

# THE CUMANS (KIPCHAK) – RELIGION

## OVERVIEW

The Cumans followed their ancestors' (Kimak, Kipchak) religious heritage of the Tengri cult and the practice a shamanistic religion. They believed in ancestral spirits with an established pantheon.

Monotheism was a late development among the Cumans. It was in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Cumans almost entirely converted to Islam after they were conquered by the Mongols. Some Cumans began to migrate to the West during the Mongol conquest and became Christians after their close contact with Eastern Europeans.

## RELIGION

As written in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the Cumans (Polovtsy) maintained the shamanistic customs of their ancestors in the shedding of blood and in glorifying themselves for such deeds. The burials contained dogs, horses, and even humans who were ritually sacrificed and buried with the chief or any high ranking Cuman to provide him a pleasant afterlife. They believed in certain elements of nature with spiritual significance like mountains, rivers, and animals etc.



There were sacral stone statues, known as *Kamennye baby* (stone old women) in Russian, found near the burials or in tombs. The Cumans worshiped these idols and gave them offerings.

*Cuman statue, 12th century, Luhansk*

Abu'l-Fida, in his *Taqwim al-Buldan*, stated that in the land of the Cumans (bilād al-Qāmāniyya), they worshiped the stars and were guided by them in their judgements.

The Cumans never adopted any world religions in large numbers, and their shamanic practices continued until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

After the defeat by the Mongols, the Cumans began to migrate to Hungarian territory. There were efforts made by Hungarian missionaries to convert the Cumans to Christianity. Khagan Bortz, the fourth chieftain of the Cumans, sent his son, along with a retinue, to Esztergom, the seat of the Hungarian Archbishop, to be baptized and to make an alliance with the Hungarian king, Andrew II in 1227 in order to obtain protection from the Mongol threat.

Many Kipchaks who migrated to Georgia, settled there permanently, adopted Orthodox Christianity and ultimately were Georgianized.

## Discussion/Questions

1- What factors determined which major religion the Cumans adopted later in their history?

## Reading

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