invisible. The unknown looms much larger than the known. This is even more true of Khazar foreign policy. We can only resort to conjecture about what part, if any, the Khazars played in the formation of this Byzantine-Rus entente. But, given Byzantium's generally good relations with the khaganate, with but few exceptions (most recently the 860 attack), it seems to me highly improbable that the Byzantines would not have sought Khazar approval before making their offer to the Rus. It was also needed if ever the Rus were to be deployed in the Caspian against regional Arab powers of north-west Iran and Transcaucasia.

It remains to be seen what, if anything, the Byzantines gained from their cultivation of the Rus. Not much in the Balkans in the crises of 913 and 917, both initiated by Byzantium: we do not know whether the Pechenegs or, conceivably, the Rus themselves were expected to play a part in an attack on Bulgaria planned for 913, because the campaign had to be aborted after an attempted coup d'état by the commanding general, and the Bulgars then exploited the disarray of Byzantine forces to advance to the walls of Constantinople; in 917, by contrast, the Pechenegs did agree to take part in a joint campaign against Bulgaria, and may well have been made amenable to Byzantine diplomatic overtures by pressure from the Rus; but again it came to nothing, when the Pechenegs balked at the last moment and the Byzantine field army suffered a serious defeat at Acheloos⁶³.

It was a different story further east. For it so happens that a large Rus raiding fleet attacked the southern and western coasts of the Caspian, pushing inland into Azerbaijan, at a perfect time from the Byzantine point of view – some time after AH 300 (912–913) according to Mas'udi. In his *Meadows of Gold*, an overview of the history and geography of the Caliphate, written in 943, he reproduced what looks like a brief but detailed report about the actions of the Rus and the response of the local authorities, with additional information about the political background. It is embedded in a sometimes confused account of the northern world

⁶² A. MAHÉ, J.-P. MAHÉ, *Histoire de l'Arménie...*, p. 137–138.

⁶³ SYMEON LOGOTHETE, c. 135.14, 18–21. Cf. J. SHEPARD, *Symeon of Bulgaria...*, p. 22–42; J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *A Short Piece of Narrative History: War and Diplomacy in the Balkans, Winter 921/2–Spring 924*, [in:] *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization. In Honour of Sir Steven Runciman*, ed. E.M. JEFFREYS, Cambridge 2006, p. 340–360, at 341–346.

(focused on the Khazars), based on earlier writings⁶⁴. A crucial piece of information is given at the start. The Rus expedition was *authorized* by the Khazars. In exchange they were to receive half the booty⁶⁵. But the prime movers were the Rus. They sailed down the Don and crossed by a portage to the Volga (presumably where their courses come closest to each other), thus bypassing Volga-Bulgar territory⁶⁶. Once in the Caspian they sailed south to raid the coastlands from Gurgan to Shirwan. There was some organized resistance, led by a general from Azerbaijan and the ruler of Shirwan, both of whom are named. Extensive damage was done in what turned out to be several months of raiding, which extended into the interior where it was accessible, as in Transcaucasia⁶⁷. It is tempting to connect this Rus attack with a Byzantine initiative in Armenia – a counterstrike into Armenia in 915 by Ashot, son of the executed Smbat, which was sponsored by Byzantium. Its success – Ashot reached Dvin, administrative centre for the whole of Arab Transcaucasia – may be partly attributable to diversionary action by the Rus⁶⁸.

The expedition ended badly for the Rus. An important component of the Khazar army, Muslim troops recruited from Khwarezm and serving in the al-Arsiyya, was incensed at the news coming from the south and resolved to attack the Rus when they returned. The Khazar authorities could do no more than warn the Rus, who had to fight their way back and suffered heavy losses. This cannot but have strained relations both between Rus and Khazars and between Khazars and those ultimately responsible, the Byzantines⁶⁹.

This second bold southern venture of the Rus is hard to understand as a speculative Viking raid on rich southern targets – the targets were tempting but remote, and there were hazards en route, above all on the Don-Volga portage. Nor can it be taken to have been a deliberate act of aggression on the part of the Khazar kaganate – for it might have provoked the Sajid governor of Azerbaijan into striking north across the Caucasus, and he had a powerful army at his disposal. It should be seen rather as a Byzantine project, devised at a time when the power of the Bagratids, Byzantium's chief clients in Armenia, was on the verge of extinction. The wide field of diplomatic vision, the grasp of geopolitics, and the ability to formulate and execute a grand strategy, evident in this episode, were inherited from the late Roman empire and are attested on other occasions in the middle ages, as for example in the marriage which sealed a Byzantine-Khazar alliance in the eighth century. On this hypothesis, the Rus Caspian raid thus acted as a delayed Byzantine riposte to the Arab-sponsored Rus attack on Constantinople in 860.

⁶⁴ AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawhar*, vol. I, rec. C. PELLAT, Beirut 1966 (cetera: AL-MAS'ŪDĪ), p. 447–461, trans. C. PELLAT, *Les prairies d'or*, vol. I, Paris 1962.

⁶⁵ AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, p. 218.12 – 219.2.

⁶⁶ AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, p. 218.3–4, 219.2–4. He has the Rus sail from the Sea of Azov to the Volga.

⁶⁷ AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, p. 219.5 – 220.5.

⁶⁸ M. WHITTOW, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium...*, p. 219–220.

⁶⁹ AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, p. 220.6 – 221.5.

Khazars, Byzantines and Rus from *ca.* 920 to *ca.* 950

Tensions in Byzantine-Khazar relations erupted into open conflict in the 920s. Goodwill was superseded by suspicion which lasted into the 950s. The Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus classified the Khazars as potential adversaries when he was adding the final editorial touches to the *DAI* in 951–952⁷⁰. There were two aggravating factors – Byzantine missionary activity among the Alans of the Caucasus (during the second patriarchate of Nicholas Mystikos [912–925]) and what the Khazars viewed as persecution of Jews by Romanos Lekapenos (around 932)⁷¹. The information comes from the one trustworthy Khazar source to have survived, a letter drafted by a senior Khazar official in reply to inquiries from a distinguished Jewish scholar-diplomat in Umayyad Spain, Hasdai ibn Shaprut. It survives, along with fragments of four other letters to or from Hasdai, in copies preserved in the Cairo Geniza. The manuscript which preserves it dates from the late eleventh century. The original letter was probably written in the middle or later 940s. There can be no doubting its authenticity⁷². It is not affected by the doubts which hang over the purported reply of King Joseph (the last *beg*), which Firkovitch claimed to have acquired in Egypt in the 1860s⁷³.

The letter provides a potted history of the khaganate, focusing on its partial conversion to Judaism in the past, the rise of the khagan's chief officer (the *beg*), and recent bouts of warfare with Byzantium⁷⁴. It amounts to a short intelligence digest, akin to those about Hungarians, Pechenegs and minor Armenian principalities picked up and included in the *De administrando imperio*. Its history of the recent past covers three distinct conflicts. In the first the khaganate was attacked by a grand, anti-Khazar alliance put together by Byzantium around 920, which included Burtas (the As, steppe Alans, traditional Khazar subjects, to be distinguished from the Alans proper, living in the north Caucasus), Pechenegs and Oghuz (Turks) as well as two other peoples⁷⁵. Corroboration of a phase of active Byzantine diplomacy in the north comes from a letter of Nicholas, Patriarch of Constantinople, who threatened the Bulgar khan Symeon with a coalition of peoples. We do not know how long the fighting lasted, only its outcome

⁷⁰ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, cc. 10–12 notes that the Oghuz, the Alans and the 'Black Bulgars' (aka Volga-Bulgars) could attack the Khazars.

⁷¹ С.А. ИВАНОВ, *Византийское миссионерство. Можно ли сделать из 'варвара' христианина?*, Москва 2003, p. 178–190; C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 254–255.

⁷² N. GOLB, O. PRITSAK, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents...*, p. xiv; C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 237–241.

⁷³ D.M. DUNLOP, *The History...*, p. 125–155; N. GOLB, O. PRITSAK, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents...*, p. xv; C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 247–250.

⁷⁴ *Geniza Letter*, p. 106–121.

⁷⁵ *Geniza Letter*, p. 112–113, with commentary of C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 254.

– successful Khazar resistance, aided by an Alan counteroffensive⁷⁶. There was a reversal of roles in the second crisis. This time the Alans were Byzantine allies while the Oghuz fought with the Khazars. The Alans were defeated and their king who had been captured was brought back into subjection⁷⁷.

While the position of the Khazars was undoubtedly weakened in the 920s, that of Byzantium was growing stronger. The fighting in the Balkans, which had flared up with yet another grand Byzantine offensive in 917 – that which was meant to involve a Pecheneg attack on Bulgaria from the north and which resulted in the rout of Byzantine forces at Acheloos – and had involved several Bulgar thrusts into the metropolitan region, died down after a compromise agreement was reached at a summit meeting between Symeon and Romanos Lekapenos in November 923. The *de facto* armistice was turned into a durable peace after the death of Symeon in 927 and the marriage of his son Peter to Romanos' granddaughter Maria⁷⁸. In Armenia, Ashot II began the long and slow process of reconstituting the Bagratid principality after the spectacular campaign of 915, eventually challenging the Artsrunis of Vaspurakan who had achieved temporary paramountcy after fending off Sajid attacks in 914–916⁷⁹.

This Christian resurgence in Armenia received a massive boost, once Byzantium was free to concentrate its forces in the east. By the early 930s, the only resistance in the Arab marches came from individual cities and a young commander, the Hamdanid Ali, who was building up a reputation as a frontier commander in the Jazira and Armenia. For the two effective fighting forces available to the central authorities in the Caliphate had disappeared, that of the Sajid emirs of Azerbaijan, destroyed in battle against Qarmat insurgents on the edge of Iraq in 926, and the metropolitan army increasingly impotent after the execution of its commander Munis in 933⁸⁰. In the course of fifteen years (926–940), the Byzantine field army under a fine general of Armenian extraction, John Kourkouas, reduced the emirate of Manzikert to client status, captured Melitene, one of the principal *jihad* bases in the frontier zone, occupied its territory on each bank of the Euphrates, pushed east up the Arsanias valley, taking Asmosaton (Arab Šimšat), gained control of the mountain spine of western Armenia, and was in a position to lay siege to Theodosiopolis for several months in 940 (this second important *jihad* base fell in 949)⁸¹.

⁷⁶ *Geniza Letter*, p. 112–115.

⁷⁷ *Geniza Letter*, p. 114–115, with commentary of C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 254–255.

⁷⁸ SYMEON LOGOTHETE, c. 135.18–21, 23, 136.17, 19–20, 23–24, 27, 29–37, 45–51; M. WHITTOW, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium...*, p. 290–292; J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *A Short Piece...*, p. 346–355.

⁷⁹ A.A. VASILIEV, rev. M. CANARD, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. II.1, *La dynastie Macédonienne (867–959)*, Brussels 1968, p. 231–234; A. MAHÉ, J.-P. MAHÉ, *Histoire de l'Arménie...*, p. 137–142.

⁸⁰ H. KENNEDY, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates...*, p. 165–168.

⁸¹ SYMEON LOGOTHETE, c. 136.52–53, 80–81; THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, bk. 6, ed. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1828, p. 426.3 – 429.2; CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 44.26–65, 85–112,

A steady expansion of Byzantine influence went hand in hand with this extension of direct authority. It was gradually encroaching on the outer fringes of the Khazar zone of influence in the western Caucasus. Two attempts to suborn Khazar clients in the 920s, first the Burtas, then the Caucasian Alans, had failed. Now Byzantine diplomats concentrated on the Rus. Whatever recriminations may have followed the disastrous end of their Caspian campaign in *ca.* 915, they were once again amenable to suggestions from Byzantium, even if, as in this case, they were being incited to rise up and attack the Khazars. This is reported in the *Geniza Letter* and placed in the context of a pogrom of Christians ordered by the Khazar king in reprisal for Byzantine persecution of Jews; '[the evil o]ne sent great presents to HLGW {Helgo} king of RWSY' {Rus'}, inciting him to (do) his evil; he went against the city of SMKRYYY {Samkarts, ancient Phanagoria, Rus Tmutokan} by night, taking it by stealth [...]'⁸². The Khazar response makes it plain that this was no minor incident but an attempt to cause serious damage to the khaganate. The Rus were *rebellious*. Samkarts was well placed – in a strong position on the eastern of the two peninsulas which nearly close off the Sea of Azov from the Black Sea. It would provide the Rus of Helgo (Oleg in *PVL*) with a secure base from which to send forays into the Khazar heartland.

The Khazar commander-in-chief, Pesah, dealt first with the sponsors of the Rus rising. He invaded the Byzantine sector of the Crimea, captured a range of settlements, large and small, and laid siege to Cherson, the theme capital. When Cherson made terms (payment of an indemnity, return of Khazar prisoners of war, and surrender of the Rus in the city), Pesah turned his attention to Helgo. The fighting went on for four months and ended with the defeat and subjugation of Helgo. The booty taken from Samkarts was recovered. Helgo and his Rus were left alone, on condition that they attack Byzantium⁸³.

The Rus, led by Igor (Oleg's successor according to *PVL*) as well as Helgo (aka Oleg)⁸⁴, appeared before Constantinople on 11th June 941 – a date given by the only Byzantine history to cover the period, the Logothete's Chronicle, put together a generation or more later out of antecedent written sources, including official reports. The account of the Rus attack, which lasted until September (so three months or so, rather than the four of the *Geniza Letter*), looks like one of those reports, perhaps a news release issued shortly afterwards. The narrative is clear and succinct. There is plenty of detail, all plausible save for the number of Rus boats

45.55–175. Cf. A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. II.1..., p. 257–291, 295–303; J. HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Military and Provincial Reform in the East in the Tenth Century*, TM 21.1, 2017, Mélanges Jean-Claude Cheynet, p. 285–309, at 294–298.

⁸² *Geniza Letter*, p. 114–115, with commentary of C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 256.

⁸³ *Geniza Letter*, p. 116–119, with commentary of C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 256–257.

⁸⁴ Cf. C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion...*, p. 258–264.

– given as 10,000 (rather than a little over 1000, as reported by an eyewitness). The tone is dispassionate, even when Rus atrocities are described. There is no glorifying of the commander of the naval forces left in Constantinople, the Patrician Theophanes, who destroyed much of the Rus fleet in two actions, apart from a fleeting reference to his ‘most vigilant and noble soul’⁸⁵. It is complemented by eyewitness testimony, written down at one remove in the *Antapodosis*, a contemporary history of Christendom written by Liudprand Bishop of Cremona. Liudprand’s stepfather was in Constantinople on a diplomatic mission when the Rus arrived. Liudprand’s account captured the emotions of the time, gave a figure (15) for the number of old warships which were reconditioned on the emperor’s orders, and homed in on the devastating effect of Greek Fire in the first naval engagement⁸⁶.

The threat was much greater than in 860. This time the Rus came in great force, with the intention of taking the city. Theophanes launched his attack from Hieron, on the Asian side of the Bosporos, when the Rus fleet was arrayed outside the city, close to the Pharos (so probably near the mouth of the Golden Horn). He led the way, on a great fireship, a warship converted to carry numerous projectors of Greek Fire (on the bows, stern and both sides). The impact, physical and psychological, was devastating. Theophanes and the rest of the scratch Byzantine fleet (also equipped with flamethrowers) sank many Rus ships, with many casualties (dead and wounded), took large numbers of prisoners, and cowed the surviving Rus, who were able to escape over shallows and landed on the Asian shore. That was where they committed the atrocities and burned down churches. But their ability to plunder and gather supplies was constrained by the presence of a small army adept at guerrilla tactics. Their position worsened dramatically when the main field army, recalled from the east, arrived and penned them back into their camp by their ships. Finally, in September, short of provisions, they planned to escape by night. But Theophanes was ready and engaged them for the second time, sinking many Rus ships with heavy losses and leaving only a few (according to the official news release) to escape the following night⁸⁷.

There follows a blank period, during which Igor seems to have ousted his co-ruler and long-time regent, Helgo/Oleg⁸⁸. Certainly their paths diverged. It was Igor who negotiated the second Rus-Byzantine treaty in 944, the year when, despite his age, Helgo/Oleg embarked on a bold expedition south, across the Caspian – presumably with Khazar permission⁸⁹. This was a very different venture

⁸⁵ SYMEON LOGOTHETE, c. 136.71–75.

⁸⁶ LIUDPRAND, *Antapodosis*, v. 15.

⁸⁷ The main features of the campaign – raids over Bithynia, atrocities, the return of the field army from the east, and the devastating effect of Greek Fire – are captured in *PVL*, p. 33 (trans. p. 71–72). Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 113–117.

⁸⁸ C. ZUCKERMAN, *On the Date of Khazars’ Conversion...*, p. 265.

⁸⁹ *Geniza Letter*, p. 118–119.

from the raiding expedition of 915. The Rus were aiming to take control of the Kur river and establish a permanent base at Barda'a, capital of Caucasian Albania (ex-Soviet Azerbaijan), from which to tap the resources of the whole Caspian and Transcaucasian region. They attacked in summer 944, annihilated the small army of regular soldiers and militia assembled by the governor of Barda'a and seized the city. Much was made of Rus atrocities by the regional authorities. Large forces were mobilized, but the Rus proved impossible to dislodge by force of arms. It was disease which did so in the end and the deaths it caused, including, probably, that of Helgo/Oleg. They left the citadel in Barda'a at night, in 945, with a rich haul of booty and slaves, boarded their ships and sailed away⁹⁰.

Igor succeeded in repairing relations with Byzantium. The treaty of 911 was renewed, with a few additional provisions: the system of licensing political emissaries and merchants would be changed – a full list sent by the prince of Kiev, against which individual certificates could be checked, would replace the gold and silver seals previously used to authenticate certificates⁹¹; a limit of fifty nomismata was put on Rus purchase of silks; there was to be no military action against the Byzantine sector in the Crimea; and the emperor was to have the right to call on the Rus for military assistance⁹². The delegation sent to Constantinople was large and representative of a wide range of interests among the Rus. Twenty-five merchants were balanced by twenty-five political emissaries. Besides Igor himself and three close relatives, twenty princes and the wife of one of them were individually represented⁹³. It looks as if the leaders of most, if not all, of the principalities established by the Rus, *i.e.* those in the north and north-east which looked towards the Volga as well as the nascent cities of the Dniepr valley, were being required to assent to the terms of the treaty. Byzantines and Rus were seeking to cement a grand alliance, which would offset the traditional allegiance of the Rus to the Khazars⁹⁴.

Two years later, Igor's successor Olga reaffirmed the alliance when she went to Constantinople and was baptized, Constantine Porphyrogenitus standing as godfather. This greatly enhanced the prestige of Christianity, originally implanted after the 860 attack and now spreading among the Rus. Shared faith would give added tensile strength to the alliance. Olga too sought to involve a wide array of

⁹⁰ MISKAWAIH, *The Experience of Nations*, vol. II, ed. D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, Oxford 1921 (cetera: MISKAWAIH), p. 62–67, trans. H.F. AMEDROZ, D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate. Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century*, vol. V, Oxford 1920–1921, p. 67–74; MOVSES KALANKATUATS'I, *Patmut'iwn Aluanits'*, iii.21, rec. V. ARAK'ELJAN, Erevan 1983, trans. C.J.F. DOWSETT, *Moses Dasxuranc'i's History of the Caucasian Albanians*, London 1961, p. 224.

⁹¹ PVL, p. 35 (trans. p. 74). Cf. I. SORLIN, *Les traités...*, p. 456–457.

⁹² PVL, p. 35–39 (trans. p. 74–77). Cf. I. SORLIN, *Les traités...*, p. 447–465.

⁹³ PVL, p. 34–35 (trans. p. 73–74).

⁹⁴ Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 117–119.

interests. Twenty-two princes were represented on her embassy, which included forty-four merchants. All were there to witness her reception into the Christian church and the strengthening of the Rus-Byzantine entente⁹⁵.

Khazar suspicions of Byzantium can only have been aggravated by the deals struck in 944 and 946. Byzantium was gaining increasing leverage within the kaganate, and there was no reason to suppose that its intentions were benign. The Rus may have been in no position to assert their independence after the debacle of Helgo/Oleg's rebellion, but they were likely to gain power and wealth over the following years, constituting a growing threat.

None of the doubts surrounding the driving forces behind the first two southern ventures of the Rus recur over those of Helgo/Oleg in 941 and 944–945. The *Geniza Letter* makes it clear that the impetus behind the expedition against Constantinople was Khazar, and that the attempt to gain territory in the outer reaches of the Caliphate in Transcaucasia was a Rus initiative. There was nothing unusual about the Caspian venture. Vikings in the west made numerous conquests – in Normandy, East Anglia, the northern and western isles of Scotland, both shores of the Irish Sea, and Iceland. The Rus would make a second attempt in 969, when, after an initial Byzantine-sponsored intervention in Bulgaria, they returned and established a colonial regime on the Danube, an important artery of trade and avenue for the extension of Rus power into central Europe⁹⁶.

As for the Rus who were not involved in Helgo/Oleg's last campaign, the text of the 944 treaty and the official Byzantine account of Olga's visit two years later make it plain that there were numerous, semi-independent princes jostling for influence among the Rus, that the prince of Kiev had to work hard to maintain his pre-eminence among them, and that the managing role accorded to him in the treaty with Byzantium was a more than useful instrument.

Rus and Khazars: concluding reflections

The various forays made by the Rus into the southern world, the role which they played in international relations involving Khazars, Arabs and Byzantines, indeed the accumulation of wealth through trade which underlay their growing power and drew more and more of them to the colonial centres in Russia and Ukraine

⁹⁵ CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *Liber de cerimoniis*, ii.15.557–634, vol. III, p. 142–149 for political representatives and merchants present at banquet on Sunday 8th October; PVL, p. 44–45 (trans. p. 82–83). C. ZUCKERMAN, *Le voyage d'Olga et la première ambassade espagnole à Constantinople en 946*, TM 13, 2000, p. 647–672, at 647–654, 660–669. *Contra* D. OBOLENSKY, *Ol'ga's Conversion: The Evidence Reconsidered*, HUS 12/13, 1988/1989, p. 145–158; J. FEATHERSTONE, *Ol'ga's Visit to Constantinople*, HUS 14, 1990, p. 293–312 and *idem*, *Olga's Visit to Constantinople in De Cerimoniis*, REB 61, 2003, p. 241–251.

⁹⁶ PVL, p. 50–52 (trans. p. 87–90). Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 145–151.

– these important historical phenomena are hard, if not impossible, to explain, unless we accept the explicit indications of the sources that they were formally subordinated to the Khazars. The khagan who sent Rus envoys to Constantinople in 838 must have been the Khazar khagan, given the claim to limitless rule implicit in the title. The Rus then were one of the twenty-five or so peoples in the belt of satellites around the Khazar heartland in the Kuban and Terek steppes between the Caucasus, lower Don and lower Volga. Their fighting prowess, which had overawed the Arabs sent against them in Azerbaijan in 944–945⁹⁷, made them, along with the Oghuz who, since the 890s, guarded the eastern approaches to the khaganate between the Ural and Volga rivers, the most powerful and dangerous of those satellite peoples⁹⁸.

The events of the 940s – the open challenge to Khazar rule, clear evidence of continuing Byzantine hostility, and the formation of a strong Rus-Byzantine entente – augured badly for the future. The Rus would undoubtedly rebel again, to break free and pursue their own destiny, untrammelled by Khazar overlords. They would have the backing of Byzantium, now that it had shed its old benign attitude to the khaganate. If ever the Rus were to make common cause with one or more of the other subordinated peoples, the khaganate would be in trouble.

The *Geniza Letter* was written soon after the last event mentioned, the departure of Helgo/Oleg for Fars (Persia), so probably in the middle or late 940s. For the next twenty years or so the Rus seem to have accepted their subordinate status, to judge by what is reported of their internal history in the *PVL*. The major rebellion, when it eventually occurred, was not, it seems, sponsored either by Byzantium or by the Samanid emirs of Khurasan and Transoxiana. It is dated to 965 in *PVL* and may have been concerted with an Oghuz attack from the east. The fall of Itil seems to have triggered the collapse of the khaganate⁹⁹.

The first entirely freelance venture of the Rus was the conquest of Balkan Bulgaria in 969, after a first intervention a year earlier at the request of the Emperor Nikephoros Phokas (963–969). Bulgaria could be turned into an advanced southern base from which to put pressure on Byzantium and the nascent states of eastern and south-eastern Europe. When the Byzantine response proved more formidable than that of the provincial authorities in Azerbaijan in 944 – the new emperor John Tzimiskes taking personal command of the main field army, driving the Rus into the fortress of Dristra on the Danube and blockading them there until they agreed to withdraw – the Rus, with a single exception (their third attack

⁹⁷ MISKAWAH, p. 53, 65, 66–67 (trans. p. 67, 71, 73–74).

⁹⁸ IBN FADLĀN, p. 10.9 – 17.5 (trans. p. 11–21); CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *DAI*, c. 10.3–4, 37.2–8.

⁹⁹ *PVL*, p. 47 (trans. p. 84); IBN HAWKAL, *Kitab surat al-ard*, vol. II, rec. J.H. KRAMERS, Leiden 1939, p. 393, trans. J.H. KRAMERS, G. WIET, *Configuration de la terre*, vol. II, Beirut–Paris 1964, p. 384. Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 143–145.

on Constantinople in 1043), concentrated their efforts in the northern lands and set in train centuries of expansion which took them across the Ural mountains in the sixteenth century and ultimately brought them central Asia and Siberia¹⁰⁰.

The Khazar phase of Rus history left its mark. Not an inclination to autocracy – that surely originated in the Mongol phase, when the forces of resistance were gathering in the northern Rus principalities. While the Khazars could conduct winter sweeps through the wooded steppe and forest zones of Ukraine and Russia, they did not have the resources or the statecraft to coerce peoples living in an inhospitable forested landscape into submission for more than a short time. They had no choice but to adopt a policy of light, relatively benign rule, demanding, for example, no more than one marten pelt per year from each household on Volga-Bulgar territory¹⁰¹. In the case of the Rus, there was no exaction of tribute, just the collection of customs dues, a tenth of the value of the merchandise in transit. The individual principalities were otherwise free of burdens and free to pursue their interests within the Khazar sphere of influence. What is striking above all is the number of those principalities, and the failure of the leading prince of Kiev to impose his authority on the others. He was merely *primus inter pares*. This was, I suggest, the result of deliberate Khazar policy, paralleled by that adopted towards the Pechenegs, one of supporting multiple centres of authority under a single overarching monarchical power, that exercised by the *beg* on behalf of the khagan.

We should probably envisage each of those twenty or so princes as similar in appearance to Svyatoslav, prince of Kiev and leader of the 969–971 Bulgaria venture. It was at a summit meeting with John Tzimiskes outside Dristra that he agreed to evacuate Dristra and to return home. The scene is described by the contemporary Byzantine historian, Leo Deacon. Tzimiskes was on land, on horseback on the river bank. Svyatoslav was aboard a small Rus ship in the Danube. Leo describes Svyatoslav: he was wearing a plain white garment and a bejeweled gold ring in one ear; he had a drooping moustache but no beard; his head was shaven except for two long strands of hair¹⁰². This was a world away from the look of a Viking leader. Svyatoslav had been a Khazar client ruler and *he looked like a Khazar*. He and probably the other Rus princes (and their leading followers?) had been assimilated into the Khazar way of life. It would take time before

¹⁰⁰ LEO DIACONUS, *Historia*, vi.10–13, viii.1–ix.12, rec. C.B. HASE, Bonn 1828 (cetera: LEO DIACONUS), trans. A.-M. TALBOT, D.F. SULLIVAN, *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, Washington D.C. 2005; IOANNES SCYLITZES, *Synopsis historiarum*, rec. J. THURN, Berlin 1973 [= *CFHB*, 5], p. 287–310, trans. B. FLUSIN with notes by J.-C. CHEYNET, JEAN SKYLITZÈS, *Empereurs de Constantinople*, Paris 2003; *PVL*, p. 47, 50–53 (trans. p. 84–85, 87–90). Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 145–151.

¹⁰¹ IBN FADLĀN, p. 35.5–9 (trans. p. 44).

¹⁰² LEO DIACONUS, ix.11 (trans. p. 199–200). Cf. S. FRANKLIN, J. SHEPARD, *The Emergence of Rus...*, p. 143.

the influence of Khazar culture would fade away. Indeed two generations passed before the relatively peaceful symbiosis of the individual principalities was broken by the first of a series of escalating internecine conflicts between leading princes.

It was indeed the solidarity of individual principalities, their rivalries and frequent infighting, so characteristic of 11th–early 13th century Rus history, which constituted the chief long-term legacy of Khazar overlordship. For it was in the Khazar phase that the colonial centres developed their own political individuality, undisturbed by neighbours in what was a single political space. The Rus analogue to the lordships of western Europe was the principality, centred on a colonial town, fortified, with an inner citadel, where the prince resided – but the scale was immeasurably larger. When the Khazar-imposed peace faded away and fighting broke out, it resulted in far more bloodshed and deeper animosities. The history of the Rus during and after the Mongol epoch had been programmed.

Grim though the long-term consequences may have been, at the time Khazar rule was relatively benign. It opened up the greatest market of early medieval western Eurasia to Rus merchants, thereby channeling wealth into northern Russia, Poland and Scandinavia. The rapid growth of Rus numbers on the continent south of the Baltic and the founding of numerous, widely spaced colonial centres was driven by the wealth garnered by the merchants. It was through the Khazars too that the Rus gained knowledge of the different components of the southern world and could begin to dream of southern conquests. It was through the Khazars, albeit at Arab instigation, that the Rus made their first contact with Byzantium, which was to exert the strongest influence on them in the long run.

There was a Khazar yoke but, as the great Russian historian Ključevsky wrote, it was light and relatively benign¹⁰³.

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¹⁰³ V.O. KLYUCHEVSKY, *History of Russia*, vol. I, New York 1960, p. 50–52.

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