

The Title “khagan” in Old Slavic Traditions

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The term “khagan” as the title of Rus’ Prince was mentioned by Eastern and Latin sources in the 9th–10th centuries. In the 11th–12th centuries, the term khagan definitely refers to the Russian Princes Vladimir, the Baptist of Rus’, and his son Yaroslav the Wise. This title was given in Hilarion’s “Sermon on Law and Grace” (the first half of the 11th century). In “Igor Tale” (12th century), the title khagan refers to the representatives of the princely family in Chernigov, claiming authority over the territories from Middle Dnieper to Tmutorokan (former lands of the Khazar khaganate). Tsevetlin Stepanov demonstrated a similar situation in Danubiane Bulgaria. Bulgaria could be heir of the Avar Khaganate, but Bulgarian rulers did not claim to the title, because Avar lands were subject to the Carolingian Empire. The title khagan was given the Bulgarian ruler (in retrospect) by Chronicle of Pop Dukljanin (12th–16th centuries) and vested in the Baptist of Bulgaria Boris/Michael (d. 907). Byzantium recognised the title of tsar (basileus) for Bulgarian rulers. The name Michael associated with the name of Archangel and the ruler of “last” eschatological times (after 1000 A.D. apocalyptic expectations). The reign of the Byzantine Emperor Michael III marked the beginning of Russian history in the “Tale of Bygone years”; Vladimir (as well as Yaroslav) completed this history by the Baptism of the Rus’ (in Hilarion’s treatment). These deeds are most consistent with the universal (Imperial) title of the ruler of the edge of the Christian Oecumene.

The title *khagan*, considered as the most ancient title of Russian Princes, was mentioned by two different groups of sources. An ancient group (9th–10th centuries) is represented by controversial external Eastern and Latin sources.

The Russians (*Rhos*) were mentioned for the first time in the Carolingian *Annales Bertiniani* s.a. 839, when they appeared with the Byzantine embassy sent by Emperor Theophilus to Louis the Pious’ residence in Ingelheim on Rhine. The Embassy attended people (*Rhos*), who were sent by their ruler, the *chacanus*, to Constantinople “for the sake of friendship” but could not return to their land through the same way because this way was blocked by the “fierce Barbarians”. Theophilus begged Louis to miss friendly “divergences” over the Empire of the Franks, but Louis was supposed to investigate their origin. These

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people admitted that they are “from the tribe of Sueones” (Swedes). The Franks tried to oppose the onslaught of Vikings and Louis suspected the aliens were not “friends”, but spies, so he ordered that they were arrested. These Rhos people declared that their ruler (*rex*) was the *chacanus*,¹ and this declaration gave way to the modern discussion regarding whether these Russians obeyed the Khazarian *khagan/chacan* or they had their own ruler in a mysterious “Russian khaganate”.

In the recent Russian historiography, despite the apparent “normanist” nature of *Annales Bertiniani* (detecting the Scandinavian origin of initial Rus’), the “antinormanist” idea dominated: the first diplomatic initiative and the original Russian State was ruled by a ruler who made a claim to the Khazarian title *khagan*. Kiev was supposed to be the capital of this State. Taking into account the absence of any evidence of Kiev before the second half of the 9th century in recent hypotheses the capital of the “Russian (Rhos) Khaganate” is placed in the old Novgorod Hillfort or in Ladoga, where the Scandinavian finds are dated from the 9th and even from the 8th century. Ladoga seems to be preferable in such theories in an attempt to synchronise the archaeological data with the 839 Embassy, but the borders of the “Russian Khaganate” remains unclear, and its “capital” Ladoga was a small settlement in the first half of the 9th century.²

According to Elena A. Melnikova, the first Russian rulers of Scandinavian origin adopted the Khazarian title *khagan* to oppose their power to the archaic rule of the tribal Slav princes with their Pre-Slavonic title *knjaz*.³ However, there are no traces of this adoption in the official (Byzantine or Western) documents. Anton A. Gorsky considered the Varangians Askold and Dir (who ruled Kiev in the 960-970s, according to the Primary Chronicle) could be the Russian *khagans*.⁴ He relied on the traditional construction *ex silentio*. In his polemic letter on the titles of European sovereigns (871), addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Basil I, Louis II insisted that the Khazars (!) as well as “the Normans” (*Nortmani* – Varangian Rus) were not given the title of *khagan*, hence this title could be recognised for Russian Princes in Byzantium; however, the *khagan* was the acknowledged ruler of Khazaria, and the Russian Princes were

¹ *Annales Bertiniani*. Rec. G. Waitz. Hannoverae, 1883, s.a. 839; *Древняя Русь в свете зарубежных источников: хрестоматия: в 5 т. Т. IV: Западноевропейские источники*. Сост., пер. и коммент. А.В. Назаренко. Москва 2010, 17–21.

² Cf. В. Я. Петрухин, “Саркел и Бергинские анналы: хазарское начало русской истории?”, In: *Восточная Европа в древности и средневековье: XXVII Чтения памяти В.Т. Пашуто*, Отв. ред. Е. Мельникова, Москва 2015, 216–221; А. П. Толочко, *Очерки начальной Руси*. Санкт-Петербург 2015, 112–123.

³ Е. А. Мельникова, *Древняя Русь и Скандинавия*. Москва 2001, 120–121.

⁴ А. А. Горский, *Русь от славянского Расселения до Московского царства*. Москва 2004, 55–56.

called *arhonts*. Oleg, who murdered Askold and Dir in 882 and concluded a treaty with Byzantium in 911, was called *knjaz' / arhont* in this treaty.⁵

One could suppose that Askold and Dir who conquered Kiev – the tributary of the Khazars, could claim the Khazar title as rivals of Khazarian *khagan*. Moreover, these claims could reflect the information of the Oriental authors (cf. the almost identical texts by Ibn Rusta and Gardizi), ascending to the second half of the 9th century. However, these authors mentioned the *khaqan-rus* without specific localisation: *not in connection with* Kiev and even with the Slavs. These Russians lived in the Island (it might be possibly Scandinavia) and attacked the Slavs and Volga Bulgars from their ships.⁶

It is essential that in the years close to the Russian embassy of 838, the Khazarian *khagan* and his commander-in-chief *beg* sent their embassy to Theophilus asking for assistance in building the Sarkel fortress on the river Don which, according to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, was built around 840.⁷ The river Don was the main trade route for Khazaria as well as for the Russians (initial *Rus'*) who had Scandinavian (Swedish) origin: the oriental coins reached Northern Europe from the beginning of the 9th century onwards. One of the early hoards (around 800) was found in the so-called Right Bank (Tsimlyansk) fortress: Sarkel was situated on the opposite (left) bank of the Don (now at the bottom of Tsimlyansk Reservoir).⁸ A Khazarian imitation of dirham and a coin with Scandinavian graffiti characterise the cultural contacts of the owner of the hoard.⁹

A tile of the Byzantine type was also found in the excavations of the Right Bank fortress. It is remarkable that the material of the fortress on the right bank includes shingles that mirror the Byzantine construction traditions. According to the recent investigations of Valerij S. Flyorov, the impact of the Byzantine construction equipment was not only found in the fortress on the right bank but also in the Khazarian Semikarakory fortress in the lower Don

⁵ On discussion concerning the letter, cf. A. В. Назаренко, "Русь IX в.: обзор письменных источников" In: *Русь в IX–X вв. Археологическая панорама*, Отв. ред. Н. А. Макаров, Москва–Вологда 2012, 21–22.

⁶ Cf. H. Göckenjan–I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter*. Weisbaden 2001, 180–182; *Древняя Русь в свете зарубежных источников. Хрестоматия. Т. III. Восточные источники*. Сост. Т. М. Калинина, И. Г. Коновалова, Москва 2009, 43–58.

⁷ К. Багрянородный, *Об управлении империей*. Под ред. Г. Г. Литаврина, А. П. Новосельцева, Москва 1991, 42.

⁸ Cf. P. B. Golden. "The question of the Rus' Qaghanate," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* II. 1982, 96–97; A. Róna-Tas, "The Khazars and the Magyars." In: *The World of the Khazars. New Perspectives. Selected Papers from the Jerusalem 1999 International Khazar Colloquium*. Ed. P. B. Golden, H. Ben-Shammai, A. Róna-Tas, Leiden-Boston 2007, 275.

⁹ В. Я. Петрухин. *Саркел и Бертинские анналы*.

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Basin,¹⁰ The strengthening of the “domen” of the Khazarian Khagan could be connected with the complication of Khazar-Magyar relations. The Magyars were apparently threatening the international waterways on their way to Central Europe. These Magyars could be mentioned as “a fierce people” by the *Rhos* ambassadors. There are no traces of Russian (or Slavonic) organisation of state or *khaganate* in this period:¹¹ the *Rhos* ambassadors in 839 must have been the members of the Khazarian embassy to Constantinople.

To summarise, it appears that the initial (Scandinavian) *Rus'* recognised the sovereignty of the Khazarian khagan in the first half of the 9th century, but they demonstrated their claims to the title of *khagan* during their raids against the Slavic and Bulgarian tributaries of the Khazars in the second half of the 9th century.

In the second - Old-Russian group of sources (11th–12th–XII centuries), the title of *khagan* definitely confers the Russian Princes Vladimir, the Baptist of *Rus'*, and his son Yaroslav the Wise. This title was given in Hilarion's “Sermon on Law and Grace” (the first half of the 11th century). In a very curious Kievan graffito from the 11th century and in an obscure fragment of the “Igor Tale” (possibly from the 12th century),¹² the title *khagan* refers to representatives of Chernigov (Eastern) branch of Russian princely family,¹³ claiming the authority over the territories from the Middle Dnieper to Tmutorokan' – the former lands of the Khazarian Khaganate. Svjatoslav, prince of Chernigov, son of Yaroslav the Wise, who usurped Kiev in the 1070s, could be mentioned as the *khagan* in a Kievan graffito. His son, Oleg, prince of Tmutorokan', who tried to siege Chernigov in the end of the 11th century, could be endowed with this title in the “Igor tale”.¹⁴ However, only the founders of Christian Russia, Vladimir and Yaroslav were solemnly proclaimed by Hilarion to be *khagans* in the 11th century, the century after the fall of Khazaria.

The Bulgarian researcher Tsvetelin Stepanov demonstrates (after Ivan Venedikov) a similar situation in Danube Bulgaria.¹⁵ Bulgaria could be heir to the ruined Avar khaganate, but the Bulgarian rulers did not claim the title, because the Avar lands were subject to the Carolingian Empire. The title *khagan*

¹⁰ Т. М. Калинина, В. С. Флёров, В. Я. Петрухин, *Хазария в кросскультурном пространстве: историческая география, крепостная архитектура, выбор веры*. Москва 2014, 109 ff.

¹¹ А. З. Винников, “Донские славяне и алано-болгарский мир: мирное существование или противостояние”, In: *Хазары: Миф и история*. ed. В. Я. Петрухин, Е. Э. Носенко-Штейн, Москва 2010, 195.

¹² А. А. Зимин, *Слово о полку Игореве*. Санкт-Петербург 2006, 299–300.

¹³ С. А. Высоцкий, *Древнерусские надписи Софии Киевской XI–XIV вв.* Выпуск–Киев 1966, 49–52; С. А. Высоцкий, *Средневековые надписи Софии Киевской (По материалам граффити XI–XVII вв.)*. Киев 1976, 218.

¹⁴ М. Д. Каган, “Каган,” in: *Энциклопедия Слова о Полку Игореве*. отв. ред. О. В. Творогов, Т. З. Санкт-Петербург 1995, 3–4.

¹⁵ Ц. Степанов, *В очакване на Края: европейски измерения ок. 950 – ок. 1200г.* [Awaiting the End: European Dimensions, ca 950 - ca 1200] София 2016, 51 ff.

was given to the Bulgarian ruler by the Latin *Annales Anonymi presbyteri de Dioklea* (once again in retrospect: the *Annales* dates from the 12th to the 16th century) and vested in the Baptist of Bulgaria Boris/Michael (d. 907).¹⁶ The Byzantium recognised for Bulgarian rulers the title of tsar (*basileus*) of the Bulgars (!).¹⁷ The name Michael is associated with the name of the Archangel and the ruler of last times after 1000 A.D. apocalyptic expectations.¹⁸ The reign of the Byzantine Emperor Michael III marked the beginning of the Russian history in the “Tale of Bygone years”; Vladimir (as well as Yaroslav) completed this history by the Baptism of the Rus’ (in Hilarion’s treatment). These deeds are most consistent with the universal (Imperial) title of the ruler of the edge of the Christian world, but are not connected with actual political meaning.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Annales Anonymi presbyteri de Dioklea*. In: *Латински извори за българската история*. Т. 3. София. 1965, 170; cf. The Russian edition: *Летопись попа Дуκληнина*. Пер. и комм. С. В. Алексеев, Санкт-Петербург 2015, 50.

¹⁷ В. Дреус. “Коронование и брачный союз: повышение статуса болгарских правителей византийскими императорами в X в.,” In: *На языке даров: правила символической коммуникации в Европе 1000- 1700*. Отв. ред. Г. Альтхов и М. Бойцов, Москва 2016, 29–39.

¹⁸ И. Венедиков. “Легендата за Михаил каган.” In: *Преслав 2. сборник*. София 1976, 179–204.

¹⁹ A similar theory was connected with the rhetorical use of emperor title *tsar* as applied to the Russian holy princes (*kniazja*) Boris and Gleb: W. Vodoff. “Remarques sur ie valeur du tempie ‘tsar’ applique aux princes russes avant ie milieu du XV sicle,” *Oxford Slavonic papers. New series*. Vol. 2. Oxford, 1978, 8–14.