



Summary :

The Cumans were a people of Turkish origin, who came from Asia around the middle of the 11th century and started replacing little by little their ethnically kindred people, the Pechenegs, on the steppes of the Eastern Europe. In the late 11th century they were plundering Byzantine territories, though in the battle at Lebonion in 1091 they helped the emperor Alexios I Komnenos to defeat the Pechenegs. Their attacks against the Byzantine Empire continued up until 1160. Part of the Cumans settled in Byzantine territories, converted to Christianity, received land estates and served in the imperial army.

Date

11th- 14th century

Geographical Location

Eastern Europe, Balkan peninsula

1. Emergence and migrations of the Cumans

The Cumans constitute one of the last waves of the Turkic westward expansion. In the 11th-13th-c. Byzantine sources they are mentioned very often as *Scythians*, whereas their Turkic name is *Qipčak* and the Slavic one *Polovci*. They formed a confederation of Eurasian nomads and semi-nomadic tribes which replaced the [Pechenegs](#) in the steppes of East Europe around 1050-1060. Their history begins in Asia and concludes in Europe and in Africa. The Cumans played an important role in the steppes of the Black Sea over the period between the 11th and the 13th century, and their relations with the Gruzim (Gruzinim), the [Russians](#), the Magyars, Byzantium and [Bulgarians](#) had a deep impact in the history of those peoples.

The beginnings of the migrations of the Cumans from the northern parts of the steppes of central Asia towards the west go back to the 9th c. In the second half of the 10th century, probably because of the migrations of various tribes, caused by the foundation of a strong Chinese state in central Asia, the Cumans from the northern regions of the steppes of central Asia, namely the upper course of the Irtysh river, turned southwards, towards Turkistan, pushing their ethnically kindred people of the Oğuz out of the south fridge of the steppes of central Asia. In the 1030s, the Cumans were dominating on the steppes of central Asia as far as the borders with the Muslim world. With the clashes continuing, the Cumans penetrated into Europe in the 1040s and the 1050s, and within 10-15 years they prevailed all over the steppes as far as the borders of Byzantium and of Hungary. In reality they constituted only a small chain link of the 11th century great migrations, extending from the borders of China to Eastern Europe.

2. Sources about the Cumans

The Armenian historian Matija Edeski reports that in 1050/1051 «the people of the dragon» penetrated into the territories of the Cumans, crashed them and thereafter expelled them, and in turn the latter pushed back the Oğuz and the Pechenegs; all these people took the offensive on the Byzantines.¹ The name «people of the dragon» probably implies the Chinese or some Mongolian tribe. As a consequence of this raid, a significant part of the Cumans, though not all of them, set out towards the steppes of the Black Sea, where, around 1054, they attacked mainly against the Oğuz. After being put to flight by the Cumans, the Oğuz found rescue or total disaster on the border regions of Byzantium, of Russia and of Hungary. The blow of 1050/1051 directed a considerable part of the Cumans westwards, on the steppes – through the Carpathian forests, the Iron Gates of the Danube and the Balkan mountain range, behind which Byzantium and Hungary were lying. It is known that in 1114 they reached Vidin. But the blow of 1050/1051 did not utterly destroy the Cumans in Asia: a part of them remained there, which means that their expansion covered a large area from Turkistan to the Danube.

The sources have recorded the Cumans' height, robustness, beautiful stature, beauty and fair-hairness. A lot have been written about the beauty of their women. The archbishop of Thessalonica Eystathios writes of the Cumans: «The Scythians (= Cumans) are a



people that never remain in one place but are in constant movement, and for that reason they are deprived of institutions. They (the Cumans) roam about to the four corners of the earth wandering endlessly, without ever taking a rest. They are really flying and fleeing, and nobody can even catch them, since neither do they inhabit cities, nor do they know about villages, but they constantly move like wild beasts".²

Robert de Clari who participated in the [Fourth Crusade](#), reports that beyond Bulgaria, Cumania was lying (the realm of the Cumans) and he adds: "The Cumans are a savage people who neither sow nor reap: they do not have huts or houses, but large tents constructed from skins under which they find shelter, while they exclusively live on milk, cheese and meat. During the summer so many flies and mosquitoes are gathering, that they do not even dare to move out of their tents in order to invade the lands that they want to plunder."³

3. Settlements and organization of the Cumans

The Cumans were mainly occupied with nomad stock-breeding. However, in the 12th century craftsmen of various specialties started to appear among them as well, such as blacksmiths, furriers, shoemakers, saddle makers, arms makers - mainly fletchers -, and tailors. As was usually the case with other nomads, Cumans too were involved in raids and plundering, which was a significant part of their occupation, and so they were known as very skillful warriors. Besides this, the Cumans were also involved in trade, especially in slave-trade, in Crimean ports such as [Souгдаia](#) and [Cherson](#). There is evidence that in the society of Cumans vendetta also existed.

During the summer, the Cumans resided mainly at the northern regions of the territories they occupied, namely at the region south of the Carpathian mountain range, while during the winter because of the inhospitable climate, they descended further south, reaching the southern bank of the Danubian Lowland, namely the Byzantine and Bulgarian lands. At the north their territories reached as far as the region of Bukovina. The Cumans sojourned on the northern shores of the Black Sea and the [Azov Sea](#) as well, at the Crimean peninsula, but only at the northern parts of it, because the southern ones were unsuitable for nomads. Their capital was located near the modern city of Kharkov (or Kharkiv or Charkow) in Ukraine.

During the 11th century the social organisation of the Cumans was on the stage of transition. Their initial tribal system consisting of families and lineages was becoming more and more stratified. More families were creating clans, clans were united into hordes, and some hordes were forming tribes in charge of which were the **khans**. Their army was composed of light and heavy cavalry which was characterized by its wide agility. Women took part in the battles. As far as their religion is concerned, it is known that they believed in evil spirits. The archaeological evidence regarding the Cumans are scarce, and their tombs are hard to discern from those of their ethnically kindred Pechenegs. Stone figures were placed in honor of the dead Cumans they were placing stone statues as monuments.

4. On the Danubian steppes. Relations with the Rus and the Hungarians

When they arrived from Asia, the Cumans descended as far as the borders of Russia, of Byzantium and of Hungary and over the next two centuries they had particularly intensive relations with these states. Their first raids against these states' lands came as an answer to the defiance shown by these states. These clashes paved the way which the subsequent waves would follow, thus enabling their penetration into these lands and their expansion.

With the Russians they collided for the first time in 1054, and thereafter repeatedly penetrated the Russian lands and inflicted heavy defeats upon the armies of the princes of Kiev (1068, 1092, 1093, 1096). Nevertheless, in the begging of the 12th century the princes of Kiev Svyatopolk Izjaslavič and Vladimir Monomakh managed to make a series of victorious campaigns against the Cumans (1103, 1106, 1107, 1109, 1111, 1116). As a result of these successes only a small horde of the khan Sarčak settled in the region around river Don. His brother Otrok with 40.000 Cumans left in 1118 at Caucasus where he settled and put himself at the service of the king of Georgia David II the Restorer (1089-1125). The latter made use of their services in the wars against the Seljuks, as well as in the internal conflicts with the rebellious aristocracy.



The effort of a part of the Cumans to threaten the Bulgarians at river Volga in 1117 was unsuccessful. After the death of Vladimir the Monomakh (1125) the Cumans of the river Don were united. Many Russian princes got married to illustrious Cuman women, settled Cumans on Russian lands and made use of their military skills. Despite the increased pressure against the Russian territories in the 1170s and the 1180s, the Russians resisted. The fight of the Russian people against the Cumans is described in chronicles and in the well-known work «Slovu o polku Igoreve» (The Song of Igor's Campaign).

From the steppes of Danube, the Cumans were undertaking raids in Hungary and were interfering in its internal affairs. Something similar was happening in Poland as well. The sources record the attacks against Hungary in 1070, in 1091 and in 1094. It is known that in the middle of the 12th century, Hungary fortified its borders with Transylvania because of the Cumans. Documents of Hungarian kings attested that the Cumans in 1211-1212 were threatening the Hungarian borders.

5. In the Balkan Peninsula. Relations with Byzantium

5.1. 11th – 12th c.

The raids of the Cumans over the northern regions of the peninsula of Haemus began after 1060. Following their ethnically kindred people of the Oğuz, who in 1064-65 crossed the lower Danube and penetrated deep into the Byzantine territories, part of the Cumans penetrated as well into Byzantine lands. Nikephoros Basilakes, one of the pretenders to the Byzantine throne, invited in 1078 the Pechenegs and the Cumans, who, plundering and devastating, reached as far as Adrianople. A similar attack was repeated in 1087. The Cumans were on the side of [Alexios I Komnenos](#), at the well-known battle at the foot of the Mount Lebonion in the spring of 1091, which resulted in crushing the Pechenegs. However, this alliance was short-lived and the raids of the Cumans continued. Thus, in 1095, Cumans appear in the army of the usurper Leo Diogenes, who presented himself as son of the ex-emperor [Romanos IV Diogenes](#). However, after their defeat by Alexios I Komnenos, and for about half a century, their attacks ceased. They were repressed in 1146, in 1154 and in 1160, on the fringes of the Byzantine Empire along the Danube. It is believed that it was the Cumans who around 1122 destroyed [Dinogetia](#) (modern Garvan in Rumania). During this same period, they started to settle in Byzantine lands.

The Cumans also played an important role during the uprising in Bulgaria against Byzantium in 1186, as well as during the establishment of the so-called Second Bulgarian Empire. The brothers Peter and Asen, co-founders of the new state, often used their military services. At Byzantium, a number of the officials who were granted **pronoiai** in the 12th century were of Cuman origin, as is attested by certain documents in the archives of the monasteries at Mt. Athos. In the first decades of the 13th century they served as mercenaries for the Bulgarian leaders Kaloyan and Ivan Asen II.

5.2. 13th – 14th c.

In 1223 the Mongols twice crushed the Cumans: on the northern Caucasus and at the well-known battle near the Kalka river where the Cumans were allies of the Russian princes. After the Mongols' penetration, part of the Cumans was integrated in the newly founded state of the **Golden Horde** and part of them moved to Hungary where they received lands to settle in exchange for their military service.

After the Mongols' invasion, the influx of the Cumans into Byzantine territories increased. In 1241 [John III Vatatzes](#) settled ten thousand Cumans in Thrace and in [Asia Minor](#), while in 1259 Cuman soldiers played an important role at the battle of Pelagonia. The Cumans were notorious as skillful warriors who were accurate archers. However, sometimes their allegiance was uncertain: in 1256 near Didymoteichon, the Cumans fled to the Bulgarians. One of the most famous Byzantine generals of the 14th century, Syrgiannes, was of Cuman origin on his father's side, originating from those Cumans who were hired on the service of John III Vatatzes.

6. Assessment

Although they had great victories in the dominion of Byzantium and of Russia, the Cumans never showed the will to found their own



state there. They appear to have been following, like the Pechenegs, the vows of the great Turkish **khagans** of the 7th and the 8th century, who were swearing that they would never replace the steppes where they were born and that they would resist the temptation of a closer contact with the attractive, luxurious but indolent civilization of the indigenous peoples. In this light, the words of Otrok, one of the most illustrious leaders of the Cumans that «it is better for someone to die during a battle at his homeland, rather than be glorious in a foreign land», have a particular meaning. These words may epitomize the Cuman way of life and at the summarize two centuries of this people's history in Eastern Europe.

The dynasty of **Mamlūks** in Egypt, which ruled from 1250 until 1517, was partly composed of former slaves (*mamluk*) of Cuman origin. The Cumans left traces in place-names of the Balkan Peninsula. The city of Kumanovo in Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is only one such example.

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1. *Chronique de Matthieu d'Edesse*, tr. E. Dulaurier (Paris 1858) p. 89.
 2. *Eustathii Metropolitae Thessalonicensis Opuscula*, ed. T. Tafel (Frankfurt/M 1832) /reprint: Amsterdam 1964/, p. 44.
 3. Robert de Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. P. Charlot (Paris 1939), LXV, p. 138.
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Glossary :

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| | Golden Horde Conventional designation of the state of <i>Ulus Jochi</i> or the <i>Khanate Kipchak</i> . It was a nation, that was a cross of Turcs and Mongolians and lived in the west part of the Mongolian Empire. The Horde flourished from the middle of the 13th century until the end of the 14th century and built up important commercial relationships with the nations of the Mediterranean Sea, especially the Genoese. |
| | khan (Ilkhan), khagan This title was used in Turkic and Mongolian languages to designate the supreme ruler. The Byzantines used it to refer to the rulers of the Avars, Khazars, Turks and Bulgarians. |
| | pronoia ("care", "forethought") An institution that goes back to the 11th century. It refers to estates granted to a prominent military official or to the Church; it also designates in general the right of an individual of areligious foundation to receive directly from citizens of farmers whatever dues they would normally be obliged to pay to the state. The holder of a <i>pronoia</i> was called <i>pronoiaros</i> . The <i>pronoiai</i> could not be inherited by the family of military officials after their death, while when a donation was made to the Church, the pronoia was considered full and permanent. |

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Quotations

The collapse of the Cuman realm after the Mongol invasions

Scholars tend to underline the Cuman vitality; Golden cited the famous statement of al-'Umari, according to which the Mongols later mixed

and intermarried with the conquered Kıpçaks and became like their subjects; I myself discovered Cumans in the service of Daniil of Galicia and Vladimir-in-Volyn' in 1245, which means that that particular group of Kıpçaks survived the Mongol invasion and now lived in the vicinity of the Mongol dominions. Yet these optimistic statements should not conceal the collapse of the Kıpçak world. The Cuman aristocracy was slain; their sacred stone figures were often purposefully destroyed; and while the Kıpçaks gave birth to, or at least enriched, many Turkic nations (the Tatars, Crimean Tatars, Kazakhs, Kirgizs, Uzbeks, the Turkic people of the North Caucasus and the Altai Mountains), the very name 'Kıpçak' was eventually replaced by 'Tatar' for the entire territory covered by the Golden Horde. The *Codex Cumanicus*, our chief source of Cuman, reflects the changing name of the language. In the first two parts of the Codex, which were written on paper made during the first half of the fourteenth century (the *terminus ante quem* of the work), the language is described as *comanicum* or *chomanico*. By contrast, the later parts of the Codex referred to the language as 'Tatar' (*tatar til*). Indeed, the very name 'Kıpçak' survived in the Armeno-Kıpçak documents composed in L'viv and Kamianets' Podil's'kyi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ironically, we do not know the ethnic identity of the Armeno-Kıpçak people: as the acts were written in Armenian characters, and were, mainly, translations of Armenian sources, one may suggest that the speakers were either Armenians who had adopted the Kıpçak language, or Kıpçaks who had turned Armenian.

Korobeinikov D., "A broken mirror: the Kıpçak world in the thirteenth century," in Curta, F. – Kovalev, R. (eds), *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans* (Leiden 2008), pp. 406-7.

Chronological Table

1050/1051 : «The people of the dragon» (Chinese?) crushes the Cumans in the steppes of central Asia.

Around 1050-1060. : The Cumans dominate over the steppes of Eastern Europe.

1054 : First victorious attack of the Cumans against the Russians (later raids: 1068, 1092, 1093, 1096).



- 1064/1065 : The Oguz cross the Danube and penetrate into Byzantium, followed by the Cumans.
- 1070 : Raid of the Cumans against Hungary (later raids: 1091, 1094)
- 1078 : Raid of the Cumans against Byzantium.
- 1087 : New raid of the Cumans against Byzantium.
- 1091 : At the battle of Lebounion the Cumans side with Alexios I Komnenos to defeat the Pechenegs.
- 1095 : The Cuman allies of Leo Diogenes are defeated by Alexios I Komnenos.
- 1103 : The Russians defeat the Cumans (later victories of the Russians: 1106, 1107, 1109, 1111, 1116)
- 1118 : The Cumans at the service of Georgian king David II.
- 1146 : Attack against Byzantium (later attacks 1154, 1160).
- 1186 : They participate in the foundation of the Second Bulgarian Empire.
- 1211/1212. : The Cumans threaten Hungary.
- Between 1222 and 1237: They are subjugated to the Mongols.
- 1241 : John III Vatatzes settles ten thousand Cumans in Thrace and in Asia Minor.
- 1259 : Victory of the troops of Nicaea at the battle of Pelagonia with the significant contribution of Cuman forces.