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0521837561 - Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365

Istvan Vasary

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CUMANS AND TATARS

The Cumans and the Tatars were nomadic warriors of the Eurasian steppe who exerted an enduring impact on the medieval Balkans. With this work, István Vásáry presents the first extensive examination of their history from 1186 to the 1360s. The basic instrument of Cuman and Tatar political success was their military force, over which none of the Balkan warring factions could claim victory. As a consequence, groups of the Cumans and the Tatars settled and mingled with the local population in various regions of the Balkans. The Cumans were the founders of three successive Bulgarian dynasties (Asenids, Terterids and Shishmanids), and the Wallachian dynasty (Basarabids). They also played an active role in Byzantium, Hungary and Serbia, with Cuman immigrants being integrated into each country's elite. This book also demonstrates how the prevailing political anarchy in the Balkans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries made it ripe for the Ottoman conquest.

ISTVÁN VÁSÁRY is Professor of Turkish and Central Asian Studies at Loránd Eötvös University, Budapest. His previous publications (in Hungarian) include *The Golden Horde* (Kossuth, 1986), and *History of Pre-Mongol Inner Asia* (1993; 2nd edition, Balassi, 2003). He served as Hungarian Ambassador to Turkey (1991–5), and to Iran (1999–2003).

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In memoriam Pál Engel

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Preface

From the first moment of its existence until its final fall in 1453, Byzantium had to face the imminent danger of barbaric attacks and incursions. The most frequent and dangerous of these attacks reached the empire from north of the Danube, notwithstanding that the deadly blow to Constantinople was dealt by the Ottomans arriving from the the East through Anatolia. Beginning with the Huns in the second half of the fourth century AD and ending with the Tatars in the thirteenth century, the barbaric hordes had frequently crossed the Danube and ravaged and pillaged the towns of the Balkan Peninsula, leaving them in ruins. More than once they made their incursions close to the Golden Horn, thereby endangering the imperial capital itself. Byzantium had learnt clever ways of handling the nomadic question, the most effective being the hire of nomadic warriors as auxiliaries to fight against Byzantium's enemies. But even the most cunning diplomacy could not prevent the temporary influxes of nomads, which, more often than not, proved devastating to the sedentary population of the Balkans. The nomads were generally compelled to cross the Danube by other nomads from the East, so it was a whole chain of warlike events that led to the appearance of barbaric nomads in Byzantine territory.

One major wave of nomadic tribes proved instrumental in the formation of a new state: Esperükh's nomadic warriors founded the Bulgarian Empire between the Danube and the Haimos (Balkan) Mountains in 679–80. The conquering Bulgar-Turks became slavified in the course of the two subsequent centuries, and the adoption of Christianity by Boris in 864 meant their final assimilation into the Byzantine oecumene. But Byzantium had never acquiesced in the loss of Moesia, a former territory of the empire, and after several attempts it was Emperor Basileios II Boulgaroktonos ('Killer of the Bulgars') who finally crushed the Bulgars' resistance in 1018 and incorporated what was then Bulgaria into the Romaic Empire. Though the process of rehellenisation of the southern Slavic population began and Bulgaria lost both its political and administrative-ecclesiastical

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independence, Byzantium could not eliminate the nomadic question from its northern frontiers. Moreover, the annihilation of Byzantium's northern rival brought about a power gap in this region and Byzantium was again in direct confrontation with the renewed and vigorous attacks of the nomads.

In the eleventh century the Pechenegs and the Uz were the protagonists of the historical scene on the right bank of the Danube. From the second half of the same century a new nomadic confederacy entered Byzantium's sphere of interest – that of the Cumans. Following age-old techniques, Byzantium used Cuman warriors to crush Pecheneg hegemony in the Balkans. From 1091 the Cumans gained the upper hand in the Balkans, and their role in the re-establishment of the Bulgarian Empire in 1185–6 and in its eventual fate was fundamental. Furthermore, they played a pre-eminent historical role in the history of the Fourth Crusade, the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople and the Nikaian Empire. After the Tatar invasion of Eastern Europe in 1241, they were forced to flee to the West, and several groups settled in the Balkan Peninsula. Utilising their former intimate links with the Bulgarian elite, they twice appeared as founders of new dynasties (the Terterids and Šišmanids of Bulgaria). The Tatars subjugated the Second Bulgarian Empire, which was obliged to pay tribute to the new Tatar state of the Golden Horde. Towards the end of the thirteenth century and in the first decades of the fourteenth, Bulgaria was in direct dependence on the Golden Horde.

It is the Cumans and Tatars, nomadic warriors of the steppe, who are the focus of this book. I shall trace their historical fate in the Balkans, the westernmost stage of their wanderings, from 1185 until the middle of the fourteenth century. Both the chronological and the geographical frameworks of my book need some explanation. As far as the starting point is concerned, other events could equally well have been considered, such as the Cumans' first appearance in the Balkans in the second half of the eleventh century (as in the works of Michael Attaleiates, Anna Komnene and other Byzantine authors), or the first Tatar invasion, in 1241. But for the most part the early Cuman incursions did not exceed, at least in character and size, other nomadic influxes to which the Byzantines had become accustomed in the foregoing centuries. The Cuman participation in the foundation of the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1185 and the subsequent years, however, brought about basic changes in the political and ethnic map of the Balkans. Since 1185 seems to be a real turning point in the history of the Balkans, therefore, I deemed it reasonable to commence my narrative at that point. The terminus of my discussion is the middle of the fourteenth century. Although a sharp dividing line cannot be drawn, a

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few dates may indicate that a new era began in the history of the Balkanic lands at that time. The Tatar period of the Balkans came to a complete end with Berdibek Khan's death in 1359 and the subsequent anarchy in the Golden Horde. By contrast, the Ottoman powers' advance in Europe can be marked by the following major events: the seizure of Gallipoli in 1354, the occupation of Edirne in 1361, and finally, the loss of Serbian independence at Kosovo Polje in 1389. These events of the second half of the fourteenth century, since they herald the new Ottoman period, fall outside the scope of my work.

As far as the geographical framework of this book is concerned, it is broader than the term 'Balkans' would normally permit. The 'Balkans' as a geographical and cultural term designates the territories lying south of a line between the Sava and the Lower Danube. The western frontiers of the Balkans were rather loose: medieval Bosnia, with its mixed Catholic and Orthodox population in the pre-Ottoman period, can be regarded as a transitory territory, while Croatia and Dalmatia surely belonged to Western European civilisation. To the north, I have included medieval Wallachia and Moldavia and their historical antecedents. In the strict geographical sense, the territories between the Lower Danube, the Eastern Carpathian Mountains and the Dniester do not belong to what we call the Balkans. These territories represented the final stages of nomadic migration, and their fate was directly connected to that of the Balkans. The history and cultural traditions of these two Romanian principalities belong to that of the Balkans; they constantly stood and grew under the cultural influence of Byzantium. That is why I have included the history of these territories (within the indicated time-frame) in my book.

Finally, I must explain why I have restricted my investigations to the Cumans (a generally ethnic term) and the Tatars (generally a political one). These two peoples undoubtedly played a major role in the history of the Balkans. Their history belongs to that of the Turco-Mongolian world. A separate chapter could have been devoted to the Iranian people of the Alans or Yas, who also had a special role in the military and ethnic history of the Balkans, their role, together with that of the Catalan Company, being especially significant in the first decade of the fourteenth century. Similarly, the first Turkish mercenaries in Byzantium, often Christianised and called *Tourkopouloi*, played a significant role in the events between 1259 and 1319. Later, the first Turkish incursions into the Balkans up to the time when Orhan's son Süleyman had irrevocably set foot in Tzympe, near Gallipoli, in 1352, are also very important. The Yas, the *Tourkopouloi* and the early Balkanic activities of the Turks could equally have been included in this

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book. Despite having researched their history in the Balkans extensively, however, I finally decided to exclude them here. I am convinced that the *Tourkopouloi* and the Turks need separate treatment: their history belongs rather to the historical antecedents of Ottoman presence in the Balkans. Sufficient grounds could be given for the inclusion of the Alans or Yas in this book, though, since they really played an active role in the battles of the age as oriental military in the Balkans. But, after the publication of A. Alemany's excellent compilation of the sources on the history of the Alans (Alemany, *Alans*), I felt relieved of any need to include them in my treatment.

Much has been written on the history of the Balkans in this period (Ostrogorsky, *Gesch.*, pp. 285–366 (331–440); Vasiliev, *Hist. Byz.*, II, pp. 440–621; Jireček, *Serb.*, pp. 269–412; Jireček, *Bulg.*, pp. 209–90; Zlatarski, *Ist.*, II, pp. 410–83, III, pp. 1–575; Mutaščiev, *Ist.*, II, pp. 30–198; Spinei, *Moldavia*), and similarly much has been done to elucidate the history of the Cumans and the Tatars (Golubovskij, *PTP*; Marquart, *Komanen*; Rasovskij, 'Polovcy' 1–4; Rásonyi, 'Turcs non-isl. '; Hammer-Purgstall, *GH*; Howorth, *History*, II/1; Spuler, *GH*; Grekov-Jakubovskij, *ZO*; Safargaliev, *Raspad*; Kafalı, *AO*; Vásáry, *AH*), but their history in the Balkans has been rather neglected. Apart from scattered notices and hints, there are no monographs devoted to the history of the Cumans and Tatars in the Balkans, and even those works that touch on the subject have dealt with the Cumans and the Tatars from the viewpoint of different 'national' (Bulgarian, Serbian and Romanian) histories. Bulgarian researchers, especially, have shown a keen interest in the Cuman and Tatar presence in Bulgarian history (Zlatarski, Mutaščiev and Nikov). During the past twenty years the Bulgarian P. Pavlov and the Romanian E. Oberländer-Târnoveanu have made particularly important and valuable contributions to the theme (for their works, see the Bibliography). My primary aim was not to produce a history of the Balkanic lands (Byzantium, Bulgaria, Serbia, Wallachia and Moldavia), but to discover how the Cumans and Tatars bear on this history. It was difficult to determine how best to organise the heterogeneous data, since the history dealt with in this book is not that of a state, but covers the process of dispersion of nomadic tribes whose original home lay outside the Balkan peninsula. The most reasonable solution seemed to be to group the material around certain minor historical periods of Balkanic history, compromising chronological and geopolitical principles to a degree that I believe will be acceptable. The material is arranged according to what seemed to work best in practice, and, although I have tried to avoid it, there will inevitably be minor overlaps of both chronology and geography. I hope, however, that these will not detract

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from the book's comprehensibility. Equally, because the aim is to identify Cuman and Tatar activity and influence rather than simply to chart the history of the Balkans, and because of the fragmentary character of much of our evidence, there are evident chronological gaps. That is why Chapter 6 ('Cumans and Tatars on the Serbian scene') and Chapter 7 ('Cumans in Byzantine service after the Tatar conquest, 1242–1333') may seem to present a collection of vignettes of events in which the Cumans and Tatars participated, but which are not sufficiently linked in a meaningful way. Though I am fully aware of this unevenness of treatment, which gives rise at times to discontinuity, more often than not it is the character of the extant sources that prevents a more consistent treatment and in-depth analysis of the events. A more coherent presentation was practically impossible.

Let me say a few words about some technical details. The Abbreviations and Bibliography form two sections at the end of the book. In the Abbreviations, shorter titles refer to works whose full titles can be found in the Bibliography. Each work referred to in the text of the book has an abbreviation. The Bibliography is larger than the Abbreviations, since it includes works that have no abbreviations and that consequently are not referred to in the text. The aim of the compilation of this larger, though not exhaustive, bibliography is to offer fuller information to enable further reading and research into the various topics of the book. The transcription of Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, Persian and Turkic words follows accepted systems of transcription and/or transliteration. Their interpretation will cause no problem to the expert. However, when longer Greek passages are cited, the original script has been used.

Proper usage of geographical names presents a special problem in medieval Balkanic history since a place may well have different names in different languages. Current state borders, more often than not, differ considerably from the medieval ones, and even within the 180 years (1185–1365) covered in this book, the overlordship of territories and cities often changed. My basic principle in each case was to use the geographical name in the dominant language of the polity to which the place belonged in the age in question. Thus I have used Greek place-names in discussing Eastern Thrace, although these territories later fell under Ottoman rule and now belong to Turkey. Geographical names of the Hungarian Kingdom are given in Hungarian, irrespective of whether these places currently belong to Romania or to Serbia. Of course, this practice could not be totally consistent. For example, the southern part of Bulgaria was a territory frequently disputed by Byzantium and Bulgaria, so the Bulgarian and Greek forms are used alternately ('Plovdiv' and 'Philippoupolis' are both correct forms).

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To help readers get their bearings, I have included a comparative 'List of geographical names' as Appendix 1. In Appendix 2, the 'Chronological table of dynasties' provides a quick-reference overview of the rulers of the Golden Horde, Bulgaria, Byzantium, Serbia and Hungary. In Appendix 3, four maps help to locate the places. The maps are merely technical aids, and I do not claim to call them pieces of historical cartography.

Finally, let me express my sincere gratitude and thanks to all those friends and colleagues who, by their critical remarks and bibliographical suggestions, have helped me to improve the text of this book. Among their number are Professors Gyula Káldy-Nagy, András Róna-Tas, Peter Golden, László Solymosi, and above all Professor Pál Engel. Professor Engel was a fine and erudite historian of the Central European Middle Ages, whose untimely death was an irreparable loss for his colleagues and friends. I humbly dedicate this book to his memory.