The Title "khagan" in Old Slavic Traditions

Vladimir Petrukhin*

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 Tmutarakan (former lands of the Khazar khaganate). Tsevtlin Stepanov demonstrated a similar situation in Danubian 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 Dukijanim (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 Oecumen.

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

* The National Research University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow
THE TITLE “KHAGAN”...

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 chacamus,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 hypothesises 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

---

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

---

237
Vladimir Petukhin

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 Khazar khanan. 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 khanan and his commander-in-chief beg sent their embassy to Theophilus asking for assistance in building the Sharkel 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). A Khazarian imitation of dirham and a coin with Scandinavian graffiti characterise the cultural contacts of the owner of the hoard.8

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

---

7 К. Багрянородный, Об управлении империей. Под ред. Г. Г. Литаврина, А. П. Новосельцева, Москва 1991, 42.
9 В. Я. Петрухин. Саркел и берингские анналы.
The Title "Khagan"...

Basin,10 The strengthening of the “domen” of the Khazaric 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 Khazaric embassy to Constantinople.

To summarise, it appears that the initial (Scandinavian) Rus’ recognised the sovereignty of the Khazaric 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 Kievian graffiti from the 11th century and in an obscure fragment of the “Igor Tale” (possibly from the 12th century), the title khagan refers to representatives of Chernigov (Eastern) branch of Russian princely family,12 claiming the authority over the territories from the Middle Dnieper to Tmuturokan’ – the former lands of the Khazaric Khaganate. Svjatoslav, prince of Chernigov, son of Yaroslav the Wise, who usurped Kiev in the 1070s, could be mentioned as the khagan in a Kievian graffiti. His son, Oleg, prince of Tmuturokan’, who tried to seize 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 Tsvetelina Stepanska 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. Петрушев, Хазария в кросскультурном пространстве: историческая география, крепостная архитектура, выбор веры. Москва 2014, 109 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). The Byzantium recognised for Bulgarian rulers the title of tsar (*basileus*) of the Bulgarians. The name Michael is associated with the name of the Archangel and the ruler of last times after 1000 A.D. apocalyptic expectations. 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.

---


