

THE CUMANS – Introduction

OVERVIEW

The Cumans were Turkic nomads who travelled westward from the East at the beginning of the 10th century. Like the Pechenegs, they established a tribal confederation.

The Cumans in Greek and Latin sources were known as *Polovtsy* in Russian sources, and in the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, or referred to as *Kipchaks* in Muslim travel accounts.

Russian, Byzantine, European chronicles, and Muslim travel accounts, all mentioned that the Cumans constituted a threat to any kingdom in their path, but, they were also interested in diplomacy and many joined the Golden Horde, and were integrated into Eastern European and Central Asian kingdoms in the 13th century.

EVENTS

CUMAN - KIPCHAK CONFEDERATION 1018-1240

The Kipchaks, a Turkic nomadic people, were known as one of the seven tribes of the Kimaks who separated from the Tatar. The *Hudud al-'Alam* written in the 10th century by an unknown writer indicated that they were a clan split from the Kimak seven-tribe union after the collapse of the Western Göktürk state, and became part of the *Kimak* tribal union. The Kipchaks lived in the south west of Siberia, advanced to the Irtysh, Ishim and Tobol river areas and reached almost as far as the Ural mountains. The Kipchak-Kimaks began to expand into the territory of the Oghuz tribes during the 9th and 10th centuries.

In the 10th century the Kipchaks gained their independence within the Kimak Khanate and began to migrate westward. By conquering the lands of richer pastures that belonged to Oghuz, the Kipchaks increased their power in the region, and the Kimaks became subject to them. Some of the Kimak groups remained on the left bank of the Irtysh, and some advanced with the Kipchaks to the west.

The Kimak state collapsed in the mid-11th century due to the waves of migration out of Central Asia. In the 13th century the survivors of the Kimak Khanate were captured by the Mongols and its lands were transferred to the Ulus of Jochi.

The Kipchaks and Cumans were united by the 12th century, and they set up the Cuman-Kipchak confederation. Most of the North Caucasus was part of the confederation. Their territory was called Cumania (*Dast-i Qipcaq* - the Kipchak steppes) and was composed of loosely connected tribal units.

The Kipchaks and Cumans were originally two different tribes. The Cumans were a semi-nomadic pastoralist Turkic people who formed a loosely organized tribal confederation. There are two different views about the original homeland of the Cuman: some sources place it in northeastern China, and others place it in the Altay region and southern Siberia.



The Cumans reached the north of the Black Sea by the early to mid-11th century and began to threaten the Byzantine Empire, the Magyars, and the Kievan Rus'.

Cuman – Russian Relations

The Russian word *Polovtsy* referred to the Kipchak and Cuman in Russians chronicles. Historians have claimed that the names Kipchak and Polovtsy had the same meaning, “*pale yellow*”, which was the color of the Cuman horses, *Akhal-Teke*.

According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the Cumans first appeared in the Dnieper region in 1054 during the rule of Grand prince *Vsevolod I of Kiev*. The western branch of the Cumans was in close contact with Kievan Rus’; and based on the *Chronicle*, the first encounter between Rus’ and the Cumans took place in 1055 and resulted in a peace agreement. After that there were a series of raids by the Cumans on the boundaries of the southern Russian principalities, and plundering Rus’ lands.

In 1061, the Cumans made their first attack on Rus’ territory. The Cumans’ again appeared in the Chronicle due to their second attack on Rus’ at the Battle of the Alta River in 1068 which resulted in a crushing defeat of the Rus’ princes Izyaslav I, Svyatoslav II and Vsevolod I by the Cuman forces. The Cumans decided to consolidate their power and attacked Russian territory once again. The Rus’ forces defeated the Cumans killing many of them, and the Cuman prince Sharukan was captured. Taking advantage of this situation, the Kievan princes continued their campaigns against the Cumans. These systematic attacks on the Cuman lands weakened the Cumans.



When Izyaslav’s son Svyatopolk II assumed power, the Cuman tribes sent ambassadors to him, asking for peace with the Kievan state. Svyatopolk II threw the ambassadors in prison. Later Svyatopolk II released the prisoners, but would not make peace with them. Svyatopolk II was defeated and forced to make peace with the Cumans at the Battle of the Stugna River in 1093.

Cuman invasion of Kiev according to the Radziwiłł Chronicle (1096)

The Cumans reattacked in 1107 plundering near Pereyaslavl’. Vladimir II Monomakh showed fierce resistance to stop the Cuman attacks. At the beginning, the Cumans defeated Vladimir II Monomakh, but later the combined Rus’ forces repelled the Cumans and drove them from the Rus’ territory to the Caucasus. There were multiple attacks on Kievan Rus’ conducted by the Cumans in 1096, 1097, 1105, and 1107.

From the 1120s, the Cumans expanded their territory from the Irtysh to the Dniester river and reached even as far as the Danube. From the late 11th through the 12th century the Cumans became the most powerful people on the eastern European steppes.

Due to dynastic strife, there were large-scale confrontations between Izyaslav Mstislavich and Yuri Dolgorukiy. Yuri Dolgoruky with the help of the Cumans assumed the Kievan throne, restored the traditional order of succession and sent them plundering his enemies’ principalities.

When Yuri’s son, prince Gleb Yuryevich assumed the Kievan throne, the Cumans came to renew political agreements with him as the main ruler of the Rus’ principalities. In the entry for 1172 of the *Ipatyev chronicle* the writer talked about a large number of Cumans travelling to the Rus’ lands.



In 1185, Prince Igor Svyatoslavich of Novgorod-Seversk conducted a campaign against the Cuman tribes who occupied the upper reaches of the Don river. The campaign ended in a catastrophic defeat in the Don river basin at the river Kayala. Igor and other princes were captured and some princes were killed. This defeat became the subject of the autonomous epic poem, *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*.

After Igor was captured, Svyatoslav III Vsevolodovich of Kiev and the co-ruler Rurik Rostislavich conducted a campaign to rescue Igor from the Cumans. In 1193, Rurik had to sign a peace agreement with the Cumans to end the Cuman raids.

The Cuman raids in Rus' territory continued until the appearance of the Mongols in 1223. When the Mongols advanced to the southern Russian steppes during their pursuit of the Khwarezm shah, they confronted the Cumans in Subcaucasia

and defeated them.

Cuman – Mongol Relations

When the Mongol conquest became a real threat not only for the Eurasian steppes, but also for the Southern Russian principalities, and after the Cumans suffered a series of military defeats by the Mongols, the Cuman khans sought and received help from the princes of Rus'. However, the combined Rus'- Cuman forces were defeated by the Mongols in 1223 at the Kalka River. A group of Cumans fled the territory and moved to the west, to Bulgaria. Some Cumans migrated into Hungary, some into Ukraine, and the rest of the Cumans were incorporated into the Golden Horde.

In 1229 – 1236 the Mongols conducted successful campaigns against the Cumans and the Volga Bulgars, but in 1237 they focused on the Rus'. The Mongols under the command of the generals Jebe and Subutai defeated the combined forces of Rus' princes of Kiev, Galicia and Chernigov, and their allies the Cumans. They defeated the northern Rus' princes at *the Battle of Sit* in 1238.

After the Mongols invaded Europe in the 13th century, the tribal confederation broke up in 1239.

Cuman and Byzantine Relations

The Cuman first appear in Byzantine sources as allies of the Pechenegs in 1087. In the historical source the *Alexiad*, it was reported that in 1091, the Pechenegs began to be a major threat for the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines made an alliance with the Cumans and the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos used them to defeat the Pechenegs (Scyths – this name was used for the Pechenegs by Anna Komnene, the writer of *the Alexiad* and the daughter Alexios I) at *the Battle of Levounion*.

In the 12th century relations between the Cumans and the Byzantines were occasionally hostile, but some Cumans began to settle in Byzantine territory.

After the defeat of the Russian principalities by the Mongols at the *Battle of the Kalka River* in 1223, Cumans fleeing the Mongols entered the Balkans in the thousands. Their raids and destruction of towns and villages continued until 1242.

In 1242, John III Vatatzes, Emperor of Nicaea, was able to persuade the Cumans through a mix of diplomacy and gifts to become allies and settle on lands he provided in Thrace and Anatolia.

The Byzantines used the Cumans to help put down local conflicts, but Cuman forces gave the Empire of Nicaea the edge at the Battle of Pelagonia in 1259, resulting in a clear victory over a western alliance that also included the Despotate of Epirus.

After the reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 by Michael VIII Palaiologos, the Cuman continued to form an important part of the Palaiologan armies until the end of the 13th century.

The Cuman hordes fled from the Mongols to the Magyar kingdom and the complex process of their assimilation and integration there began.

Discussions/Questions:

1. What were the roles of the Cuman tribes in the rise of the Kievan Rus'?
2. Why did the nomads always become a threat to the surrounding peoples?

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