

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

# THE CUMANS – Social Structure

## OVERVIEW

The Cuman-Kipchak state had a multiethnic structure, and was composed of Turkic, Mongol and Persian elements. The state was composed of a number of confederated tribes whose military forces represented them. There was no central authority in this confederation. The territory of this Kipchak-Cuman realm was called the *Dasht-i Kipchak* (the steppes of the Kipchak).

The processes of ethnic assimilation and consolidation of power did not start until the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Oghuz, Pecheneg, Bashkir, and Bulgar peoples were assimilated within the western Kipchak tribes and Oghuz-Kimek, Karluk, Kara Khitai and other tribes were merged with the eastern Kipchak tribes, but later they all took the common name *Kipchak*.

According to the Jewish traveler Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon's travel account written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Cumans had "no king, but only princes and (noble) families".

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**THE CUMAN-KIPCHAKS:** In the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after the collapse of the Oghuz and Kimek states, many individual tribes were united under the Cuman-Kipchak confederation, and took control of the southern Russia and Black Sea steppes.

The individual Cuman-Kipchak tribes were administered by *begs*, and the groups of tribes were governed by the hereditary families of *khagans*. Each khagan had his own military forces, servants and slaves. The slave-markets controlled by the Cumans in Crimea sold numerous Turkic captives from different tribes who were sold into military slavery in the Middle East.

In the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the split of the Cuman-Kipchak federation into western and eastern branches created the growth of tribal chieftains who began to assume the role of the khagan. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the two branches were reunited.

Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Urani tribe established a dynasty that ruled the Cuman-Kipchak confederation and it was in this period that other nobles from this tribe became involved in political events on the frontier with Khwarazm.

The nobles had their own retinues from the warrior-class, called *nögers* (or *nökörs*), members of which served as mercenaries in foreign lands like Georgia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary.

In the Cuman-Kipchak society, there was also a small class of artisans. Some artisans were settled in camps and towns, but others were itinerant, moving from place to place. However, many members of the Cuman-Kipchaks society were pastoralists, breeding cattle, horses, sheep, and camels.

## Discussion/Questions

1. What led to decrease of the khagans' power in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century?
2. Why would some warriors in the retinues of nobleman leave to serve as mercenaries in foreign countries?

## Readings:

- 1- Agajanov, S.G., "The States of the Oghuz, the Kimek and the Kipchak, in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. IV, The age of achievement: AD 750 to the end of the fifteenth century, Editors: M. S. Asimov and C. E. Bosworth, UNESCO Publishing, 1998.
- 2- Curta, F., "Oghuz, Pechenegs, and Cumans: Nomads of Medieval Eastern Europe?" in *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)*, Ch.10, Brill's Companions to European History, Vol. 19, Brill, 2019.
- 3- Horváth, A.P., *Pechenegs, Cumans and Lasians, Steppe peoples in medieval Hungary*, Hereditas Corvina, 1989.
- 4- *The Cumans: The History of the Medieval Turkic Nomads Who Fought the Mongols and Rus' in Eastern Europe*, By Charles River Editors.
- 5- Голубовский. П.В. *Печенеги, торки, и половцы*, Москва, Вече, 2011.
- 6- *Hudud al-'Alam* (The Regions of the World), A Persian Geography, translated and explained by V. Minorsky, Messrs. Luzac Co., 1937.  
<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.281514>
- 7- Vásáry, I., *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1186–1365*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- 8- Golden, P.B., "The peoples of the south Russian steppes", Ch. 10, Edited by Denis Sinor, in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 9- \_\_\_\_\_. "Cumanica IV. The Tribes of the Cuman-Qipčaq." *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 9 (1995-1997).
- 10- \_\_\_\_\_. *An Introduction to the Peoples of the Turkic Peoples, Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*, Wiesbaden, 1992.
- 11- *The Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, Who, in the Latter End of the Twelfth Century visited Poland, Russia, Little Tartary, the Crimea, Armenia, Assyria, Syria, the Holy Land, and Greece, Translated by Abraham Benisch, Gorgias press, 2012.