

THE CUMANS - MYTHOLOGY

OVERVIEW

The Cumans (Polovtsy-Kipchaks) practiced a shamanistic religion and followed the shamanistic custom of shedding blood and glorifying themselves for such deeds. Archeological excavations have shown that the Cumans ritually sacrificed and buried animals or humans who had lived with the deceased. The Cumans believed that certain elements of nature\ like mountains, rivers, and animals etc., had spiritual significance.

MYTHOLOGY

As Abu'l-Fida recorded in his *Taqwim al-Buldan*, the Cumans worshiped the stars believing that they would guide them.

There are sacral stone stelae, known as *Stone Baba* or *Stone Old Woman*, with their faces turned to the east, found near the burials or in tombs that were worshiped by the Cumans.

The Cumans built these large stone statues that faced the east to commemorate their ancestors. The Persian/Azerbaijani poet Nizami Gencevi, in one of his poems, talked about the Cumans' religious rituals and described how they kneeled down before these stone statues and offered animals to show their respect to their deceased ancestors.

The Flemish Franciscan explorer, William de Rubruck in his travel account mentioned that "*The Comans raise a great tumulus over the dead, and set up a statue to him, its face to the east, and holding a cup in its hand at the height of the navel. They make also pyramids to the rich, that is to say, little pointed structures, and in some places I saw great tiled covered towers, and in others stone houses, though there were no stones thereabout. Over a person recently dead I saw hung on long poles the skins of xvi horses, four facing each quarter of the world ; and they had placed also cosmos for him to drink, and meat for him to eat, and for all that they said of him that he had been baptised*".



The oldest Cuman burial site was found in the lower basin of Donetsk and Priazov and is from the first half of the 11th century. Sacrifice pits consisted of pieces of pottery and remains of bones placed towards the east.

These ceremonies were conducted on the 3rd, 7th, 9th, 12th, 20th, 40th, 49th and 52nd days after the death of a relative, and again after six months, one year, 3 years, 5 years and 7 years after the death. Sometimes ceremonies for the deceased, which included talking, feeding and giving drink, lasted for three years.

Cuman stone baba in Donetsk local history museum

Discussion/Questions

1- Why do the Cuman stone figures face the east rather than any other direction?

Readings

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- 12- *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55*, Translated by William Woodville Rockhill, London, Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1900. <https://archive.org/details/journeyofwilliam00ruys/page/n5/mode/2up>