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by *George Huxley*

The story of the steppes is a chronicle of collisions. In the Middle Ages for half a millennium from the sixth century onwards waves of migrating peoples moved across the open country between the southern Urals and the Carpathians. Turkic peoples predominated, the Magyars being an exception, since they were of Finnic origin; the movements were mainly from East to West across the great rivers flowing southwards into the Caspian and the Euxine; and the displacements transformed the political geography of eastern Europe. First came the Avars, who were absorbed by their Slavonic subjects, so that as the Russian Primary Chronicle records, their disappearance became proverbial.¹ There followed the Bulgars, some of whom came from the plains to the North of the Caucasus to settle in Moesia; other Bulgars moved to the middle Volga, whereabouts the Turkic Chuvash language still recalls their presence. After the Bulgars came the Magyars, who were displaced into the Alföld at the end of the ninth century by the formidable Petchenegs; they in turn were subject to pressure from the Ghuzz thrusting westwards from their pasturelands beside the Ural river.

Such collisions did not occur only in the Middle Ages. In antiquity pastoral peoples originating in central Asia often displaced each other in rapid westerly movements. According to the report of the traveller Aristees of Prokonnesos given by Herodotos (4.13.2) the legendary one-eyed Arimaspians drove the Issedones from their territory. The Issedones in their turn expelled the Skyths; and by the Skyths the Kimmerians were driven to the coastland of the eastern Euxine — to the Kimmerian Bosphoros in the north and to Sinope in the south (4.12.2).

During the mediaeval displacements one of the steppe-peoples, the Chazars, was able to secure continuity of settlement. The Chazar confederacy came into being in the Pontic steppe to the North of the Caucasus under the overlordship of the western Türk, the On Oğ, in the sixth century. The union of tribes, of which the tribe Chazar was but one, soon acted independently, and their subordination to the On Oğ ended formally with the subjection of the western Türk to the Chinese in 659.² The Syriac chronicle ascribed to Zacharias of Mytilene refers in an ethnographic discussion of peoples living beyond the Caspian Gates to the Chazars together

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with the Bulgars, Avar and Hunnic remnants, and other peoples³; but it is not clear from this passage that the tribal confederacy dominated by the Chazars already existed — the *Chronicle* was composed not earlier than about 569. Two pieces of evidence, however, suggest that the Chazars, while dominant, were not the only *ethnos* in the tribal grouping called Chazar in the sources. First Michael the Syrian reports in his *Chronicle* a story of three nomadic brothers who came from Inner Skythia. One of them, Boulgaros by name, was allowed by the emperor Maurice to settle in Upper and Lower Moesia and Dacia. The other two departed to the country of the Alans near the Caspian Sea. The elder of the two, Chazaros, gave his name to their followers, who were accordingly called Chazars. Here the brothers represent associated *ethne*;⁴ in writing about them Michael preserves a fragment of late antique ethnography. Secondly, Constantine Porphyrogenitus reports that a people called Kabaroi consisting of three clans under one commander engaged in a civil war with the Chazars. The defeated remnant of the Kabaroi departed to the Tourkoi, by whom Constantine means the Magyars.⁵ The date of the civil war is not clear, but it was fought before the Magyars had moved from the western steppe into the Alföld late in the ninth century. Thus we may infer: not only was the Chazar state a confederacy but also a tribe named Chazar existed before the West Türk overlords amalgamated tribes in the steppe between the Volga and the Don in the sixth century.

Once the confederacy had come into being the Byzantine authorities were quick to perceive the political and strategic advantages of good diplomatic relations with Chazaria. Textbooks emphasize that the Chazars were capable of providing advance warning about potentially troublesome movements in the steppes, whence nomads might migrate swiftly to threaten imperial outposts in the Crimea or even in the hinterland of Constantinople itself. Another commonplace in textbooks of Byzantine history is the correct statement that the Chazars were strategically vital to Byzantium because they blocked the advance, first of the Persians and later of the Arabs beyond the passes of the Caucasus. Chazaria, however, was not a consistently impenetrable barrier to Arab invasion; in the disastrous year A.H. 119/737 A.D. Marwān took his troops beyond the Chazar capital Atil in the Volga delta and defeated the Khagan, who had fled far northwards to the Burṭās, a Finno-Ugric people subject to him.⁶ The Khaganate was temporarily converted to Islam, but the Arabs were not able to hold territory permanently beyond the Caspian Gates, and the strategic position was secured by the

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successful campaigning of the emperor Leo III. in Asia Minor. Yet the Byzantines were still not able to rely on the Chazars to block the Caucasian passes without fail.

Another strategic consideration, one vital for the understanding of Byzantine diplomacy beyond the Euxine, is that imperial dealings with people of the Caucasus affected their northerly neighbours, the Chazars. The peoples of especial concern to the Byzantines were the Alans, the Iberians of Georgia, and the Abasgians. All of them appear intermittently in the Greek sources — notably in Nikephoros, Theophanes and his Continuator, and Skylitzes, but the underlying motives of Byzantine diplomacy at particular times during a period of half a millennium do not emerge from the texts. The Greek and the non-Greek testimonies have to be put together, but the linguistic prerequisites for such combinations are numerous. The present writer can handle Greek and Old Slavonic evidence with some confidence. He has taken advice about Hebrew texts concerning Chazars. Arabic, Armenian and Georgian witnesses are used in translation. But despite these disqualifications, which, one may suspect, are shared by many Byzantine historians in one degree or another, the attempt at combination is necessary and can be fruitful.

The first context is the campaigning, or rather crusade, of the emperor Heraclius against the allies and outposts of the Persians in the Caucasus in the 620's. A narrative of events can be constructed from statements in Nikephoros and Theophanes. The pertinent details are these: firstly, when in 624 Heraclius, having left his winter quarters in Caucasian Albania, intended to advance directly against Chosroes in Persian-held territory, the strongest opposition to the proposed campaign came from his Lazian, Iberian, and Abasgian allies and their followers. Later the Lazoi and Abasgoi deserted from Heraclius' force in a moment of danger, when a Persian army was in hot pursuit, and returned to their homes. The emperor, needing other allies, called in the Chazars — Theophanes describes them as "Turks from the East, whom they name Chazars".⁷ The Chazars advanced by way of the Caspian Gates into Adraigan (Azerbaijan), where they took Persian prisoners and put towns and villages to the torch. Their commander, who was called Ziebēl, is said by Theophanes to have been second in dignity to the Khagan.⁸ When Ziebēl met Heraclius outside Tiflis, the Turkic troops did obeisance to the emperor; and Ziebēl himself expressed delight at a picture of the emperor's daughter Eudokia, according to Nikephoros⁹ — the name Eudokia is not otherwise attested for a

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daughter of Heraclius; as Bury suggested, Epiphaneia may be intended.¹⁰ (In the event the maiden did not have to endure matrimonial banishment in Chazaria, since Ziebēl was killed soon after the meeting). Ziebēl sent a large detachment of his troops with Heraclius, who again invaded Persian territory in 627; but these Tourkoi, that is, Chazars, seeing winter coming on and suffering from the inroads of the Persians, gradually withdrew.

To comprehend the diplomatic background to these events we turn to Armenian and Georgian testimonies. Neither Nikephoros nor Theophanes explains the negotiations prior to the meeting between Heraclius and Ziebēl, but we learn from the *History of the Caucasian Albanians* ascribed to Movsēs Dasxurançi that the proposal for an alliance against Persia was brought to the Chazars by a Byzantine ambassador called Andrē, or Andreas. Movsēs confirms that Ziebēl, whom he calls Ĵebu 'Xak'an, was second in dignity among the Chazars,¹¹ as Theophanes states. In the *History* of Movsēs he is described as Viceroy of the King of the North and second to him in kingship. The Armenian word used here for kingship is *t'agaworut'ean*; it does not entail that the Chazars had already introduced their system of divided rule, shared between Khagan and Pek, as it is found in later sources. Ziebēl is simply second in rank to the Khagan of the Chazar confederacy.

From Theophanes' account of the withdrawal of the Chazar troops from the army of Heraclius at the onset of winter¹² no-one could infer that there was to be continuing military action by the Chazars in the Caucasus on behalf of the emperor. But according to Movsēs not only did they attack Albania at his behest, until Chosroes persuaded them to desist; but also in the thirty-eighth year of Chosroes' reign, that is, sometime in 628, the Chazars besieged Tiflis. They withdrew at the approach of a Persian force; but in the following year they returned and took the city.¹³ Thus the Abasgoi, Lazoi, and Iberians proved to be of far less use to Heraclius than did the Chazars; and as for the pro-Persian Albanians, they suffered by having their land ravaged by the Chazars and, as Movsēs also reports, by the emperor's army too.

Georgian evidence also shows how the Chazar alliance benefited the empire during the crusade against Persia. Stephen I., the Guaramid remained faithful to Chosroes when Heraclius invaded Iberia, but he died during the Chazar siege of Tiflis in 627. When the city fell to the Chazars in 628 a replacement of Stephen was installed there; he was Adarnase Patrikios the Chosroid, who had previously been designated as Presiding Prince; having assisted in

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the siege, he thereafter ruled in the imperial interest.¹⁴ Thus the Chazars set up a government on behalf of Byzantium, a result we could not have inferred from the texts of Nikephoros and Theophanes.

The next context is the quarrel between the Chazars and the Bulgar-Onorgoundors of Pontic or Great Bulgaria. Not all the disturbed Bulgars departed to Moesia or to the Volga-Kama country. Some, as we learn from Theophanes, stayed behind near the northeastern shore of the Euxine and became tributaries of the Chazars. According to Theophanes, they were still paying the tribute in his own time.¹⁵ The Bulgar remnant in the Pontic steppe provided a link between the Chazars and the Bulgars farther to the West, who established themselves under their leader Asparouch between the Dniester and the Danube,¹⁶ in about 679. Later they moved further southwards into Moesia. The connexion between Bulgars and Chazars was useful to Byzantium during Justinian II's negotiations with the Chazaria.

The narrative of Justinian's experiences in exile in Cherson and in Phanagoria is episodic and hard to disentangle in the Greek sources. However, some general inferences can be drawn from the disconnected details. Since the Khagan gave his sister to Justinian in marriage, the wily Chazar ruler thought that the fugitive emperor still had diplomatic value. The bride took the name Theodora as a clear indicator that her husband was determined again to become emperor in Constantinople, so that a second Theodora would rule with the second Justinian. Her brother cannot have been unaware of the intentions of his new brother-in-law. According to Theophanes he yielded to the protests of the emperor Apsimar to the extent of telling his agent in Phanagoria, Papatzys, and also the Chazar Governor in Bosporos, Balgitzis, that they were to murder Justinian, but not until he gave the word. Theodora, alleges Theophanes, was informed of the plot by a household slave and told her husband. Justinian then enticed the two men successively to interviews and throttled them.¹⁷ The leaking of the plot, with the slave as intermediary, may well have been deliberate. The Khagan could be seen to have heeded the protest of Apsimar; at the same time it was in his long-term interest to have Justinian in Byzantium, married to his sister, and tributary.

When Justinian left Phanagoria to recover his throne, he placed Theodora in safe keeping with her brother; and when the time came to fetch her and the son to whom she had meanwhile given birth, the restored emperor sent a fleet. The loss of many ships and their

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crews caused the Khagan to remonstrate. Had Justinian imagined that a war-fleet would be necessary? Two or three ships would have been enough to collect his wife and son.¹⁸ Justinian had become so unbalanced in mind that a large fleet may have been sent. The tale, however, shows that the Khagan was determined to remain on good terms with his suspicious brother-in-law. Patience might yet be rewarded: the Khagan's nephew might yet become emperor in Constantinople.

It is in the diplomatic context of the birth of Theodora's son Tiberius that the mention of the Khagan in the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* should be examined. In section 37, *peri theamatōn*, it is stated that there was at Constantinople a gilt statue in a basilica (thus much is clear, although the passage is slightly corrupt); the figure was kneeling.¹⁹ It was of Justinian II. when he was emperor for the second time. Next to him was his wife, the sister of Ibouzeros Gliabanos. Here alone do we learn the name of Justinian's brother-in-law. The text adds that Terbelis the Bulgarian often sat there for the handing over of tribute, as had Gliabanos (or Gliavanos) the Chazar. The statement that Terbelis often received tribute in person in the city is acceptable, because he had been honoured with the dignity of Caesar after assisting in the restoration of Justinian to power in 705. But would the Chazar Khagan also have come in person to receive tribute? That he came to Constantinople is the clear statement of the text. It has been suggested that he came with his sister and nephew to the City after Justinian sent for them;²⁰ and if the plot was deliberately revealed to Justinian in Phanagoria, then the Khagan would have been a welcome visitor, to whom recompense would have been payable. That Terbelis and the Khagan of the Chazars were present at the same time is not stated, but that tribute was paid to Chazaria as well as to Bulgaria need not be doubted. The payments to Bulgaria soon brought results; the Bulgars of Moesia were again on good terms with Byzantium in the great siege of the city in 717/8, when they inflicted much damage upon the Arabs,²¹ thereby indirectly helping the Chazars also.

Towards the end of Justinian's second reign the Chazar Khagan gave up his support of the increasingly mad emperor and instead favoured Bardanes, who had fled to Chazaria. The abandonment of Justinian by the Khagan implies no diminution of the Chazars' desire for friendship with the empire, a friendship all the more needed in face of the growing Arab threat in the Caucasus and in Asia Minor. Meanwhile the empire had been attempting a forward

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policy in the Caucasus. Abasgia had been won for the empire by the first Justinian, but already in the first decade of the eighth century Arab influence was strong there, and also in Iberia and Lazike, as Theophanes states.²²

It was at this time that Justinian II., who was suspicious of the future emperor Leo III., sent him on a dangerous mission to the Alans of the Caucasus. Alania was cut off from the coast by the territory of Abasgia, but with local guides Leo made his way from Phasis to Apsilia and over the mountains to the Alans. This Iranian people, whose descendants are the Ossetes, had been pushed into the high valleys of the northern Caucasus during the late antique migrations across the steppe and the establishment of Chazar power.

The narrative of Theophanes is full of circumstantial detail; it could well come from an account by Leo of his embassy to the Alans.²³ Leo had left funds behind at Phasis, but Justinian treacherously ordered their confiscation. The Abasgians, learning of the loss, urged the Alans and their ruler Itaxes²⁴ to hand over Leo to them, since he would never pay them. However, the Alans said that they did not need the money. But after a second urging from the Abasgians a party of Alans went to Abasgia — with the intention of spying out the land. Abasgians came with the returning embassy to take Leo, but by previous arrangement he was rescued by Alan soldiers. The Alans then attacked Abasgia, taking advantage of the knowledge obtained by the negotiating party. Leo's crossing of the high Caucasus on snowshoes²⁵ and subsequent adventures do not concern us. The significance of his tale is that it shows Alania being entered through Abasgia; but to travel from the coast in safety required that Abasgia be friendly. Beyond, the Chazars were easily reached from Alania. Since Alans and the Abasgians were traditionally enemies, there was a persistent danger that if the Alans, who were by tradition friends of Byzantium, were to attack Chazaria, the Chazars would retaliate by encouraging the Abasgians to cause trouble to imperial outposts on the eastern coast of the Euxine. For the present, however, all was well between the rulers of Chazaria and the empire. Friendship was strengthened by the marriage-alliance of Leo's son Constantine with the Khagan's daughter Čiček, 'Flower', who gave her name to the vestment known at Constantinople as the Tzitzakion.²⁶ Her son was Leo IV., 'the Chazar'.

When trouble came between Byzantium and Chazaria, the focus of friction lay in the Crimea, at the periphery of both empires. John, an iconophile, had been ordained Bishop of Crimean Gotthia at

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Mzkheta in Iberia. He led the opponents of Chazar domination in his diocese and even took some of his flock into battle from his seat at Doros to the *kleisourai*, the passes inland. But he was betrayed to the Chazars, whose local Governor kept him in prison at Phoullai.²⁷ Gotthia was not formally part of the Byzantine empire at the time of the battles, about 786; the iconoclastic rulers of Byzantium tended, rather, to regard the Crimea as a convenient dumping-ground for troublesome iconophiles. The Chazars however would have assumed that the Bishop had been acting with Byzantine approval, the more so since he had recently visited the Patriarch Paul in Constantinople; and even if military gains in Chazar territory were impossible, it is likely in this period that Byzantium had large religious ambitions towards Chazaria: the so-called 'Ikono-klastennotiz' in Paris.gr. 1555A lists under the Eparchy of Gotthia Doros the metropolis followed by seven other Bishoprics. Three of them are *ethnē* and may be interpreted as Chazars, Onogours (the Bulgar-Onogour Pontic remnant tributary to the Chazars), and the Hunnic remnant in the northern Caucasus. The other names are of places: Atil (or Itil), the Chazar capital on the lower Volga; Terek, the river near the summer residence of the Khagan on the western shore of the Caspian; and Chouales, an unidentified place whose name may be preserved in the Old Slavonic name of the Caspian, *Khvaliskoye*. That Orthodox Bishops ever resided in these places is doubtful, but the list is significant for Byzantine diplomatic intentions.²⁸

The Chazar riposte, made easier by the weakness of Irene's government in the war against the Arabs, was to try to win over the Christians of the Caucasus. When the Iberian prince Nerses fled from Tiflis to safety from the Arabs, he took with him the Arab convert Abo. The *Life* of St. Abo, who was martyred in 786 after his return to Tiflis, tells how Nerses and his followers were made welcome both by the Chazar Khagan and by the Christian Prince of Abasgia. The *Life* reports incidentally that there were many Christian towns and villages in Chazaria; but it makes no mention of any of the Chazars then being converts to Judaism.²⁹ The friendly Prince of Abasgia who welcomed the fugitives from Iberia was Leo II. The *Georgian Annals* state that he was a son of a daughter of the Chazar king; they record also that the Chazars helped him to be independent of the Byzantines and to take possession of Abkhazia and western Georgia as far inland as the Lixi mountains. To celebrate his independence Leo, who reigned from 766/7 to 810/11 according to C. Toumanoff, adopted the title 'King of Abasgia'.³⁰

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Leo had, it seems, already attained to some independence before 786, because the *Life* of St. Abo, in listing Byzantine outposts in the eastern Euxine, mentions Trapezous, then the *parembole* at Apsarea, and finally Nikopsis, but no place further northwards on the coast. When Leo had consolidated his kingdom, he moved his capital to Kutaisi; his dominion then extended from the passes leading to Alania in the North and at least as far southwest as the Ćorok valley.

To counter Abasgian independence and expansion, efforts of propaganda were first necessary. Military action did not follow until the reign of the emperor Theophilos. Two documents of the early ninth century reveal Byzantine ambition to reestablish Constantinopolitan religious authority in the eastern Pontic coastlands. The first is the *Life* of St. Andrew written by Epiphanius of the monastery Ἐὼν Καλλιστράτων. Epiphanius may have spent part of his life as an iconodule exile, because he claims to have visited some of the coastal places where St. Andrew had preached. In Bosphoros he was told that the inhabitants had accepted the teaching of the Saint; there also he received relics of St. Simon. Similarly in Cherson the local people told him of St. Andrew's visit. The Saint had been in Theodosia too, but now, says Epiphanius, there is not a trace of human presence in the place. From Bosphoros the Saint went by ship to Sinope where he appointed a certain Philologos bishop. The journey continued thence to Byzantium and to Patras. Epiphanius thus conveniently links the Pontic evangelization with the heart of the empire and with a city dedicated to the Saint.³¹

The emphasis upon the Caucasus and the eastern Euxine in the Epiphanian *Life* is strong. St. Andrew with St. Simon visits Alania, Abasgia, and Sebastopolis. In Zichia, where Andrew had preached, the people, laments Epiphanius, is still half without faith. Worst of all were a mysterious nation call Chersakes. They were a εὐπερίστατον ἔθνος, an expression perhaps meaning 'easily tempted to sin'.³² Still are they strong against the Faith. Liars are they, and carried about by every wind. Who are these persistently wicked people, these Chersakes? They may well be Chazars in disguise. Without anachronism Epiphanius could not write that Chazars resisted St. Andrew. The name Chersakes did service for them. Yet, oddly, a Chersakine vessel takes the Saint from Cherson to Sinope.

The second document is the Synaxarium relating the martyrdom of Saint Orentios and his six brothers. This, Père Peeters suggested, seems to reflect the line of communication in the eastern Euxine after the creation of the Thema Chaldia.³³ It may therefore be as

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early as the 820s. The fictitious tale, however, is placed in the time of the emperor Maximinian. The brothers are sent to a Doux in Satala to have their faith broken. They resist and are despatched to the barbarians by way of Trapezous. At each of the *parembolai* on the way a brother is martyred. St. Eros succumbs at Kaine Parembole on 22 June. St Orentios is thrown into the water off Rhizaion; after the Archangel Gabriel has brought him ashore, he is buried there on 24 June. Finally, after a succession of deaths, the seventh martyr Longinos, who dies in a storm off Lazike, is buried in Pityous on 28 July. The fictions provide the hagiographical coordinates of tomb cult and festal date conveniently tied to appropriate sailing times from a Byzantine base in Trapezous.

A new threat caused a rapprochement between the Chazars and the Byzantines in the reign of the emperor Theophilos. Scandinavian Rhos were already venturing down the great rivers to the Euxine from the Baltic and Novgorod. Sometime in the 820s, not long after the death of St. George of Amastris, a force of Rhos sailed across the Euxine and attacked that city on the Paphlagonian coast. They had come by way of the sea called in the *Life* 'the Propontis',³⁴ that is the Sea of Azov, between the River Don (Tanais) and the Euxine proper. The Rhos were as great a menace to the Chazars as to Byzantine outposts, since the attackers had come down the Don through Chazaria. Rhos ambassadors, as we learn from Prudentius in the *Annals of St. Bertin*,³⁵ visited the court of Theophilos, who sent them on to the Frankish court. Their ruler bore the title Khagan according to Prudentius: the Turkic title may well have come to the Rhos from their Slavonic subjects and more remotely from Chazaria, because the *Russian Primary Chronicle (Povest')* shows that Chazar power at its height extended far to the northwest from Itil (Atil) through the river systems and over the portages. The tributary peoples obligated to the Chazars included the Vyaticians near the headwaters of the Oka. Others were the Radimichians in the basin of the Sozh', a river which rises near Smolensk and flows into the Dniepr; the Severians who lived beside the Desna, Seym', and Sula rivers; and the Polyanians dwelling in forests on hills near the Dniepr. The neighbourhood of Kiev itself is also said to have been tributary to the Chazars, until in 862, according to the *Povest'*, Askold and Dir came from Novgorod to establish their rule. The list of tributary peoples shows that the Chazars controlled the strategic portages linking the Volga and Don systems with that of the Dniepr. Of great significance is the watershed south of Kursk where the Seym rises. Here the high ground commands the passage

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between the Dniepr and the Don-Donets systems; it is no accident that to hold this ground the greatest tank battle of the Second World War was fought hereabouts. This was the country of the Severians, whom Oleg won over to be tributary to himself — in 884 according to the *Povest'*.³⁶

To help in the defence of Chazaria Theophilos sent a force of military engineers, at the request of the Khagan and Pek, to build Sarkel on the Don. If the site excavated by Professor Artamonov near Tsimlyansk is Sarkel, then the fort was placed too far south to control the portage between the Don and the Volga where the rivers are closest to each other. The presence of the great Soviet reservoir makes topographical inferences here more difficult, but the intention in building Sarkel may have been to dominate the lower Don; and a Byzantine presence at the site is suggested by capitals of columns and other architectural fragments; they were perhaps brought by the engineers from Cherson. Skylitzes states that Sarkel was built as a defence against the Petchenegs,³⁷ but most scholars have assumed that the 'White House', as the Porphyrogenitus interprets the name Sarkel,³⁸ was a joint Byzantine and Chazar response to the danger from the Rhos. Marquart, for example, denied that Petchenegs were near the Don by about 830 when Sarkel was built. But his denial is not conclusive. The Petchenegs were a mobile people. They had already penetrated to the country beside the lower Dniepr in the third quarter of the ninth century.³⁹ So it is quite possible that they were beside the lower Don in the second quarter. Sarkel, then, would have been well placed to monitor movements of Rhos on the river and of Petchenegs across it. Watch could also be kept from other riverside forts.

Diplomatic recompense for assistance at Sarkel was owed to the Byzantines. Two concessions may be inferred. The first was a willingness to recognise the empire's rights in the Crimea; Petronas, the designer of Sarkel, suggested the creation of a Thema based in Cherson; the new administration there was installed promptly and without difficulty, soon after his return from Sarkel.⁴⁰ The second concession was a free hand to bring Abasgia back from independence into formal dependence upon the empire. The evidence for the change is the subsequent campaigning of Byzantines in Abasgia; the king of Abasgia received no help from the Chazara, but in the event expeditions under the command of Theoktistos to Abasgia were not a success; there were two, perhaps three, Byzantine attacks on the Abasgian coast in the reign of Theophilos, one of which can be dated by a solar eclipse of 5 May 840 — the band of totality

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passed over Abasgia.⁴¹ The evidence for these attacks is given in *Theophanes Continuatus*,⁴² they show the determination, despite failures, of Byzantium to reestablish authority there. One reason for the persistence was the continuing need to reopen communications with the ever-friendly Alans in their Caucasian redoubts. The success of the Abasgians' defence owed much to the support of the Emir of Tiflis.⁴³

The next diplomatic move was the mission of Constantine-Cyril and Methodios to the Khagan. Chazar emissaries at Constantinople, claiming to believe in a single God, asked for a scholar to be sent to debate with Jews and Muslims in Chazaria. According to his Slavonic *Life* Cyril was specifically commanded by the emperor (Michael III.) to expound the Trinity.⁴⁴ The stay in Cherson on the way was partly devoted to the study of Hebrew, a needed preparation for debate in the presence of the Khagan near the Caspian Gates. In the debate many quotations from the Old Testament were deployed. The text shows that the author of the *Life* follows the original Greek account of the brothers' mission to Chazaria in regarding this particular Khagan at least as having not yet definitely embraced Judaism, even if he knew much about the Old Testament. However, the mission was not a success, though a few converts were won and some Byzantine prisoners were repatriated. Also, on the outward journey Cyril had persuaded a Chazar chieftain to desist from besieging a Christian city. The saint's words were strengthened by his authority as an ambassador travelling at the request of the Khagan, It is not likely that the chieftain acted with the approval of the government in Itil, whose inability to control the outlying parts of Chazaria was becoming evident.

Ninety years later when Constantine Porphyrogenitus was putting together his work on imperial foreign policy, relations with Chazaria had soured. The conversion of the rulers to Judaism was not the reason — the Porphyrogenitus does not even mention the matter. The trouble was that the Chazars could not be expected to keep the Rhos in check. Oleg had made several of the peoples at the portages tributary, and on the Dniepr use had to be made of subsidised Petchenegs at the rapids to attack the Rhos on their way, to trade or to raid, in Byzantine territories.⁴⁵ Byzantine diplomacy was now directed to support of the Alans, not of the Chazars.

Alania was once again accessible through Abasgia, which had been brought back into dependency upon the empire. A formal acknowledgement of Abasgian dependency lay in the use of the title *Exousiastes*⁴⁶ in correspondence sent from Constantinople. The

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change cannot be dated exactly, but in about 916 the Patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos sent a letter to George II. of Abasgia addressing him as τῷ ὑπερφυεστάτῳ καὶ ἠγαπημένῳ ἡμῶν υἱῷ τῷ περιδόξῳ ἔξουσιαστῇ Ἀβασγίας.⁴⁷ This had been written soon after the Prince had succeeded his father. Nikolaos urges him to help the Archbishop of Alania among that foreign tribe the Alans and in that strange land Alania. Earlier Nikolaos had addressed George's father Constantine III. simply as τῷ περιδόξῳ ἔξουσιαστῇ Ἀβασγίας, but the letter praises Constantine warmly for helping the Archbishop of Alania in his work and for provision of hospitality to him.⁴⁸ The Archbishop himself, Peter, meanwhile had found his task burdensome; he complained that Nikolaos had forgotten him. Peter had been appointed in 914 or 915. Euthymios and the other monks who had been his forerunners in Alania had, it seems, been more effective missionaries and less ready to complain.⁴⁹

The missionary efforts were continued even in Chazaria. In response to a request from Chazaria for presbyters the Archbishop of Cherson was instructed by Nikolaos to go into the country to make the needed arrangements, and then to return to Cherson.⁵⁰ The ecclesiastical authorities could expect little success in that barren ground, but they did not lose hope. It was, however, in the wilds of Alania that their policies were rewarded.

There are in *De Administrando Imperio* two chapters treating relations between Alans and Chazars. The first explains that the Ghuzz can attack Chazaria and so can the Alans.⁵¹ The second took the fancy of Arnold Toynbee⁵² and, following him, of Arthur Koestler.⁵³ The argument is that if the ruler of the Alans prefers friendship with the east Romans to friendship with the Chazars, he can attack Chazars on their way to Sarkel and τὰ Κλίματα (districts of the Crimea and its hinterland)⁵⁴ and Cherson. Cherson and Ta Klimata can thus enjoy peace, because the Chazars are not strong enough to fight on two fronts, against Cherson and against the Alans. The Alans are not expected to be continuously hostile to the Chazars, but the intention is to turn intermittent hostility to the emperor's advantage. In one of the tenth century Chazarian Hebrew documents, the Schechter text,⁵⁵ it is stated that at one time only the king of Alan supported the Chazar King Benjamin against his enemies, who included Maqedon, that is, the Byzantines. The writer remarks that the Chazar king made peace with the king of Alan, since the kingdom of Alan is stronger and crueller than all the other nations which are around him. The text also claims that some Alans observed the law of the Jews. However, in the following reign, that

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of Aaron in Chazaria, the king of Alan was enticed by the king of Greece and fought against the Chazar. Later the king of Alan repented and begged forgiveness; he was treated kindly by the Khagan, who took his daughter as a wife for his son Joseph. Joseph, having become king, gave asylum to Jews who had been persecuted by the emperor Romanos Lakapenos. Thus in the three reigns of Benjamin, Aaron, and Joseph from about 880 to the mid-tenth century, the Alans had been friendly, then hostile, then friendly again towards the Chazars. The period of hostility coincides with the missionary activity directed by Nikolaos Mystikos, as Pritsak and Golb point out.⁵⁶ A remark of alMasūdī is consistent with the inferred sequence of events. He states that in 320 A.H (932/3) the Alans gave up Christianity and drove out the bishops and priests who had come to them previously from the Byzantine emperor.⁵⁷ However, that was not the end of Christianity in Alania.

The Schechter text is valuable also because it shows the Chazars to have known that Romanos Lakapenos incited the Rhos against them. In encouraging the Rhos Byzantium hastened the ruin of Chazaria. The death blow to the central power of the Khagan and the Pek was delivered by Svyatoslav. According to the *Povest'*, Svyatoslav visited the Vyatichians in 964 in their lands beside the Oka and the Volga. In 965 the prince, again according to the *Povest'*, attacked the Chazars and took their city of Bela Vezha.⁵⁸ This place, as Marquart supposed, may have been Itil, not Sarkel.⁵⁹ In the course of the same campaign Svyatoslav won victories over the Iasians (who were Alans) and the Kasogians (or Čerkesses). The great invasion of Chazaria is also described under 358 A.H. (968/9) by Ibn Hauqal; he mentions the ruin of the Chazar cities Semender and Itil and adds that the Rhos also wreaked destruction upon Burtas and Bulgars of the Volga.⁶⁰

Out of the wreckage of the Chazar state little survived. The last mention of Chazaria in a Byzantine chronicle is in Skylitzes: in January 1016 the emperor Basil II. sent an expedition against Chazaria. With the help of Rhos the land was subjected, its ruler George son of Tzoules having been captured in the first assault.⁶¹ Here Chazaria cannot signify the whole of the old Khaganate. It may be that a small successor state survived with the name Chazaria, somewhere beside the northeastern Euxine or the Sea of Azov. With his name, George the captured ruler is likely to have been a Christian, not a Jew. The fate of Chazarian Judaism is not known. Byzantine sources give no account of the fate of the believers after the fall of Itil and the breakup of the state.

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The Chazars of the steppe vanished, but their neighbours and predecessors the Alans did not. Nor did Byzantium forget them and their attenuated Christianity. In 998 the Patriarch of Constantinople issued special regulations for the supply of wine and cheese to the Metropolitan Nikolaos of Alania during his journeys to and from Byzantium. The rules were sent to the monastery of Epiphanius in Kerasous, where the Metropolitan might have to wait long for fine weather. After his death Alan clerics had exploited his privileges at the expense of the monastery; the Patriarch had to issue a *hypomnema* concerning the matter in 1024.⁶² The patriarchal documents thus show that travel for ecclesiastical purposes to and from Alania continued. The continuing significance of Alania is shown also by the change of Alania to the standing of a Metropolis from an Archbishopric.⁶³

Even in the difficult years of the Latin tenure in Constantinople Orthodox Churchmen recognised an obligation to Alania. The moralist Theodore, author of *Ἠθικά*, was active in pastoral work at that time. His epistolary address, the *Alanikos*, shows him travelling by way of Cherson to the mountains of the Caucasus. He knows that in former times the Alans had been more widely dispersed; they had again, he remarks, been sending out settlers to other places.⁶⁴ He so deplors the doctrinal ignorance of the local clergy that in some passages a note of despair intrudes: who is he to have been compelled to heal by his preaching the ills the people of Alania feed?⁶⁵ They are Christians in name only.⁶⁶ His address is reminiscent of the grim mission led by Peter of Alania three centuries earlier among the *ethnē* in the service of the faith. Yet something was achieved even before Theodore's time.

In the northern Caucasus an inscription of the eleventh or twelfth century in Old Ossetic commemorates four men and gives also the names of their fathers.⁶⁷ The text begins with the Greek abbreviation *Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς Χ(ριστό)ς* followed by *ὁ ἄγι(ος) Ν(ι)κόλαος*. The names follow with *φουρτ*, meaning in Ossetic 'son of', between son and father.⁶⁸ At the end, according to L. Zgusta's interpretation, are the words ANH TZHP (= *ani cyrtä*), meaning 'their stele' in Ossetic.⁶⁹ This remarkable testimony to the combination of Byzantine and local cult was found by the River Zelenčuk, a tributary of the Kuban'.

Theodore of Alania's mention of settlers sent out by the Alans is an authentic piece of local knowledge. A body of Iasi (or Alans) joined the Cumans in the steppe to the North of the Caucasus. Groups of the two peoples migrated to Hungary, where they are

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likely to have arrived ahead of the Mongols. Iasi are first attested in Hungary in 1318. Placenames show a concentration to the West of the Theiss River. A Latin-Iasian wordlist, probably from the district between Buda and Estergom, dates from 1422.⁷⁰ It shows the Iranian character of the Iasian language and has close affinities with Ossetic. For example, Iasian *dan* 'water' is common Iranian; a form of the word survives in the modern Ossetic Digorian and Ironian dialects as *don*. Iasian was still being spoken in parts of Hungary in the sixteenth century. Rumanian Jassy may also attest the presence of migrant Alans.

Christianity in late mediaeval Chazaria was no more than a memory. But in Alania, secure in its fastnesses to the North of the Darialan, the Gate of the Alans, the devoted work of Peter, Theodore, and others had left a permanent impress upon the beliefs and folklore of the mountainy people. In their religion a prominent protector was the master of the storm, Uacilla, the Ossetic manifestation of Elias. Another champion, St. George, is Uastirji, or in the Digorian dialect Uaskergi. The frequent prefix Uac 'Saint' originally signified a prodigy, and thence a supernatural being. In Ossetic 'Georges' and 'Eliases' are also generic names of spirits (represented by the plurals *uastirjitaë* and *uacillataë*) who were attacked by the Narts. Thus the result of adopting Byzantine Saints' names in Ossetic lore was that demons fought heroes called St. Eliases and St. Georges.⁷¹ Benveniste thought that the names were of Russian Orthodox origin, a supposition which would imply a borrowing as late as the eighteenth century; but the multiple heroes are so deeply embedded in the folklore that a mediaeval borrowing from Byzantine missionaries is likely. Similarly, Uas-totor is St. Theodore in disguise: he is a patron of wolves. The composite spirit Faelvaera, a patron of smaller livestock, became an entire class of spirits. The name is of saintly origin, being a conjunction of *Flor*-⁷² and *Laur*-. Another notable survivor is Donbettir (in Ironian) or Donbettaer (in Digorian), a water spirit who is St. Peter of the Water in disguise. A wheel rolled against enemies is Uoinoni calx 'the Wheel of St. John'; and atinaeg, a ritual at harvest, takes its name from St. Athenogenes.⁷³

The folklore of the Ossetes helps to explain the near despair of Theodore of Alania in his attempts to convert their thirteenth century ancestors. How was an educated Byzantine to cope with a society in thrall to spirits of the woods and the hearth and to male and female sorcerers who perpetuated shamanic practice in their annual visits to Kuris, the meadow of the dead?⁷⁴ It was a society

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open to Christian influence but, as Theodore wrote, Christian in name only. The Faith made even less progress in Chazaria, though there too Byzantine effort had not been lacking. Long had the Chazars clung to their Altaic shamanism. For a time they had been eclectic, while being strongly affected by the Jews in their midst. But when, in the late ninth century, both sectors of state, that of the Khagan and that of the Pek, had opted for Judaism and so also for diplomatic compromise between Christendom and Islam, Byzantium began to direct greater missionary effort towards the Caucasus and to the greatest of the new threats, that of the Northmen. Already in 867 Photios proudly asserted in an encyclical to the Patriarchs of the Orient that Rhos, having been converted from paganism, had received a bishop.⁷⁵ Hopes of stabilising the steppe peoples through the agency of the Chazars were giving way to the need to face and to tame the menace looming from the North. The Chazars were not yet expendable, but in Constantinopolitan diplomacy, from Photios' time onwards, the Rhos had priority. The realignment of policy was prescient: within a generation of the fall of Itil Vladimir was converted. But in deeper perspective the strategic beneficiaries of Byzantium's diplomatic abandonment of the Chazars can be seen; the beneficiaries were the Seljuks.⁷⁶

Notes

1. *Povest'*, tr. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass. 1953) 57 (12).
2. W. Barthold and P. B. Golden, "Khazar", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (ed. 2 Leiden 1978) 1173. The Chazars were still subordinate to the west Türk at the time of the campaigns of the emperor Heraclius in the Caucasus: see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Chazars* (Princeton 1954) 31.
3. Tr. F. J. Hamilton and E. W. Brooks (London 1899) 12.7 (p.328).
4. Michael Syrus 10.21 (Vol. 2.3 Chabot) 363-364. See also Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historians* (Oxford 1988) 128-129.
5. *De Administrando Imperio* 39, 5-7 ed. Moravcsik and Jenkins (tr.) (Washington D.C. 1967).
6. al-Balādhuri noted by Barthold and Golden, *art. cit.* (note 2 *supra*) 1174.
7. *Chronographia* 1.315, 15-16 de Boor.
8. 1.316, 2-3 de Boor.
9. *Hist. Brev.* p. 16, 8-17 and 21, 28-22, 2 de Boor.
10. *A History of the Later Roman Empire* 2 (London 1889) 238 n. 2.
11. p. 87, tr. C. J. F. Dowsett (O.U.P. London 1961).
12. 1.317, 13-16 de Boor.
13. p. 15 (b) and pp. 94-95 tr. Dowsett.
14. C. Toumanoff, *C.M.H.* 4.1 (ed. 2 1966) 605 for the context; also 781 for a list of the Presiding Princes of Iberia.
15. *Chron.* 1.358, 7-11 de Boor.
16. Theophanes, *Chron.* 1.357, 27-358, 5. Nikephoros, *Hist. Brev.* 34, 58 de Boor.

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17. 1.373, 3-14 de Boor.
18. Theophanes 1.375, 21-26 de Boor.
19. A. Cameron, J. Herrin and others, *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: the Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* (Leiden 1984) 96 and 98.
20. *op. cit.* (note 19 *supra*) 212.
21. Theophanes 1.397, 28-30 de Boor.
22. 1.391, 18-19 de Boor.
23. J. B. Bury, *op. cit.* (note 10 *supra*) 2.275.
24. The name may be a title and corrupt in the text of Theophanes (1.392, 27 de Boor). Compare Iberian *Pitiakhsh* 'Viceroy' in the epitaph of Sarepta, ca. 150 A.D. (D. M. Lang, *The Georgians* [London 1966] 152-153). Similarly, Toundounos, the ill-fated Governor at Cherson in the time of Justinian II., has a Chazar title for name (Nikephoros p. 45, 3 de Boor).
25. μετὰ κυκλοπόδων, Theophanes 1.393, 21 de Boor.
26. G. Moravcsik, *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 4 (Prague 1931) 69-76.
27. *Vita S. Ioannis Gotthiae AA.SS.* Jun. VII. 167-171. Concerning the Chazar presence in the Crimea see also D. Obolensky, *APXEION ΠONTOY* 35 (1979) 126-129. The Georgian *Life of St George the Hagiorite* mentions the ordination of St John at Mzkheta (P. Peeters, *A.B.* 36-37 [1917-19] 117, 15 [51]).
28. For discussion see A. A. Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge, Mass. 1936) 97-102.
29. P. Peeters, "Les Khazars dans la Passion de S. Abo de Tiflis" *A.B.* 52 (1934) 21-56.
30. Toumanoff cited by Arnulf Kollautz in *Reallexikon der Byzantinistik* A.1.2 (Amsterdam 1969) 35-36. The diplomatic context of the marriage of Leo II.'s mother is discussed by B. Martin-Hisard, *Byzantinobulgarica* 7 (Sofia 1981) 153.
31. Epiphanius, *Life of St Andrew, P.G.* 120. 215-260. Epiphanius is usually supposed to have been at work in the period 800 to 813, but activity a generation later is possible: H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und Theologische Literatur im Byzantinischem Reich* (Munich 1959) 513.
32. *P.G.* 120. 244C.
33. *A.B.* 56 (1938) 241-264, esp. 261-262.
34. *Vita S. Georgii Amastr.* Ch. 9, *AA.SS.* Feb. Tom. III, 21 Feb. (Venice 1736) 278-279.
35. The text is discussed by A. A. Vasiliev in *The Russian Attack on Constantinople in 860* (Cambridge, Mass. 1946) 6-13.
36. Anno 6392. col. 24 (Leningrad ed. 1926-1928, repr. Munich 1977).
37. *Synopsis Hist.* Theophil. 22, p. 73, 80 ed. I. Thurn (Berlin and New York 1973).
38. *D.A.I.* 40, p. 182, 24 Moravcsik and Jenkins. In the Chuvash language also 'sarkel' means 'white house': I. Sorlin, *Travaux et Mémoires* 3 (1968) 450 n. 137.
39. *D.A.I.* 38, p. 172, 31 and 55-57 M. & J. Cf 37, p. 166, 2-14.
40. *D.A.I.* 42, p.184, 39-54. *Theoph. Cont.* pp. 122-4 ed. I. Bekker (Bonn 1838). For hints of trade in pottery between Cherson and Sarkel see J. Smedley, *APXEION ΠONTOY* 35 (1979) 189.
41. Th. v. Oppolzer, *Canon der Finsternisse* (Vienna 1887) 196, No. 4881. See also *Byzantinoslavica* 50 (1989) 9-10.
42. 4.39 p. 203 Bekker.
43. Kollautz, *art. cit.* (note 30 *supra*) 39.
44. F. Grivec and F. Tomšič, *Constantinus et Methodius Thessalonicensis. Fontes* (Zagreb 1960) viii, 7 p. 109.
45. *D.A.I.* 9. Byzantine distrust of the Chazar in the mid-tenth century is also reflected in the *Antapodosis* of Luidprandus (1.11 p. 9, 25-28 ed. J. Becker in *Luidprandi Opera*, Hannover and Leipzig 1915), where Chazars are included among the *ferocissimae gentes* to the north of the Byzantines. Dr. A. B. Scott kindly mentioned the passage to me.
46. The Alan ruler is distinguished as *Exousiokrator* in *D.A.I.* 10, p. 62, 4.
47. No. 46 in *Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople. Letters* ed. R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink (Washington D.C. 1953).
48. No. 51 J. & W.
49. No. 52, with the commentary of J. and W. on No. 79, p. 559.

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50. The instructions are mentioned in No. 68 and had been obeyed by the Archbishop in 920 (No. 106, with commentary p. 554).
51. *D.A.I.* 10.
52. *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (O.U.P. London 1973) 507-509 on *D.A.I.* 11.
53. *The Thirteenth Tribe* (London 1977) 109-110.
54. In the passage the wording of Constantine is not clear: the Klimata in the hinterland of the Crimea are entered by the Chazars; the Nine Klimata adjacent to Alania are a source of Chazarian wealth and can be damaged by the Alans; it seems that the Klimata of *D.A.I.* 11 (p. 64, 10-14) are to be distinguished from the Nine Klimata of *D.A.I.* 10 (p. 64, 5-8).
55. Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca and London 1982) 112, 21-115, 16, text and tr.
56. *op. cit.* (note 55 *supra*) 135.
57. Golb and Pritsak (note 55 *supra*) 136 note 56.
58. *Povest' ed. cit.* (note 36 *supra*) col. 64 and col. 65.
59. *Osteuropäische und Ostasiatische Streifzüge* (Leipzig 1903) 1-3.
60. Marquart, *op. cit.* (note 59 *supra*) 2. For use by the Rhos of the Don-Volga portage where the rivers are closest — some fifty kilometers apart — see Jonathan Shepard, *Saga Book* 21 (1985) 264.
61. *Synopsis Hist.* Basil. II. 39, p. 354, 88-94 Thurn.
62. N.A. Bees, *APXEION ΠΟΝΤΟΥ* 16 (1951) 255-262. G. Ficker, *Byz.-Neugr. Jahrb.* 2 (1922) 92-101. The *hypomnema* refers to a campaign of Basil II. against Abasgia; it may be that the Alan clerics were fugitives from Abasgian attacks (cf. 1.62 Ficker, p. 94).
63. The name of Nikolaos the Metropolitan can be added to the lists of churchmen of Alania in M. Le Quien, *Oriens Christianus* 1 (Paris 1740, repr. Graz 1958) 1347-1350.
64. *P.G.* 140, 392D.
65. *P.G.* 140,408D.
66. *P.G.* 140, 409C. Concerning Theodore's difficulties in Alania see also E. Amann, *Dict. Theol. Cath.* 15.1 (1946) 226-227.
67. Ladislav Zgusta, *The Old Ossetic Inscription from the River Zelenčuk*, *Öst. Akad. Wiss.* (Vienna 1987), S.B. phil.-hist. kl. No. 486.
68. Iranian *puθra-* 'son'.
69. Zgusta, *op. cit.* (note 67 *supra*) 60.
70. J. Németh, 'Ein Wörterliste der Jassen, der ungarländischen Alanen', *Abh. D. Akad. Wiss.* Berlin, kl. spr. lit. u. kunst 1958 No. 4 (1959). See also H. Becker, *Wiss. Zeitschr. Fr.-Schiller-Univ. Jena, Gesch. u. Spr. Reihe* 14.1 (1965) 159-161.
71. E. Benveniste, *Études sur la Langue ossète* (Paris 1959) 133-134.
72. The name Florentios was not unknown in mediaeval Alania: a cleric of the name was Metropolitan of Alania and Soteriupolis in 1347 (Le Quien, *op. cit.*, note 63 *supra*, 1349-1350). There is no sign that he failed to visit his distant see.
73. For more detail see Benveniste, *op. cit.* (note 71 *supra*) 136-143.
74. Benveniste, *op. cit.* (note 71 *supra*) 139-140.
75. *Ep.* 2. 292-305 edd. B. Laourdas et L. G. Westerink 1 (Leipzig 1983) p. 50.
76. This essay in some Byzantine and other texts concerned with Chazaria and adjacent territories was read to the Hibernian Hellenists at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth on 16 February 1990. By kind invitation of Professor Cyril Mango and Professor Averil Cameron versions were also read in 1989 at Byzantine Seminars in Oxford and in London. I thank all who participated in the discussions; they are blameless for the resulting publication. I am especially obliged to Dr David Wasserstein for talking with me about Chazarian Hebrew documents. Most of the works cited are in the Gennadius Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens; I thank my former colleagues there for their scholarly companionship.