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The Polovcian problem: the Central Asian aspect (I)

The history of Eastern Europe in the 10th to 12th centuries A.D. was marked by a vast migration of Turkic-language tribes from Central Asia into this region. It is commonly held that the most significant invasion of the Turkic nomads was the Qipchaq occupation of the Eurasian steppe between the Irtysh and Danube Rivers. Doubtlessly in the eastern part of the Eurasian steppelands in the 11th century there predominated tribes called Qipchaqs in the Oriental sources. Were the Turkic tribes called Polovcians, Comans or Quns in Russian and Western sources really Qipchaqs?

The question of the identification of Qipchaqs, Polovcians, Comans and Quns has long been popular in the literature. According to the concept most widely accepted it was the Qipchaqs who on forcing the Oghuzes out of the lands adjacent to the Aral Sea invaded the steppes of southeastern Europe, and on ousting or absorbing the Pechenegs dominated there until the Mongol conquest. It is implied that from the very beginning the Qipchaqs though multitribal were still a quite homogeneous Turkic-language community similar to the unions of the Pechenegs and the Oghuzes. In this case, the difference in their denomination in Muslim, Russian and Western sources is merely incidental.

The harmony of such a structure was slightly broken by information found in the work of Tāhir Marwazī (12th century A.D.). In connection with the invasion of "the lands of the Pechenegs", i.e. the steppes of southeastern Europe, Marwazī does not mention the Qipchaqs at all and gives another succession of events not deviating from the chronological framework of the 10th century to the first half of the 11th which I describe here. The Qitays (the Kidans) force the Qun tribe (tribes) westwards upon which they are pursued by the Qai tribes together with whom they force out the Shary tribes. Then all of them invade the lands of the Turkmens; the latter force out the Oghuzes who in turn move to the lands of the Pechenegs.

The invasion of the Oghuzes (Uzes, Torks) to the steppes of southeastern Europe took place in 1050, and as early as five years after this date at the

boundaries of the Rus' there appeared tribes called Polovcians by the Russians. In this chain one can definitely identify only the Turkmens – this is what Marwazī himself along with Mahmud al-Kashgharī call who had the Oghuz converted to Islam – Seljuks and Qarluqs from the Semirechje and Kashghar regions.

Prior to Marwazī the Quns and the Qais had only been mentioned among the eastern Turkic tribes by al-Birunī (A.D. 1029). The “Shary” (Yellow) tribes are recorded by the Armenian historian Matthew of Edessa when he describes the events of the middle of the 11th century: “the People of Snakes” attacked the “Reds”.

Meanwhile some coincidences allow one to build a table that encourages a return to the interpretation of the Marwazī text and to the Polovcian problem in general once again.

In the work of Mahmud al-Kashgharī one can find epic evidence of the wars of Qarakhanide “ghazies” with pagan Turks which took place until the middle of the 11th century in Jungaria and northeastern Khazakhstan. Here the tribes that fought against the Muslims are listed: Basmil, Yabaqu, Čomul, Yemek and Qai. This coalition was headed by the Yabaqu chief Böke, i.e. Great Snake, whose personal name is Budrač. After numerous battles the Muslims finally got the upper hand.

Marwazī has an addition to the story about the Shary tribe “who are known by the name of a chief of theirs who is Basmil”. Basmil chiefs were noblemen from the Turkic dynastic clan Ashina. The name of this dynastic clan has been preserved in old Russian sources. This was the name of the Polovcian khan Asen', the father of Sharuqan. These coincidences of events and ethnonyms in diverse groups of sources permit us to build the following Table.

Islamic Sources		Matthew of Edessa	Chinese Sources	Old Russian and Western sources
al-Birunī Marwazī	Mahmud al-Kashgārī			
Qun	Yabaqu	"People of the Snakes"	Hun (T'ieh-le tribe)	ХЫНЬ
Qai	Qai		White Hsi (T'ieh-le tribe)	Qun, Qoman каепичи
Šary Basmil	Basmil	"Pale ones"	Yellow Tūrgeš (?), Pasimi	ПОЛОВЦЫ
			Yellow Heads T'u-chüe (?) She-li (Šary) T'u-chüe	Plawci Plauci Pallidi Falones
Türkman Guzz	Türkman Guzz	Uz		Торки, Uz
Bajanaq	Bajanaq	Pacenikk		Печенги

The coincidences mentioned together with the circumstances that accompanied them allow one to suppose that the Polovcian-Cuman conglomerate of the Turkic tribes cannot be identified as the Qipchaqs, who in the 11th-13th centuries still inhabited the lands between the Irtysh River and the Caspian Sea.