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Redheaded Warrior Jews

On Language

By Philologos

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Zack Miller writes from Bryant, Texas:

"In the July 31 Forward, Allan Nadler reviewed two new books about Judah Halevi's 'The Kuzari."

Not surprisingly, this got me to thinking about the Khazars.

Could you discuss the Yiddish term *di royte yidn*? I first came across it in Kevin Alan Brook's speculation that these 'red Jews' were a half-remembered version of the Khazars."

By way of background information, the Khazars were the inhabitants of Khazaria, a kingdom north of the Caucasus whose royal house — an imaginary ruler of which gives "The Kuzari" its title — converted to Judaism in the mid-eighth-century C.E. Kevin Alan Brook is a historian and the author of "The Jews of Khazaria," published in 1999, and *di royte yidn,* "the red Jews," was a Yiddish term for the "Ten Lost Tribes," which were exiled by the Assyrians in biblical times and in Jewish legend continued to exist in a remote and inaccessible part of the world, beyond "the Mountains of Darkness" and the mythical Sambatyon River. This legend was given several treatments in Eastern European Yiddish literature. One of the best known is I.L. Peretz's novella "Three Weddings," which begins:

"Far, far beyond the Mountains of Darkness, across the Sambatyon, is a country named Wonderland where the red Jews live. In its capital, in the king's royal estate of Faithstone, once stood a tall, white marble palace. With its hundreds of golden columns and thousands of diamond-bright windows, this palace was beautiful, as was the lush park that formed a sea of green around it."

In Yiddish folklore, *di royte yidn* were brave warriors who one day would come to the rescue of their oppressed fellow Jews living under Christian and Muslim domination; they were not specifically associated with the Khazars, whose kingdom had been destroyed by the late 10th century, before Eastern European Jewry came into being. (It has been speculated that Jewish refugees from Khazaria were themselves partly responsible for Eastern European Jewry's creation.) And yet, the term "red Jews" was not originally a Jewish one at all. It was Christian and Judeophobic, and, as was demonstrated by the British scholar Andrew Colin Gow in his 1995 study "The Red Jews:

Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age, 1200–1600," its roots lay in medieval Germany.

It was there, starting in the 13th century, that the belief developed that somewhere beyond the Caucasus lived the peoples of Gog and Magog, the feared northern barbarians first mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel, who had prophesied that they would be humbled by God's wrath when they attempted to conquer the Land of Israel, thus ushering in the messianic age. German Christians identified Gog and Magog with the Lost Tribes, believed they were the forces of the Antichrist and called them *die rote Juden*, because they were pictured as redheaded and red-bearded. One day, it was feared, they would seek to cross the mountains of the Caucasus behind which they were contained and overrun all of Europe. Meanwhile, they gave their European Jewish brethren what aid they could, such as supplying them with the poison that was allegedly poured by Jews into Christian wells to produce the Black Plague.

Both Christian memories of the Khazar kingdom and Jewish legends about the Lost Tribes must have had something to do with this belief. But were the inhabitants of Khazaria really red-haired? They were, according to Hispano-Arab historian and geographer Ali ibn Musa ibn Sa'id el-Maghribi (1213–1286), who wrote that "their complexions are white, their eyes blue, their hair flowing and predominantly reddish, their bodies large and their natures cold. Their general aspect is wild." It would seem evident, therefore, that from here derives the epithet "the red Jews."

On second thought, however, since the Khazars are generally considered by historians to have been of Turkic stock, which means they would have been dark-haired, el-Maghribi's account is questionable. Moreover, red hair, which was apparently more common among Jews than among Christians, was widely associated in the Middle Ages with Jews and the devil, both being depicted with it in many illustrations from the period. It is possible, then, that the order of things needs to be reversed – that is, that the Khazars were not called "the red Jews" by el-Maghribi because they were redheaded, but were mistakenly thought by him to be redheaded because the Lost Tribes were called "the red Jews" and were pictured as such by Christians.

By the late 16th century, according to Gow, the epithet *die rote Juden* had ceased to be current. Now the process of cultural transmission ran the other way. Just as Jewish legend had contributed to the Christian myth of *die rote Juden,* so these "red Jews" became preserved in the Jewish imagination as *di royte yidn,* conceived of not as the demonic savages of Christian antisemitism, but as distant and powerful co-religionists who enjoyed the freedom and independence that European Jews lacked. Nor did Yiddish speakers think of *di royte yidn* as necessarily redheaded; the term stuck to the Lost Tribes without retaining its physical content, so that the average Jew could not have told you what was red about them. It was enough for him to know that they existed in a distant Wonderland.

Questions for Philologos can be sent to philologos@forward.com.

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emilio spedicato · 11 weeks ago 0

Anyone knows of a translation of Iulius Honorius, claimed as Aethicus in 1645 Lugdunum edition by Del Rio? There are no references there to Gog and Magog, he cannot be pseudo Aethicus....

Email to me, I have the 1645 volume and have translated it.

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