

THE CUMANS – Gender

OVERVIEW

Insufficient sources on the Cumans' social life do not allow us to provide detailed information about the role and status of Cuman women.

The image and the status of women in Cuman-Kipchak society, as in many nomadic societies, was much higher than in neighboring settled societies. Although Cuman women did the household work, on occasion they changed the political balance by taking control of the tribe, land, property and the whole family following a husband's death. They moved freely in society and had equal rights with men.

GENDER

Women in the Cuman society enjoyed their freedom and shared equal responsibilities with men. The housework was usually handled by women. Besides housework, they were in charge of their livestock, since responsibilities for livestock were divided between women and men. Women had to take care of the goats, sheep and cows; men - horses and camels.

Cuman-Kipchak women also practiced certain crafts. They used leather to make shoes, vessels, bow covers and horses' harnesses. The women used wool and furs to make clothes etc.

In contrast to the women, men occupied themselves with bows, arrows and spears, since men mostly dealt with hunting and shooting. According to Giovanni da Pian del Carpine's travel account, the Cuman men did not work except to practice archery, and sometimes they took care of the herds.

However, archery and horses were not an exclusively male domain. Cuman children, both boys and girls, were taught to ride as early as the age of two or three, and they were taught to use a bow. The result was that girls and women wore trousers like the men, and were as skillful riders and archers as the men.

Cuman law or custom made no distinction between men and women when it came to the punishment of a crime. In cases of adultery, both the man and the woman were executed. If a virgin slept with a man before marriage, again, both the man and the woman were put to death. Theft and robbery were also capital offenses where no distinction was made between men and women when punishment was imposed.

Discussion/Questions

1. What factors in Cuman society contributed to women's relatively high status?

Readings:

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- 5- Horváth, A.P., *Pechenegs, Cumans and Iasians, Steppe peoples in medieval Hungary*, Hereditas Corvina, 1989.
- 6- *The Cumans: The History of the Medieval Turkic Nomads Who Fought the Mongols and Rus' in Eastern Europe*, By Charles River Editors.