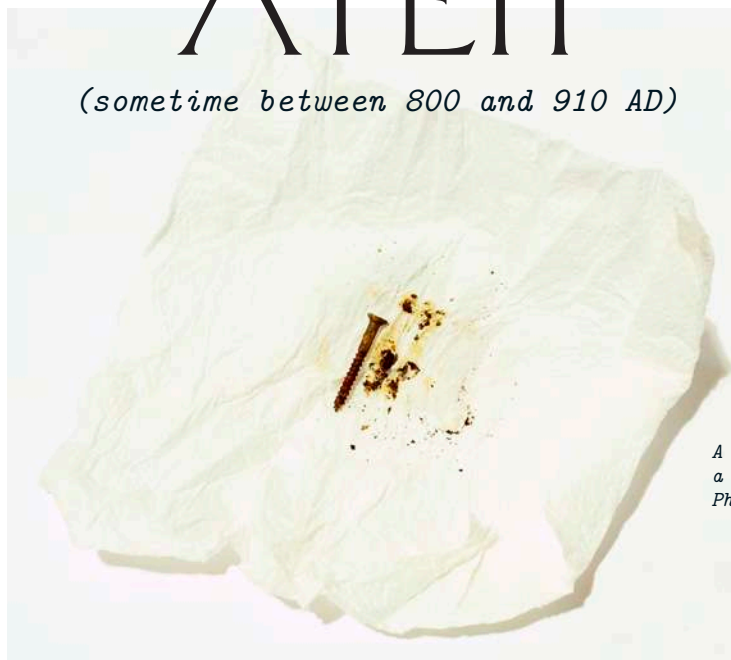


Princess, poet and leader of the dreamhunters'
cult in the extinct Khazar Empire

PRINCESS ATEH

(sometime between 800 and 910 AD)



*A screw from the USSR found in a bread baked by my grandfather.
Photo: Goda Palekaitė, 2018*



It is hopeless to distinguish the artificial from the artefact.

The mysterious extinction of the medieval Khazar culture, which once existed between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, the disappearance of the entire kingdom with its towns and settlements, and the apparent dispersion of their inhabitants, is among the most debated polemics of human history. Living by the laws of ethnic and religious diversity and the wisdom encoded in dreams, Khazaria was possibly the most tolerant empire of all time. Sleep occupied an essential place in Khazar faith. Dreamhunting – an advanced religious practice – was cultivated by a sect guided by the most talented and respected dreamhunter and poet, Princess Ateh. She ruled the country in tandem with the Khagan – or king – who was known to be her cousin in summer and her lover in winter.

There is a sculpture from the late ninth to early tenth century, found near today's Elista, which has been attributed to the worshippers of Princess Ateh. It represents a woman with closed eyes, a monumental head and a tiny body. 'Aleph', which is engraved on the right lid of her eye and which contains the first letter of Ateh's name, denotes the supreme crown, wisdom, and the caring mother's gaze. Her worshippers believed that she had seven faces, which she would change, like seven dreams every person changes each night. Those who heard the princess speak said that she always spoke in metaphors and riddles:



We, the dreamhunters, can read other people's dreams, live in them and affect them. We are in control of the viewpoint and of the things that appear in the field of vision. We are able to access the deepest secrets of one's dreams and open doors in one's fantasies.

Between the seventh and tenth centuries, the vast steppes stretching from Central Asia to the Caucasus, Crimea, southern Ukraine and the upper Volga were occupied by the kingdom of the nomadic Khazars. Besides Khazars, there were Turks, Finno-Ugrians, Slavs, Jews and others living in the territory – each speaking their own languages, each professing their own religions, from monotheistic Christianity, Islam and Judaism to a diversity of pagan and shamanic cults. Various communities were represented in the legal system and took part in the advanced state's hierocracy, ideocracy, bureaucracy and adhococracy. This is especially interesting in an era when secular or multi-religious states basically did not exist. Once asked to describe how Khazar people differ from the non-Khazar, Princess Ateh explained:



We keep snakes around our waists, sleep with our heads turned south, wash our feet without taking our shoes off, and carry birds inside our shirts to keep warm.

The summer palace of the Khagan and thus of the princess was not, as expected, by the sea, but at the place where rivers, steppes and mountains meet – right in the middle between the Caspian and the Black Sea. It was called Sarkel. Nevertheless, the Khagan insisted that at least the bathroom had to look and smell like the sea. The most advanced Roman engineers were asked to fulfil this wish. They paved the bathroom floor with rocky salt and supplied water through an aqueduct coming all the way from the Black Sea. The tiles decorating the bathroom walls were designed to remind one of the waves. Presumably, the Khagan had his fatal dream, which later caused the extinction of the whole empire, after falling asleep in the bathtub in Sarkel. This, the most controversial event in Khazar history, occurred sometime in the ninth century. It is commonly referred to as the Khazar Polemic.





It all began with the Khagan's dream, in which God told him:



I am not pleased by your deeds, but by your intentions.



I then summoned the dreamhunters who run horses at dawn and asked them to interpret God's words. They said:



You must choose one of the three biggest religions, Christianity, Islam or Judaism, and convert your whole nation to it.



I then summoned the wisest scholars of each religion to lead a debate, which lasted an eternity.

To be honest, no trace of the Khagan's dream, neither in writing nor other documents, has been discovered. Likewise, there were not sufficient historical sources to prove which religion the Khazars adopted or what happened to their people. The Khazar language itself has vanished from historical records.

However, more can be said about Khazar cities. The capital Itil was based at the mouth of the Volga river, where the Russian village of Samosdelka is now located. The controversial discovery of the ruins of Itil was made in 2003 when a history teacher at the Samosdelka secondary school found his pupils throwing stones at some ancient pots lying by the school fence. He then decided to bring the pots to the Archaeology Department at the University of Astrakhan, and so the research began. Seventeen years of excavations passed but Itil has not been recognized by the international archaeological community. The professor of archaeology at the University of Astrakhan, who is leading the excavations, thinks that international recognition could lead to similar legal and political implications as occurred in the case of Sarkel and the Tsymliansk reservoir.

Nevertheless, from the excavations, it is evident that the collapse of the empire followed soon after the Khazar conversion. At that period, Princess Ateh became so depressed that her charm and beauty began to be veiled like the face of a married woman. She said:



Thoughts whirled from the sky upon me like snow. Afterward, I was barely able to warm up and return to life.

Eventually, the princess was condemned to forget her language and all her poems, she even forgot the name of her lover. All that memory retained in her mother tongue was the word ku — the name of a fish-shaped fruit. But before all this had happened, Ateh, sensing the danger, requested a large number of parrots, which could imitate human speech. Each of them was taught a sentence and a poem in the Khazar language. When the empire collapsed and the language started to die out, the princess told her parrots:



Go and teach the poems to other birds, because soon nobody will know them.

The birds flew away into the forests, where they taught their poems to other parrots, and these taught them to others until Khazarian was only known to the parrots of the Caspian. The princess wore a mourning gown for eleven years, signifying that for a woman, a dead culture equals eleven dead husbands.

The Khazar legacy has been transformed into an exceedingly speculative subject. The lack of proof as to who the direct descendants of the Khazars are has inspired a wide range of forgeries of historical documents and relics. Given the contemporary geopolitical situation, people all over the region, where mountains, seas, and tectonic plates meet, from the Donbas to Dagestan, ask themselves: can we escape the Khazar fate?



✚

And yet, my parrots survived as did the dreams of the Caspian Sea. And the sand and the salt and the oil and the fire. He who throws a match into the sea will watch it burn.

Recently, the ancient breed of taimen — a fish from the salmon family — was found in a special container buried in the saltiest part of the Caspian Sea. It remained almost undamaged because of a special fermentation technique which the Khazars called ‘1000 years of fish’. It assured them that their food would be preserved in case of a global disaster and the extinction of the species. In fact, the last Caspian taimen died in 1946, and this fermentation technique had become extinct long before. We only know that the container in which this fish was found was kept for the wedding dinner of Princess Ateh. Unfortunately, the princess got lost in history before she got married.

Caucasus mountains, former Khazaria. Photo: Goda Palekaitė, 2017

This text was inspired by a novel by Serbian writer Milorad Pavić, Dictionary of the Khazars (1984), and by my own journey in 2017 to the territory of former Khazaria—between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, the Caucasus mountains, Georgia, Kalmykia, Dagestan and Chechnya. ‘Princess Ateh’ was first published in my book of fictional biographies Schismatics by LAPAS books in 2020. The initials of the characters were designed by Vilmantas Žumbys.