

University of Szeged
Medieval History Ph.D. Program

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History of the Cumans to the Mongol invasion
(Summary of Thesis)

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Introduction

During the 11th to 13th centuries, the major powers in the area from the Volga Region to the Lower Danube were the Kievan Rus', the Volga Bulgars and the Cumans. The history of the Kievan Rus' is well-known, elaborate in detail and several monographs have been written on it. The importance of Volga Bulgars is less known to the public but 20th century research has produced many important studies of their history, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The third power, the Cumans, who were the last to appear in 11th century East Europe; are the major subject of the present study.

This dissertation is a historiographical overview of the history of Cumans whose time boundaries are justified by two events. The beginning is obvious since Cumans were first mentioned to appear west of the Volga in 1054–1055. The end of the period is marked by the Mongol conquest of the areas inhabited by Cumans at the end of the 1230s.

The short record mentioning their first appearance in the Russian Primary Chronicle (Повесть временных лет =PVL) does not say much but the events of the following centuries in the steppe areas inhabited by the Cumans will not only interest the Kievan Rus' but they will have notable geopolitical impact on the Kingdom of Georgia in the foreground of the Caucasus as well as on the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary to the west. Describing the relations between the Cumans and their neighbours in terms of acts of hostility between the nomadic and settled civilizations, a recurring pattern in historical accounts, is not the only possible approach,

though it is indubitable that the sources mostly mention them, similarly to other nomadic peoples, when they attack their countries. However, the relations between the two civilizations were much more varied in every respect.

Cumans have left no indigenous written sources. Reconstructions of their history based on written sources from neighbouring peoples and archaeological finds have been attempted by many scholars and several excellent studies have been published about them not only in foreign languages but also in Hungarian. However, the history of Cumans has not yet been written up in its entirety. That is understandable since the historical significance of the tribal confederation occupying the territory between the Irtysh River and the Lower Danube is definitive not only in that area but also in the history of Egypt. Therefore, I had to apply restrictions in my dissertation and concentrate on the literature covering the history of the Cumans and the Rus', the Cumans and the Balkan Peninsula, and the Cumans and the Kingdom of Hungary. The results of the recently accelerated research in Ukraine and Russia have been left out, too, because the vast literature would supply sufficient material for a separate monograph.

The dissertation is primarily concerned with the history of events, examining the political and diplomatic relations between the Cumans and their neighbours. Determining the sorting method for such a diverse material with a lot of data was not an easy task. Instead of simply presenting the history of Cumans in a strictly chronological order, it seemed most adequate to sort the events by their relations with each of the neighbouring

powers. Thus the dissertation comprises four major chapters. The first chapter summarizes the theories and results about the Cumans' endonyms and exonyms and the much debated question of their origin. The second chapter gives an overview of their relations with the Rus', the third details their roles in the history of the Byzantine Empire and the Second Bulgarian Empire and finally, the fourth chapter analyzes their relations with the Kingdom of Hungary.

The Structure of the Dissertation

The chapter titled *Kunok nevei és eredete* (The names and origin of Cumans) consists of two large parts. A characteristic feature of Cumans is that they are mentioned under different names in different sources or even within the same source: (1) *Kypchaks*; (2) *Cumani ~ Comani*; (3) *Cuni ~ Kuni*; and (4) *Polovtsi, Pallidi, Valwen, Xartēšk'*, which are translations or calques of the assumed endonyms Cuman or Cun, and (5) *Kangly*. Therefore the first part of the chapter presents the hypotheses about the etymologies of the different names. The second part discusses the most debated question in the history of Cumans, their origin.

The second large chapter titled *A kunok és a Rusz* (Cumans and the Rus') deals with relationship between the Cumans and the Rus' in three sections. The first section covers the period from the appearance of the Cumans (1054/1055) to the death of Mstislav Vladimirovich, the Grand Prince of Kiev (1132), which may be viewed as the Cumans' European conquest and incursions, a period ending with a series of defeats by the princes of Rus', in consequence of which Cuman raids

were temporarily abandoned against not only the Rus' but also the Byzantine Empire. The second period extends from 1130s to 1160s. During that period the nature of the relationship between the two powers changed: according to the sources, the Cumans did not conduct independent campaigns against the principalities but they were constantly involved in the battles between the Rus' princes. In the third period starting with the 1160s and ending with Mongol conquest, the attacks against the Rus' were renewed. The most important feature of this period is the beginning of the creation of a centralized organization of power within the Cuman society. This process was hindered by the defeats suffered from the Mongols in the 1220s and then the Mongols' great western campaign starting in 1236 put an end to the Cumans' rule on the steppe.

After invading the South Russian steppe, Cumans soon appeared in the Lower Danube area. The Byzantine Empire, going through a critical period, had to soon face the newly arrived nomadic people of a Turkic language. The chapter titled *A kunok és a Balkán-félsziget a 11. század második felétől 1241-ig* (Cumans and the Balkan Peninsula from the second part of the 11th century to 1241), which examines the relations between the Cumans and people of the Balkan Peninsula from the 1070s to the Mongol Invasion of Europe (1241) is split into two large parts. The first large unit discusses the relations between the Cumans and the Byzantine Empire until the end of the rule of Komnenian dynasty (1185). First it examines in what circumstances the Cumans appeared in the Balkan Peninsula in the last third of the 11th century, and then it analyzes their 1091 campaign following their raids

against the Byzantine Empire in the 1080s. The part titled *A kunok és a Bizánci Birodalom a 12. században* (Cumans and the Byzantine Empire in the 12th century) begins with the campaign in 1114, which was the last one during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos then it presents the Byzantine–Cuman relations during the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180). The second part discusses the importance of the Cumans’ presence on the Balkan Peninsula between 1185 and 1241.

Finally, the last large part examines in three subchapters the relations between the Cumans and the Kingdom of Hungary. It begins with an overview of the their names in the Latin language narrative sources from the Kingdom of Hungary then it discusses the Cumans’ attacks against Hungary in 1091 and the Cuman’s defeat of the Hungarian army led by Coloman the Learned in 1099. The princes of the 12th century Rus’ fighting each other asked both the kings of Hungary and the Cumans for help. The second part elaborates on their involvement in these conflicts. By the 13th century the relationship between the Cumans and the Kingdom of Hungary was no longer only indirect, i.e. they did not only meet in the internal wars of the Rus’, but due to the expansionist policies of the kings of Hungary Christians missionaries were sent among the heathen Cumans.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the dissertation were grouped by two criteria: on the hand what can be learned about the Cumans themselves from the sources, on the other hand what roles they played in the history of the Rus’, the Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary.

Since the history of Cumans during the given period can only be reconstructed from external sources, i.e. from the records of neighbouring peoples, their history is mostly known from the accounts of their campaigns, which at first sight draws a partial picture of them.

The vast area extending from the Danube to West Siberia was inhabited by three large groups: the Kypchaks and the Kanglys in Inner Asia, the Kazakh steppe and the Ural–Volga region and the Cumans (Polovtsi) between the Don and the Lower Danube. That implies a nomadic confederation, diverse both ethnically and linguistically. Even the Cumans, the westernmost group examined in this thesis did not form a homogenous unit as indicated by the Cuman names of Mongol or Iranian origin.

Cuman society was certainly differentiated but its precise structure is not known even though the names of relatively many social units appear in the sources. It is not known whether they refer to clans or tribes. The titles of persons found in the sources (князь, rex) do not help either because they tend to reflect the hierarchies of the authors' societies, nevertheless they do imply that the person bearing the title is a leader. Perhaps, the supposedly personal names ending *-oba* (e.g. Altunopa, Kitanopa) may refer to clan chiefs or the clans led by them and that *-kan*, which only appears in proper nouns (Sarukan, Tugorkan), may indicate a leader of a tribal federation. However, it was not yet used in the sense of an autocrat, as it is attested later among Cumans in the 14th century, since they had not gone beyond tribal or tribal federation systems.

It is not known how many clans or tribes the Cumans had before the Mongol Invasion. On the one hand, the Old Russian yearbooks do not give numbers, just names, and it is not always obvious who or what names refer to. On the other hand, they only mention the names of whom the princes of the Rus' fought.

Cumans did not create an empire. Concentration of power among nomads generally required both internal and external catalysts. An internal catalyst enables the emergence of a military organization that may be used to build an empire around a powerful central core. There is no data of that among the Cumans. Obtaining revenue from a neighbouring settled power and adopting its political structures may serve as external catalysts. Drawing a parallel with the nomadic empires of Central Asia, all of them evolved in symbiosis with neighbouring China. Cumans did not have that external factor because they had no neighbouring powers that would force them to organize an empire. The Rus', with which the Cumans had the most intensive relationship, was extremely divided politically: the nomads probably found it similar to their own political system. The Byzantine Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary were too far to set an example or put pressure on them. Only the Kingdom of Georgia, flourishing in the 12th century, could serve as a model and perhaps it is not by chance that it was the descendents of Otrok, living on the territory of and maintaining close ties with the Caucasian country, strove to centralize power. The process probably beginning with Otrok's son Konchak was put to an end by the Mongols arriving in East Europe.

Analyzing the relations between the Cumans and the neighbouring powers, it is important to emphasize that despite their raids and campaigns they did not pose territorial threats to the neighbouring countries and when they did it was caused by the attacks of another nomadic people, the Mongols. If their neighbours were strong or if the leaders of their neighbours were able to join forces (as did the princes of Rus') then the nomads were generally defeated.

Cumans were great fighters and fearful enemies. Their fighting abilities were not only well-known to their neighbours but they were also invited as allies or employed as mercenaries or played important roles as mamluks or ghulams (Kingdom of Georgia, Egypt).

The main reason behind the animosity between settled and nomadic civilizations was how nomads obtained agricultural and craftsman products. Although nomadic economy was mostly self-supporting, there were some products they either could not produce (crops, luxury items) or the quantity was not sufficient so they had to find different ways to obtain them. For the nomads, the raids, the commerce or becoming mercenaries were three ways to achieve the same goal: to obtain the desired and needed goods. The nomads did not always have the choice to choose the strategy. If commerce was possible then raids were not necessary. Additionally, when their neighbours asked for their support against their enemies, they encouraged the raids or paid for their services usually in the form of sharing the booty with them.

This claim is supported by the observation that during the establishment of their residence on the South

Russian steppe at the very end of the 11th century they attacked places on the territory of the Rus' that were commercially important but there is hardly any evidence that they hindered trade travelling through their lands after they had achieved that they obtain a share from the profit. And indeed, it is written in Old Russian yearbooks that the merchants coming from the Cumans carried information in addition to merchandise, e.g. they warned the grand prince of Kiev about the nomads' military preparations, or the Cumans used them as messengers. In fact, nothing suggests that trade through Cuman territories had ever suffered regular or serious hindrance. That is understandable because Cumans were also interested in safe trade in which they participated just like the Pechenegs.

To sum it up, looking through the relations between the Cumans and their neighbours, first the Rus' then the powers of the Balkan Peninsula and finally the Kingdom of Hungary, it becomes clear that they are not exclusively characterized by constant warfare.

The hypothesis promulgated in 19th century studies but also circulated later that the Rus' did not only lose agriculturally valuable lands due to the Cumans' attacks but the Slavic population was forced to move northward, too, is no longer accepted. In truth, the fights between the princes of the Rus' caused much more harm to the population than the Cumans' raids, which were often made possible by the princes themselves in the 12th century when they asked the Cumans to help them in their fights against their relatives. Even then, the Cumans' goal was not to undermine the defence of the Rus' in preparation to a conquest, they simply had

opportunities for raids and plundering. When the Rus' had a prince like Vladimir Monomakh (1113–1125) who restricted their involvement in domestic warfare and led campaigns to the steppe, the Cumans proved to be the weaker side. Viewing their relations from another angle, the Cumans could even become the catalysts of a powerful Rus' but the chance was gone after the death of Mstislav Vladimirovich in 1132. Since then the princes of the Rus' almost constantly relied on the Cumans because of their internal fights. Peaceful and stable periods giving chance to go against the Cumans together were rare. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the armies of the Rus' were not sent to the steppe to conquer land either but to plunder, just like the Cumans.

Rather than launching regular campaigns against the Cumans, the Rus' tried to integrate them by making them allies and strengthening the alliance by marriages. Owing to that, the two powers had already been bound by ties of kindred since the end of the 11th century. In addition to the princely families of the Rus', the Cumans had dynastic connections with the Kingdom of Georgia and the Khwarezm Shahs and thus they were not just external observers but inevitable participants in the history of the area.

Going back to their relations with the Rus', one has to mention that the Cumans had their influence on East Slavic folklore, too. The yearbooks have not only preserved epical elements of Cuman origin but the Cumans have left their mark in the bylinas themselves and in Ukrainian folk tales, too.

On the contrary, the role of the Cumans is less manifold on the Balkan Peninsula where their military

role is predominant. First, they crossed the Danube as raiders then their involvement in the battle of Lebnion in 1091 made them in effect saviours of the Byzantine Empire. By the very end of the 11th century they are mentioned in the sources as mercenaries in the Byzantine army. Since the 1140s, by which time they had probably established their residence to the north of the Lower Danube, they launched several attacks against the Byzantine Empire. Later in the last decades of the 12th century, the Second Bulgarian Empire was revived with their help in the Balkan Peninsula. It was not only the Bulgarians who asked for the Cumans' military assistance, the Latin Empire ruling for a short period in the peninsula and the successor states of the Byzantine Empire dissolved in 1204 did so, too.

Cumans had few contacts with the Kingdom of Hungary before the 13th century. Since the two failed attacks by the Cumans returning from the battle of Lebnion in 1091 no attacks are known against the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary up until the beginning of the 13th century. Although Cumans and Hungarians may have met in several internal fights of the Rus', they were almost unexceptionally on opposing sides. However, it is a unique feature of the relations between the two powers that the Kingdom of Hungary was the only neighbour of the Cumans to subsidize missions that led to the foundation of a bishopric in Cuman territory.

The sources also make it clear that the Cumans led large campaigns only in one direction at a time. They had not had launched raids or campaigns towards the west or south until they conquered the South Russian

steppe. However, after they had established their residence, they appeared first on the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary then in the Byzantine Empire. When the princes of the Rus' successfully attacked the territories of the Cumans on the steppe, the Cuman campaigns ceased in all directions. After the threat by the Rus' had passed, the raids and campaigns against the Byzantine Empire were renewed.

The nature of the relations between the Cumans and their neighbours changed when, under pressure by the Mongols, some groups of Cumans moved to the territories of the Rus's, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula. However, the majority of them stayed and, constituting the majority of the population of the Golden Horde, they assimilated the Mongol elite that had moved to the west.

Due to limitations of scope, this dissertation will not cover the history of the Cuman–Kangly–Kypchak tribal confederation on the Kazak steppe, or their roles in the history of the Kingdom of Georgia until the Mongol Conquest, or exploring the importance of Kypchaks brought to mamluk Egypt as slave-soldiers. These topics will be addressed in future work.

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