

# Cumans and Russians (1055–1240)

ELMETWALI TAMIM\*  
(Alexandria University, Egypt)



Of the various appellations for this large tribal union, in this chapter I will use the form *Cumans* to avoid confusion. It is the name most commonly found in the Greek and Latin sources. However, the same tribal union also appears as the *Kipchaks* القفجاق (meaning steppe/desert (people)<sup>1</sup>, with variants like *Khifshākh* < *Khifchākh* خفجاق، خفشاخ،<sup>2</sup>) in the Muslim sources, The Arabic author al-Marwazī (writing about 1120) however referred to them as *Qun*,<sup>3</sup> which corresponds to the Hungarian name for the Cumans, *Kun*.<sup>4</sup> They appear to have called themselves Kipchaks, which meant that they came from the Kipchak, a Turkish name applied vaguely to the great north-western steppe of Asia, now known as the Kirghiz steppe.<sup>5</sup> The name *Polovtsy* (*Polovcian*) (yellowish, sallow) appears in Russian

---

\* Lecturer of Medieval History, Faculty of Education in Damanhour, Alexandria University, Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> al-Kāshgharī (Maḥmūd ibn Ḥussayn ibn Muḥammad), *Dīwān lughat al-Turk*, (Ankara, 1990), 20; P. B. Golden, "The peoples of the south Russian steppes," *Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. D. Sinor, Cambridge 1994), 277; O. Pritsak, "The Polovcians and Rus," *Archivum Eurasiae medii aevi* 2 (1982), 321–322, n.3. For the etymology, see, Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 325–327.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Khurdadhbih (Abu'l-Kāsim Obaidallah ibn Abdallah), *Kitāb Al-Masalik Wa'l-Mamalik*, Arabic text edited by M. J. De Goeje, Leiden 1889, 31 (henceforth: Ibn Khurdadhbih); *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam, The Regions of the World. A Persian Geography, 372 A.H./982 A.D.*, translated and explained by V. Minorsky, with a preface by V.V. Barthold (1930) translated from the Russian (Oxford, 1937), 101 (hereafter *Ḥudūd*); Abū-l-Fidā' ('Imad Ad-Din Isma'il bin 'Umar bin Kathir), *Taqwīm al-buldān*, Arabic text edited by Reinaud and de Slane (Paris, 1840), 206; Ibn al-Fakih al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb Al-Boldān*, Arabic text ed. M. J. De Goeje, Leiden 1885, 329; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 321–322, n.3.

<sup>3</sup> V. Minorsky, *Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir Marwazi on China, the Turks and India: Arabic Text* (circa AD 1120) with an English translation and commentary, London 1942, 18 (henceforth: *Marwazi*); I. Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars, Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*, Cambridge 2005, 5. For the etymology, see, Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 328–331.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bruce Boswell, "The Kipchak Turks," *Slavonic Review*, 6, No. 16 (June, 1927), 70 (hereafter Boswell, *Kipchak*).

<sup>5</sup> Boswell, *Kipchak*, 7.

sources.<sup>6</sup> The corresponding terms in western languages are; *Pallidi*, *Falones*, *Valani*, *Valwen*, etc. This group of names has no correspondence in Muslim literature.<sup>7</sup> Another name under which the *Kipchaks* were known in the Byzantine empire is *Kóμavoι*<sup>8</sup> and in western Europe as *Comani*, *Commani*,<sup>9</sup> which is also found in Idrīsī, who (perhaps quoting from a European source) calls the *Kipchaks* القمانيين and their land القمانية (al-Qumāniyīn).<sup>10</sup>

The origin of the word *Kipchaks*, in my opinion, is the name of the ancestor of this tribe. This is suggested by the names of the Turkish state in the Islamic world, like Ottoman, and perhaps supports what was written by Gardīzī, about the origin of the seven tribes of Kimāk, including the *Kipchaks*, as the names of the seven princes who came to the region.<sup>11</sup>

The precise relationship of the Cumans to the Kipchaks is unclear, although we are relatively well informed about the latter. They appear in the eighth-century Moyun Chur inscription as the *Turk-Qibchaq* who were part of the Turkic state for fifty years. In all likelihood, they were in the Altai region during the period of the Turkic Kaghanate. Subsequent to the collapse of the Turkic state, they became part of the *Kimāk* tribal union and with it advanced, or had already progressed, to the Irtysh, Ishim and Tobol river areas (south-western Siberia) in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> It is here that they first come into the view of the Islamic geographers. Ibn Khurdādhbih, writing in the ninth century but with earlier materials as sources, indicates that they already held an autonomous position within the Kimek confederation.<sup>13</sup> Iṣṭakhri gives the Kimāks as neighbors of the Guz, and separated from them by a river,<sup>14</sup> which would appear from the descrip-

<sup>6</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. and trans. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz, Cambridge MA, 1953, 58, 62, 143; *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016–1147*, translated from Russian by Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, with an introduction by C. Raymond Beazley, and an account of the text by A. A. Shakhmatov, London 1914, 4; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 70. For the etymology, see, Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 326–328.

<sup>7</sup> Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 323–324; *Hudud*, 315. For the etymology, see, Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 331.

<sup>8</sup> The name first occurs in the Byzantine literature in the work of Michael Attaleiates (c.1079–1080). See, Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, English translation by E. R. A. Sewter, Harmondsworth 1969, 222; Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica* I–II, Leiden 1983, 167–168; Vásáry, *Cumans*, 5; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 322. For the etymology, see, Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 328–331.

<sup>9</sup> Friar Giovanni di Piano Carpini, *The story of the Mongols whom we call the Tartars*, translated with an introduction by Erik Hildinger, Boston MA, 1996, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Idrīsī, (Abu Abd Allah Muḥammad), *Kitab nuzhat al-mushtaq fi'khtiraq al-'afaq*, Beirut 1989, 428–429; Vásáry, *Cumans*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Gardīzī (Abū Sa'īd 'Abdu'l Ḥayy b. aḍ-Ḍaḥḥāk), *Kitāb Zaynu'l-Akḥbār*, translated from Persian to Arabic by A. Elsaed Zedan, Cairo, 1982), 437 (hereafter Gardīzī).

<sup>12</sup> Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 336; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 278.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibn Khurdādhbih*, 31; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 278.

<sup>14</sup> "...The river Atel rises near the Kirghiz, and flows between the Kimak and the Guz, forming the boundary between them." Iṣṭakhri (Abu Ishāk al-Fārisī al-Istakhri), *Viae Regnorum (masaalik al-mamaalik)*, Arabic text Edited by M. J. De Goeje (Brill, 1927), 222; C. A. Macartney, *The Magyars in the ninth century*, Cambridge 1930, 24, n.2.

tion to be the Kama, but a confusion with the Irtysh seems probable.<sup>15</sup> The Kipchaks are given in Gardīzī's report on the Turkish nations as one of the seven tribes of the Kimāk (the fifth tribe), who were living on the Irtysh, to the north of the Pechenegs.<sup>16</sup> The tenth-century *Hudūd al-'Ālam*, although indicating that they are a clan and have separated from the Kimāk, notes that "their king is [appointed] on behalf of the Kimāk", and put them to the north of Pechenegs.<sup>17</sup>

The Kipchaks in the ninth century were living as the westernmost of the Siberian Turks on the Irtysh river, their western frontier probably reaching almost as far as the Ural mountains.<sup>18</sup>

The Kipchak-Kimāks began to encroach on *Uz* (or *Oguz*) tribes (called *Torki* in the Russian sources)<sup>19</sup> grazing lands to their south during the ninth and tenth centuries. On the basis of Marvazī's text<sup>20</sup> we may claim that the Kipchaks and Cumans were originally two separate peoples. The Cumans must have lived to the east of the large bend of the Huanghe. The Kitans spread their dominions to include this territory at the end of the tenth century, and the Kitan expansion must have expelled a large number of tribes from their former habitations. The Cumans, or Cuns, must have reached the territory of the Kipchak tribal confederacy in southwestern Siberia and the Kazak steppe round the middle of the eleventh century. The historical process is obscure, and essential data are lacking, but the final result is indisputable: two Turkic confederacies, the Kipchak and the Cuman, had merged by the twelfth century. A cultural and political intermingling took place, and from the middle or end of the twelfth century it is impossible to detect any difference between the numerous appellations applied to the same tribal confederacy. Though they were originally the names of different components of the confederacy, by that time these appellations (*Kipchak*, *Cuman*

---

<sup>15</sup> Macartney, *Magyars*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Gardīzī*, 437; Macartney, *Magyars*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Hudūd*, 101; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Macartney, *Magyars*, 24, 28.

<sup>19</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 96.

The *Uz* tribes had been concentrated in the Syr Darya-Aral Sea steppes and adjacent areas. The *Torks* (of Turkish extraction like the Pechenegs) are identical with the *Uzes* of the Byzantine historians. At the end of the ninth century, the *Torks* were on the upper Don, east of the Pechenegs. For the *Uzes*, see, Golden, *Russian steppes*, 275-277.

<sup>20</sup> "To them [the *Turks*] (also) belong the *Qūn*; these came from the land of *Qitāy*, fearing the *Qitā-khan*. They [were] Nestorian Christians, and had migrated from their habitat, being pressed for pastures. Of their numbers [is? or was?] \**Ākinji b. \*Qoçqar* (?) the *Khwārezmshāh*. The *Qūn* were followed [or pursued] by a people called the *Qāy*, who, being more numerous and stronger than they, drove them out of these [new?] pasture lands. They then moved on to the territory of the *Shāri*, and the *Shāri* migrated to the land of the *Türkmāns*, who in their turn shifted to the eastern parts of the *Ghuzz* country. The *Ghuzz* *Turks* then moved to the territory of the *Bajanak*, near the shores of the Armenian (?) sea." *Marvazī*, 29-30; For a detailed analysis of this passage, see *Marvazī*, 95-104.

and its various translations) became interchangeable: they denoted the whole confederacy irrespective of the origin of the name.<sup>21</sup>

The territory of this Kipchak-Cuman realm, consisting of loosely connected tribal units, was called *Dašt-i Qipčaq* (the Kipchak steppes) by the Muslim historiographers and geographers, *Zemlja Poloveckaja* (Polovcian Land) or *Pole Poloveckoe* (Polovcian Plain) by the Russians, and *Cumania* in the Latin sources. Naturally enough, *Dašt-i Qipčaq* or *Cumania* was not known to the various sources in precise terms, but as a *pars pro toto*; the Muslim sources meant the eastern parts of *Dašt-i Qipčaq*, while the Russian and Western sources had the western parts of *Cumania* in mind. Depending on their region and their time, different sources each used their own word to denote different sections of the vast Cuman territory.<sup>22</sup>

The Kipchak people did not possess a state but formed five large tribal zones along the rivers where they lived: (1) the Central Asian-Kazakhstan region, as far as Talas; (2) the Volga-Ural region; (3) the Don region; (4) the Dnieper region; and (5) the Danube region.<sup>23</sup> Further subdivisions may be seen in the terms “White” and “Black” *Cumania* used by al-Idrīsī<sup>24</sup> and Simon of Keza.<sup>25</sup> “White *Cumania*” may have denoted the Dniester-Dnieper region while “Black *Cumania*” was perhaps located on the Severskij Donets.<sup>26</sup>

The Russians distinguished between “Wild” and “Non-Wild” Cumans, the latter being those tribes or units with which they had close political ties and some degree of cooperation.<sup>27</sup> The “Wild” Cumans occur for the first time in the Kievan chronicle in 1146; they consisted of four tribal groups, two to each wing. Their nomadic habitats are known to us only through some indirect references.<sup>28</sup>

In the twelfth century and at the beginning of the thirteenth, the Kipchak-Cuman confederacy occupied an immense area stretching from the middle reaches of the Irtysh as far as the Lower Danube. This vast territory was never politically united by a strong central power before the advent of the Mongol conquerors in 1241. There existed no Kipchak or Cuman empire, but different Cuman groups under independent rulers, or khans, who acted on their own initiative,

<sup>21</sup> Vásáry, *Cumans*, 6; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 279–280; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 336–338.

<sup>22</sup> Vásáry, *Cumans*, 7; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 340–341.

<sup>23</sup> Golden, *Russian steppes*, 280; Dimitri Korobeinikov, “A broken mirror: The Kıpçak world in the thirteenth century,” in *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages, Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. F. Curta, Leiden–Boston 2008, 381.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Idrīsī, 428–429. The Arab Geographer al-Idrīsī located White and Black *Cumania* by the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Simon of Keza, *The Deeds of the Hungarians*, ed. and trans. by L. Veszprémy and F. Schaer, with a study by J. Szűcs, Budapest, 1999, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Golden, *Russian steppes*, 280.

<sup>27</sup> For more details about ‘Non-Wild’ Cumans, see Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 374–375.

<sup>28</sup> For more details about ‘Wild’ Cumans, see Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 375–376.

meddling in the political life of the surrounding areas such as the Russian principalities, Byzantium in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Khwarezm.<sup>29</sup>

The absence of a strong, centralized authority is evident in the Cumans history. The late twelfth-century Jewish traveler, Petahia of Ratisbon, who journeyed through Cumania, noted that they "have no king, only princes and noble families".<sup>30</sup>

As devastating as some of their raids were, we see very little in the way of attempts to conquer and possess the lands of sedentary populations. The mutual and frequent raiding that sometimes led to full-scale war was largely attributable to the conflict between two very different economic systems. The Eastern Slavs sought to bring more and more land under cultivation, including steppe areas, while the nomads looked upon local raiding as an integral part of their economy. After their takeover of the steppe zone, we cannot point to any major Cuman seizures, particularly in settled regions.<sup>31</sup>

The political relations between Russians and Cumans went through two phases. The first phase extended from the arrival of the Cumans on the steppes of the Black Sea in 1054/5 to the death of Vladimir Monomakh in 1125; while the second phase extended from that date until their fall together under the sovereignty of the Mongols in 1240. During the first phase the Russian princes took a defensive stance in the face of attacks by the Cumans. Armed resistance proved inadequate, so the senior prince Sviatopolk II (1093–1113) dabbled with diplomacy instead and in 1094 married the daughter of Tugorkan, a Cuman khan. Towards the end of this phase the Russian princes went on the offensive to stop Cuman attacks on the Russian territories by attacking their strongholds in the steppes. The aim was deep penetration, a campaign far into the steppes to weaken the Cumans in their own homelands. It resulted in the great campaigns of 1103 and 1111, which saved Russia from the Cumans for sixty years.

The account of these great expeditions in the Chronicle is scanty in detail, and the additional evidence given in Vladimir's *Pouchenie* (Instruction) is confused in its chronology. Both campaigns were conducted jointly by Svyatopolk of Kiev, David of Chernigov, and Vladimir of Pereyaslavl with their sons. The expedition of 1103 was the first of a series of effective counter-offensives into the steppes, which reached as far as the Cuman encampments on the Donetsk and the Don. At a place called Suten the main force of the Cumans was encountered, and a great victory was gained by the Russians in which twenty khans were killed (including

---

<sup>29</sup> T. S. Noonan, "Rus', Pechenegs and Polovtsy: Economic interaction along the steppe frontier in the pre-Mongol," *Russian History* 19 (1992), 305–306; Vásáry, *Cumans*, 7; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> *The Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, ed. and tr. by A. Benisch, London 1856, 5; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Noonan, *Polovtsy*, 303–304; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 281; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 72–73.

the redoubtable Altunopa),<sup>32</sup> masses of sheep, horses, camels and slaves were captured, and numbers of Torks and Pechenegs came over to the Russian side.<sup>33</sup> In 1111 the advance into the steppe was not made down the Dnieper, but by an easterly route crossing the Sula, Psel and Vorskla. Several towns were captured in the Don region, the Don itself was crossed, and finally on March 27, on the Salnitsa, a great victory was gained by the Russians.<sup>34</sup> In 1116 Vladimir sent his son Yaropolk on a further expedition to the Don, where he occupied several towns and whence he brought back as wife a beautiful Alan princess.<sup>35</sup>

If the details of those campaigns are scanty and their topography vague, their results are obvious. The Cuman power was broken. Most of their khans were killed, captured or driven into exile. Bonyak the Scabby seems to have escaped, though his brother was killed. Neither he nor Sharukan are heard of again. Ayepak fled to the Bulgars on the Volga, where he was poisoned. The Russian borders were safe for half a century. From the time of Bonyak until the days of Konchak few raids disturbed the peace of southern Russia, though frequent use was made of the nomads in internecine feuds. During the reign of Vladimir Monomakh (1113–1125) and his two sons (1113–1139), scarcely a single violation of the frontier is recorded. Another important result of the Russian victories was that practically all the Uz (Torks) and Pechenegs left the Cuman steppes and transferred their allegiance to Russia. They took up their abode not only in the steppes south of the Ros and the Sula, but further inside Russian territory, between the Ros and the Stugna, in certain parts of Chernigov, and all over the principality of Pereyaslavl. Besides the Uz, Pechenegs and Berendians, we hear of Kayepichi, Kovuye and Turpeye. But in the usual Turkish fashion these petty tribes soon became merged in a new federation of Turks, who took the name of Karakalpaks or Blackcaps. Occupying a great part of the Russian marches, the Karakalpaks provided an admirable screen for Russia against the Cumans.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noticed that the victories of the Russian princes led to no extension of Russian territory, they limited themselves to the consolidation of the frontiers. The settlements on the Ros and Sula were restored and cities like Yuriev flourished once more, but no permanent occupation of southern territory was made, such as had resulted from the victories of Svyatoslav I Igorevich (964–972). In fact such an important city as Tmutarakan was not recovered. The Cumans, forced to relinquish their hold on the northern belt of grassland, were driven to dwell nearer the Black Sea coast. They proceeded to strengthen their hold on

<sup>32</sup> "Urusoba, Kchiiy, Arslanapa, Kitanopa, Kuman, Asup, Kurtek, Chenegrepa, Sur'bar', they slew Altunopa and his followers and many other princes. Beldyuz' was taken captive." See, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 200–202; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 7; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 74; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 282.

<sup>34</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 191–193; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 8; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> *Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisei* (henceforth: PSRL), II, col. 204; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 214; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 74–75

<sup>36</sup> *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, 202; Boswell, *Kipchak*, 75; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 282; S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*, London 1996, 274, 326.

Crimea and on the steppes of the Kuban and the Kuma, and turned for booty and adventure to the wealthy lands of the Caucasus.<sup>37</sup>

The second phase of the political relations between the Cumans and the Russians, which lasted nearly 120 years (1116–1236), was characterized by the eruption of outright conflict, on a large scale, between the Russians and Cumans. The Cumans turned to alliances with the Russian principalities, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, intervened in conflicts between the Russian princes which broke out between them because of the inheritance system, especially that of the throne of Kiev.

The greatest confrontations occurred after the death of Yaropolk Vladimirovich (1132–1139), who had attempted to arrange for his nephew to be his successor and had thereby aroused objections from his own younger brother Yuri Dolgoruky, the prince of Rostov-Suzdal. As a result of the discord among the heirs of Monomakh, Vsevolod Olgovich of Chernigov was able to take the Kievan throne (1139–1146) and regain a place in the Kievan succession cycle for his dynastic branch. After his death, the contest between Yuri Dolgoruky and his nephews resumed. It persisted until 1154, when Yuri, with the help of Cumans headed by Sevinch (d. 1151), finally ascended to the Kievan throne (1155–1157) and restored the traditional order of succession.<sup>38</sup>

By the late 1160s, Cuman raids, large and small, had become annual in Russia. The horsemen from the mouth of the river Dniepr and from along the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov raided Pereiaslavl and the River Ros region south of Kiev.<sup>39</sup> The tribes living in the Donets and the Don basin pillaged, in the main, the Ol'govichi domains in the Zadesen'e and Posem'e regions.<sup>40</sup>

Additional entries in the Russian Chronicle under 1166 show that the nomads were intensifying their raids on Russia. On seeing how the Ol'govichi were living in strife, the Cumans raided caravans traveling by river and by land from the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov regions. Rostislav Mistislavich (1159–1167) of Kiev therefore sent troops to defend the caravans as they traveled along the Dniepr rapids<sup>41</sup> and summoned the princes of Russia to join him against the Cumans. Mstislav's decision to lead an all-Russians campaign against the nomads shows that their raids had intensified. After their victory, the men of Russia set free the

---

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *Kipchak*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 325–331; Martin Dimnik, *The dynasty of Chernigov, 1146–1246*. Cambridge 2003, 73–75; J. Martin, "Kievan Rus," in *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, ed. J. R. Millar, New York 2004, 753; Golden, *Russian Seppes*, 282; M. Dimnik, "The Rus' principalities (1125–1246)," in *Cambridge History of Russia*, Vol. I, *From Early Rus' to 1689*, ed. M. Perrie, Cambridge 2006, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Kobyak was a khan of the Lukomorskie Cumans, who probably lived at the mouth of the river Dniepr and along the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 111, n. 18; 202, n. 357; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 365–366.

<sup>40</sup> Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 352–3; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 160, n. 218.

<sup>41</sup> PSRL, II, col. 526; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 111–112.

captive Christians and seized much booty. The princes returned home on Easter Day, March 31.<sup>42</sup>

An even more destructive conflict broke out after the death of Rostislav Mistislavich.<sup>43</sup> When Mstislav Izyaslavich, the prince of Volynia and a member of the next generation, attempted to seize the Kievan throne (1167–1169), a coalition of princes opposed him, led by Andrei Bogolyubsky, the son of Yuri Dolgoruky and a Cuman princess. It represented the senior generation of eligible princes, but also included the sons of the late Rostislav and the princes of Chernigov. The conflict culminated in 1169, when Andrei's forces evicted Mstislav Izyaslavich from Kiev, forcing him to flee to Volynia and sacked the city.<sup>44</sup> Andrei's brother, Gleb of Pereyaslavl, became prince of Kiev (1169–1171).<sup>45</sup> Historians are not agreed on Andrei's objective in attacking Kiev or on the significance of its capture on March 8. Some claim that his aim was to recover the Kievan throne for the rightful Monomashichi claimants because Kiev was the capital of the land. Others, however, argue that Andrei attempted to subordinate it to Vladimir and that its capture signaled its decline.<sup>46</sup>

Later, the Chernigov princes, warring with Kiev and Suzdal', attempted to use the aid of Konchek, located in the Donets-Don region.<sup>47</sup> The Chernigovian-Cuman army suffered a disastrous defeat in 1181; Eltut, Konchek's brother, died in battle and two of his sons were taken captive. Igor Svyatoslavich and Konchek, however, escaped by boat to Chernigov.<sup>48</sup> These alliances were short-lived for, in 1184, Russian forces defeated a large Cuman army. The booty that they seized included 7,000 Cuman captives, sixteen of their khans including Osoluk Burchevich, Kobyak with two of his sons, large herds of animals, goods that the nomads had plundered, and Christians whom the Cumans had taken captive.<sup>49</sup> Konchek's

---

<sup>42</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 538–40; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 26; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 114–115; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 108; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> After his death, the Mstislavichi split into two dynasties: the one in Volynia descended from Iziaslav who had made that region his family possession, and the one in Smolensk descended from Rostislav. See, Dimnik, *The Rus'*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> For an analysis and translation of the relevant chronicle passages, see J. Pelenski, "The Sack of Kiev of 1169: Its Significance for the Succession to Kievan Rus'," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 1 (1989), 303–16.

<sup>45</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 544–6; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 115–18; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 108; Martin, *Kievan Rus*, 753, Golden, *Russian steppes*, 282.

<sup>46</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 118; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 110–11. Historians do not agree whether or not Kiev lost its pre-eminence in Russia after Andrei's alliance sacked it. For the discussions, see Franklin, *Emergence*, 323–324.

<sup>47</sup> Khan Konchak lived until the beginning of the thirteenth century. He unified many of the Cuman tribes and, around 1184, seemingly achieved the peak of his power. His tribesmen lived in the basin of the river Donets. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 122, n. 72.

<sup>48</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 621–623; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 150; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 113–114; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 282.

<sup>49</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 630–633; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 160–161; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 115; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 353; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 282–283.

attempted counter-stroke in 1185 ended in negotiations.<sup>50</sup> It was in this context that the 1185 campaign, quite minor in scale, of Prince Igor Sviatoslavich of Novgorod-Seversk, took place. Igor rode against the Cuman camps located in the upper reaches of the river Donets. These tribes posed the greatest threat to the Seversk towns in the Posem'ë, so that the onus of keeping these nomads at bay fell on the cadet branch.<sup>51</sup> Some historians are of the opinion that Igor planned his campaign to be executed quickly without a major military encounter on the frontiers of the Cuman steppe. Others suggest that his aim was also to establish safe passage for merchants along the trade routes.<sup>52</sup> The Russian princes, however, suffered a catastrophic defeat in the Donets river basin at the river Kayala. Igor and many of the Russian princes were captured and others were killed. This defeat became the subject of the most famous epic poem of Russia, *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, which accurately reflects the state of Cuman-Russian relations, both military and cultural.<sup>53</sup>

After taking the Seversk princes captive, the Cumans challenged Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich (1173-1194) and Ryurik Rostislavich (the *duumviri*)<sup>54</sup> to come and rescue their compatriots from the Cuman camps, but if they preferred, the Cumans would come to Russia and set their tribesmen free.<sup>55</sup> The Cumans assembled their entire nation to march against Russia. But the khans argued; Khan Koza<sup>56</sup> advocated a safe and ruthless course: to raid the towns of the defeated Seversk princes along the river Seym, where only widows and orphans remained. Konchak, however, proposed attacking the princes on the Kievan side because they had defeated Khan Kobyak. Konchak's friendship with Igor and the consideration that his daughter was betrothed to Igor's son must have also persuaded him to reject Koza's plan. Because the khans obstinately stuck to their views, they split their tribe into two.<sup>57</sup> We may assume that after failing to launch a full scale

---

<sup>50</sup> *PSRL*, II, cols. 634-636; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 162-163.

<sup>51</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 168, n. 248.

<sup>53</sup> *PSRL*, II, cols. 637-644; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 169-172; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 115; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 283; Franklin, *Emergence*, 367.

<sup>54</sup> Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich's relationship with Ryurik Rostislavich was unique. At first, the two were rivals for Kiev, but in 1181, they agreed to a *modus vivendi* by forming a partnership to rule Kiev and the Kievan land. No such arrangement had existed before them or would exist after them. Granted, princes had exercised dual rule in the past: Oleg and his brother David had shared control of Chernigov; the Davidovichi, Vladimir and Izyaslav, seemingly ruled Chernigov together; and later Izyaslav Mstislavich and his uncle Vyacheslav Vladimirovich were co-rulers of Kiev. These arrangements, however, were made between princes of the same dynasty, whereas Svyatoslav and Ryurik belonged to rival dynasties. Their partnership, therefore, signified a high-water mark in the collaboration between the Olegovichi and the Rostislavichi. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 385.

<sup>55</sup> *PSRL*, I, cols. 397-399; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 173-176.

<sup>56</sup> He was evidently Koza Sotanovich, Dimnik, *Chernigov* 112, n.21.

<sup>57</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 177-178.

attack on Kiev following Igor's defeat, Konchak resorted to directing lightning strikes against the *duumviri*. At the same time, Koza and his allies, it would seem, increased their incursions into the Chernigov lands. Neither the *duumviri* nor the Cumans gained the upper hand in their military encounters.

In 1193, Ryurik had concluded peace with the Lukomorskie Cumans.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, in the summer, Svyatoslav suggested that the *duumviri* negotiate peace with all the Cumans, especially the Burchevichi.<sup>59</sup> In addition to securing peace for the people of Russia, however, Svyatoslav probably had a personal desire to end the Cuman raids. He was some seventy years of age and he must have found participating on campaigns ever more difficult.<sup>60</sup> Svyatoslav's stated desire to negotiate peace with all the Cumans is misleading. It is unlikely that the Burchevichi represented all the tribes east of the Dniepr since Konchak and Koza were not invited to the negotiations. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Svyatoslav singled out Osoluk and Izay of the Burchevichi. Evidently, he believed them to be the most troublesome along the Dniepr. It would seem, therefore, that the Burchevichi and the Lukomortsy were the tribes against whom Svyatoslav and Ryurik had been waging their campaigns in the Dniepr region. Svyatoslav wished to conclude peace with them because they were of the greatest danger to the *duumviri*. He evidently did not propose negotiating a pact with the nomads in the Donets basin against whom Igor was waging war.<sup>61</sup> Osoluk and Izay, however, never intended to conclude peace.

Despite his valiant efforts, Svyatoslav failed to defeat the enemy or to negotiate a lasting peace. He died in 1194 during the last week of July and was succeeded, according to their agreement, by Riurik Rostislavich (1194-1208).<sup>62</sup>

After Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich died in Kiev in 1194, Ryurik Rostislavich, with the backing of the dynasties of Smolensk and Suzdalia, sought to secure for the Rostislavichi the sole right of succession to Kiev. Because he failed to deprive the Ol'govichi of their right to supremacy in Russia, the princes of both dynasties remained claimants to Kiev. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, princely seniority in the dynasty of Chernigov had passed to the senior branch of Ol'govichi. This constituted the four youngest sons of Svyatoslav Vsevolodovich - Vladimir, Oleg, Vsevolod, Gleb, and Mstislav - who were all eligible to occupy the office of senior prince. Ryurik could also expect them to make a bid for Kiev where they had the right to sit on the throne of their father.<sup>63</sup>

In 1199 Roman Mstislavich of Vladimir in Volynia hastily seized the town of Galich after the death of Vladimir Yaroslavich in 1198 and soon after began wreaking havoc on domains belonging to Ryurik of Kiev and other princes. In

<sup>58</sup> These tribesmen probably lived at the mouth of the river Dniepr and along the shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 202, n. 357.

<sup>59</sup> The Burchevichi lived along the east bank of the Dniepr. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 202, n. 358.

<sup>60</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 202.

<sup>61</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 202-203.

<sup>62</sup> *PSRL*, II, col. 680; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 205-210; Idem, *The Rus'*, 116.

<sup>63</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 241.

1201, therefore, Rurik summoned the Ol'govichi to campaign against Roman. The latter evicted Rurik from Kiev and gave it to his cousin Ingvar' Yaroslavich of Lutsk, whose father had ruled the town.<sup>64</sup>

On January 2, 1203, Rurik and the Ol'govichi captured Kiev. He therewith avenged himself against the Kievans for opening the gates to Roman.<sup>65</sup> The entire Cumans land also participated in the slaughter. The chronicler identifies two khans; Konchak and Daniil Kobryakovich.<sup>66</sup> Rurik undoubtedly summoned the khan from the Donets basin. Rurik would have called the Lukomortsy from the right bank since he had used them as auxiliaries in the past.<sup>67</sup> Although he would capture Kiev later on several more occasions, his sack of the town is of special significance. The chronicler claims it was the most horrendous devastation that Kiev had experienced since the Christianization of Russia.<sup>68</sup>

In 1204 Svyatoslavich of Chernigov died and was succeeded by his brother Vsevolod "the Red" (Chermnyi). Some time in the summer of 1207, Vsevolod assembled his brothers, his nephews, the Cumans, and the Svyatopolchichi of Turov and Pinsk. His plan was to deprive Rurik of Kiev. The latter fled to Vruchiy even before the Ol'govichi reached Kiev and the Kievans opened their gates.<sup>69</sup> After that, the town changed hands between them on several occasions while Vsevolod and Rurik employed Cumans in their battles against each other. In 1208 Rurik died and Vsevolod the Red (1208-1212) finally occupied Kiev uncontested.<sup>70</sup>

The confusing and ever-changing pattern of raids and counter-raids indicates that both the Cumans and the Russians were rarely if ever able to gain the internal unity needed to deal a fatal blow. Wherever these developments might have led, they were cut short by the appearance of the Mongols.

In the spring of 1223, the Tatars (Mongols) arrived on the frontiers of Russia and supplanted the Cumans as a military power.<sup>71</sup> According to the Novgorod

---

<sup>64</sup> PSRL, I, cols. 417-18; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 241-242; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 117.

Roman himself was not a rightful claimant, even though he was of Mstislav's line, because he belonged to a younger generation than Rurik and Vsevolod Big Nest.

<sup>65</sup> PSRL, I, col. 418; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 43; Dimnik, *The Rus'*, 117.

<sup>66</sup> *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 43; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 243. Daniil, perhaps one of the two sons of Khan Kobryak, therefore brought tribesmen from the east bank of the Dniepr. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 243.

<sup>67</sup> Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 243.

<sup>68</sup> PSRL, I, col. 418; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 43; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 243-245; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 117.

<sup>69</sup> PSRL, I, col. 429; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 259-60; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> PSRL, I, cols. 432-5; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 262-3; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 119.

<sup>71</sup> During the middle of the twelfth century, the Tatars defeated the neighboring tribe of Mongols and became one of the leading tribes in Mongolia. Since the future emperor Chingis Khan was born to a Mongol tribe, all the tribes became known as the Mongols after he united them. In western Europe, the term Tatars (in the form Tartars) was used generically to identify all the Mongol invaders, but the inhabitants of Russia kept the name Tatars (*Tatary*). For a detailed explanation, see G. Vernadsky, *The Mongols and*

account, Khan Kotyan, the father-in-law of Mstislav Udaloy, came to Galich bearing gifts of “horses and camels and buffaloes and girls” for his son-in-law and the other princes of Russia, hoping to persuade them to help the Cumans against the Tatars.<sup>72</sup> On receiving this news, Mstislav Romanovich (1212–1223) summoned the princes of Russia to Kiev where they agreed to confront the new enemy on foreign soil. Their forces included contingents from Kiev, Smolensk, Chernigov, Galicia, Volynia and probably Turov. Vladimir-Suzdal, Riazan, Polotsk and Novgorod sent no men. The princes of Russia set out against the Tatars in April. At the Varangian Island (that is, Zarub) on the right bank of the Dniepr, the Cumans joined them. There they met Tatar envoys who attempted to convince the Russians that the Cumans were their common enemies. The princes refused to believe them and killed the envoys. The Tatars allegedly sent a second delegation repeating their peaceful intent. On this occasion, the princes let the envoys depart.<sup>73</sup> After the troops set out, Mstislav the Bold quarreled with his cousin Mstislav of Kiev. Their disagreement was responsible, in part, for the annihilation of their forces on May 31 at the River Kalka.<sup>74</sup>

The Cumans were less fortunate – the Tatars destroyed them as a military power. After that, they no longer posed a serious threat to Russia. On the few occasions when the chroniclers mention the Cumans again, they are allies of the princes. For example, under the years 1225 and 1228 Khan Kotyan is mentioned,<sup>75</sup> and, in 1235, the Cumans came to help the princes.<sup>76</sup> Mongol efforts against the Cumans were renewed in 1229–1230 and in 1237 the Mongols invaded Russia and the south Russian steppes.<sup>77</sup>

Those princes and khans who fought together, and whose children intermarried, were also bound together by the goods and revenues each derived from local frontier markets and trans-steppe trade. Economic interaction was thus an integral part of the overall relationship between the Cumans and the Russians.<sup>78</sup>

Some Cuman elements under Khan Koten (Kotian) fled to Hungary in 1238–1239, where other Cuman groups had earlier settled.<sup>79</sup> Already in the 1150s the

*Russia*, New Haven 1953, 11–12. Concerning the Tatar conquests before coming to Russia, see J. Fennell, *The Crisis of Medieval Russia 1200–1304*, London and New York 1983, 63–64.

<sup>72</sup> *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 64–5; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 292, n. 182; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 120.

<sup>73</sup> *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 65; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 293, n. 187; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 120.

<sup>74</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 740–745; *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, 65–66; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 293–298; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 120; Golden, *Russian steppes*, 283; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 372–373. The river Kalka was probably a tributary of the Kalmius that flows into the Sea of Azov west of the Don. Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 295, n. 191.

<sup>75</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 746, 753; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 298, n. 213.

<sup>76</sup> PSRL, II, cols. 772–774; *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 80; Dimnik, *Chernigov*, 298, n. 213; *Idem*, *The Rus'*, 122.

<sup>77</sup> Golden, *Russian steppes*, 283.

<sup>78</sup> For more analysis about the trade relations between the Cumans and Russians and the role of the Cumans in Russian trade, see, Noonan, *Polovtsy*, 308–326.

<sup>79</sup> Golden, *Russian steppes*, 283–284; Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 373.

Cumans had begun to resettle in Bulgaria. There they led the Wallachian-Bulgarian insurrection against Byzantium which led to the formation of a second Bulgarian kingdom with three Cuman dynasties; Asen (1185-1280), Terter-oba (1280-1323) and Šišman (1323-1396).<sup>80</sup>

The mass of Cumans, however, did not flee. The Tatars, taking advantage of the fragmentation of power that had been the dominant feature of Cuman political life, incorporated them into their empire. The large number of Cuman tribesmen thus brought into the Golden Horde gave it an overwhelmingly Turkic coloration. The land, as Islamic authors noted, had prevailed over the conquerors.<sup>81</sup>

The Cumans were responsible for the "orientalization" of the Slavic population of the Kievan Russian commonwealth. Contrary to the impression one gets from the Chronicles, that the Cuman danger was the basic problem of Russian history between 1055 and 1240, the objective historian will have to stress that there was no such Cuman danger at all. The Cumans never aimed to occupy even a part of a frontier Russian principality, such as the Pereyaslav land. If they penetrated into the interior of Russia, it happened because they were in alliance with one branch of the Rurikids against another.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 373. For more details about the role of Cumans in the foundation of the second Bulgarian state, see, Vásáry, *Cumans*, 13-56.

<sup>81</sup> Golden, *Russian steppes*, 284.

<sup>82</sup> Pritsak, *Polovcians*, 380.