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Assimilation of the Kipchaks in Hungary in the 13th-18th Centuries

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Abstract. This article analyses the processes and mechanisms of Kipchak assimilation in Hungary in the 13th-18th centuries. Without studying these processes, it is impossible to fully reconstruct the history of the Kipchak presence in the Carpathian Basin. In historiography, this aspect has long remained on the fringes of scholarly attention: early works addressed the problem only fragmentarily, whereas modern research by Hungarian and Eastern European authors allows us to consider assimilation as a complex and multi-layered process. The focus is on the interaction of the Kipchak nomadic tradition with the Christian-feudal model of Hungarian society. The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the main mechanisms of Kipchak assimilation in Hungarian society during the 13th-18th centuries. To achieve the stated goal, the following tasks are solved in the work: to determine the circumstances and scale of the Kipchak migration to Hungary; to trace their military and political role and legal status; to analyze the influence of Christianization on the transformation of identity; to consider changes in the social structure, life and material culture; to identify the factors that accelerated or, conversely, hindered the assimilation processes. The study is based on a wide range of written sources: Hungarian, Czech and Western European chronicles, papal letters, royal charters and legal acts (including the Charter on the Cumans), as well as archaeological and toponymic data. The study shows that the assimilation of the Kipchaks in Hungary was long-term and uneven. The adoption of Christianity in the 13th and 14th centuries did not immediately renounce traditional beliefs, rituals, and nomadic lifestyle. The Kipchaks retained their own hairstyles, clothing, burial practices, and clan-tribal organization, which contributed to the stability of their identity. A significant factor in their integration was the incorporation of the Kipchak nobility into the kingdom's military and administrative system, as well as the gradual transition to a sedentary lifestyle, the loss of their language, and the erosion of tribal structures in the 14th and 15th centuries. Final assimilation was only completed by the 18th century, despite a brief "Cuman renaissance" in legal and cultural self-awareness. The author concludes that the assimilation of the Kipchaks in Hungary was a multi-stage process, in which the decisive roles were played by the destruction of clan-tribal organization, the integration of the elite into the Hungarian aristocracy, and changes in everyday practices under pressure from the Catholic Church and royal power. Christianization served not so much as a religious marker as a socio-cultural one, and military service alone did not lead to rapid assimilation. Only with the loss of autonomous institutions and the transition to the Hungarian language and way of life did the Kipchaks finally merge with the Hungarian ethnic group.

Keywords: Kipchaks; Hungary; Christianization; Cuman nobility; nomadic identity; Catholic church; migration; integration; tribal structure

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XIII-XVIII ғасырлардағы Венгриядағы қыпшақтардың ассимиляциясы

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада XIII-XVIII ғасырлардағы Венгриядағы қыпшақтардың ассимиляциясының процестері мен механизмдері талданады. Бұл процестерді зерттемей, қыпшақтардың Карпат бассейніндегі болу тарихын толық қалпына келтіру мүмкін емес. Тарихнамада бұл аспект ұзақ уақыт бойы ғылыми назардан тыс қалды: алғашқы еңбектерде мәселе тек фрагменттік түрде қарастырылды, ал венгр және шығыс еуропалық авторлардың қазіргі заманғы зерттеулері ассимиляцияны күрделі және көп қабатты процесс ретінде қарастыруға мүмкіндік береді. Басты назар қыпшақ көшпелі дәстүрінің венгр қоғамының христиан-феодалдық моделімен өзара әрекеттесуіне аударылады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты – XIII-XVIII ғасырлардағы венгр қоғамындағы қыпшақтардың ассимиляциясының негізгі механизмдерін анықтау және талдау. Қойылған мақсатқа жету үшін жұмыста келесі міндеттер шешіледі: қыпшақтардың Венгрияға қоныс аударуының жағдайлары мен ауқымын анықтау; олардың әскери-саяси рөлі мен құқықтық мәртебесін бақылау; христиандандудың жеке бастың өзгеруіне әсерін талдау; әлеуметтік құрылымдағы, өмірдегі және материалдық мәдениеттегі өзгерістерді қарастыру; ассимиляция процестерін жеделдеткен немесе керісінше кедергі келтірген факторларды анықтау. Зерттеу жазбаша дереккөздердің кең ауқымына негізделген: венгр, чех және батыс еуропалық шежірелер, папа хаттары, патша жарғылары мен құқықтық актілері (соның ішінде кумандар туралы жарғы), сондай-ақ археологиялық және топонимикалық деректер. Зерттеу қыпшақтардың Венгриядағы ассимиляциясы ұзақ мерзімді және біркелкі болмағанын көрсетеді. 13 және 14 ғасырларда христиан дінін қабылдау дәстүрлі сенімдерден, рәсімдерден және көшпелі өмір салтынан бірден бас тартқан жоқ. Қыпшақтар өздерінің шаш үлгілерін, киімдерін, жерлеу рәсімдерін және рулық-тайпалық ұйымын сақтап қалды, бұл олардың жеке басының тұрақтылығына ықпал етті. Олардың интеграциялануының маңызды факторы қыпшақ ақсүйектерінің патшалықтың әскери және әкімшілік жүйесіне қосылуы, сондай-ақ отырықшы өмір салтына біртіндеп көшуі, тілдерінің жоғалуы және 14 және 15 ғасырларда тайпалық құрылымдардың жойылуы болды. Құқықтық және мәдени өзін-өзі тануда қысқа мерзімді «кумандық қайта өрлеу» болғанына қарамастан, соңғы ассимиляция тек 18 ғасырда аяқталды. Автор Венгриядағы қыпшақтардың ассимиляциясы көп сатылы процесс болды, онда шешуші рөлді рулық-тайпалық ұйымның жойылуы, элитаның венгр ақсүйектеріне бірігуі және католик шіркеуінің және патша билігінің қысымымен күнделікті тәжірибедегі өзгерістер атқарды деген қорытындыға келеді. Христиандандыру діни белгі ретінде емес, әлеуметтік-мәдени белгі ретінде қызмет етті, ал әскери қызметтің өзі тез ассимиляцияға әкелген жоқ. Тек автономиялық институттардың жоғалуы және венгр тілі мен өмір салтына көшу арқылы ғана қыпшақтар ақыры венгр этникалық тобымен бірігіп кетті.

Түйін сөздер: Қыпшақтар; Венгрия; христиандандыру; Куман дворяндығы; көшпелі сәйкестік; Католик шіркеуі; көші-қон; интеграция; тайпалық құрылым

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Механизмы ассимиляции кыпчаков в Венгрии в XIII-XVIII вв.

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу процессов и механизмов ассимиляции кыпчаков в Венгрии в XIII-XVIII вв., без изучения которых невозможно полноценно реконструировать историю кыпчакского присутствия в Карпатском бассейне. В историографии данный аспект длительное время оставался на периферии научного внимания: ранние работы затрагивали проблему лишь фрагментарно, тогда как современные исследования венгерских и восточноевропейских авторов позволяют рассматривать ассимиляцию как сложный и многоуровневый процесс. В центре внимания находится взаимодействие кыпчакской кочевой традиции с христианско-феодальной моделью венгерского общества. Целью исследования является выявление и анализ основных механизмов ассимиляции кыпчаков в венгерском обществе на протяжении XIII-XVIII вв. Для достижения поставленной цели в работе решаются следующие задачи: определить обстоятельства и масштабы переселения кыпчаков в Венгрию; проследить их военно-политическую роль и юридический статус; проанализировать влияние христианизации на трансформацию идентичности; рассмотреть изменения в социальной структуре, быте и материальной культуре; выявить факторы, ускорявшие или, напротив, сдерживавшие процессы ассимиляции. Исследование основано на введении в научный оборот широкого круга письменных источников: венгерских, чешских и западноевропейских хроник, папских посланий, королевских грамот и правовых актов (включая «Грамоту о куманах»), а также на данных археологии и топонимики. Исследователем применяются сравнительно-исторический и источниковедческий методы. В ходе исследования показано, что ассимиляция кыпчаков в Венгрии носила длительный и неравномерный характер. Принятие христианства в XIII-XIV вв. не означало немедленного отказа от традиционных верований, обрядов и кочевого образа жизни. Кыпчаки сохраняли собственные прически, одежду, погребальные практики и кланово-племенную организацию, что способствовало устойчивости их идентичности. Существенным фактором интеграции стало включение кыпчакской знати в военную и административную систему королевства, а также постепенный переход к оседлости, утрата языка и размывание племенных структур в XIV-XV вв. Окончательная ассимиляция была завершена лишь к XVIII в., несмотря на кратковременный «куманский ренессанс» в правовом и культурном самосознании. Автор приходит к выводу, что ассимиляция кыпчаков в Венгрии представляла собой многоэтапный процесс, в котором решающую роль сыграли разрушение кланово-племенной организации, интеграция элиты в венгерскую аристократию и изменение повседневных практик под давлением католической церкви и королевской власти. Христианизация выступала не столько религиозным, сколько социально-культурным маркером, а служба в армии сама по себе не вела к быстрой ассимиляции. Лишь в условиях утраты автономных институтов и перехода к венгерскому языку и образу жизни кыпчаки окончательно растворились в венгерском этносе.

Ключевые слова: Кыпчаки; Венгрия; христианизация; куманская знать; идентичность кочевников; католическая церковь; миграция; интеграция; племенная структура

Introduction

The history of the Cumans in Hungary cannot be understood without examining the mechanisms and processes of their assimilation. To date, this issue has not been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. In P. Golubovsky's article, the assimilation of the Cumans is addressed only superficially (Golubovsky 1889). By contrast, the works of Hungarian scholars A. Paloczi Horváth, I. Mandoky Kongur, and N. Berend are of far greater significance for studying the history of Cuman assimilation (Paloczi Horvath 1989; Madoky Kongur 1972; Mandoky Kongur 1976; Mándoky Kongur 2012; Berend 2001). For our purposes, it is essential to analyse the mechanisms through which the Cumans were integrated into Hungarian society.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on a broad corpus of written sources: Hungarian, Czech, and Western European chronicles, papal correspondence, royal charters and legal acts (including the "Cuman Charter"), as well as archaeological and toponymic evidence. The research employs comparative historical and source critical methods, elements of social and cultural anthropology, and an interdisciplinary approach that makes it possible to correlate narrative accounts with archaeological and linguistic data.

Literature Review

The Great Western Campaign of the Mongols triggered a large scale migration of the Cumans. In a letter to the bishop of Perugia, Julian reported that a portion of the Cumans had settled in Hungary (Anninsky 1940: 88). Contemporary Ukrainian scholars A. Holovko and A. Osipian argue that the Cumans migrated in 1239 under Mongol pressure (Holovko 2006: 318; Osipian 2005: 6). According to E. Myskov, the migration of Kotyan's tribe took place in the autumn of 1239 (Myskov 2003: 28-29). T. Sultanov suggests that Béla IV granted the migrants permission to settle in his kingdom at the end of 1239 (Sultanov 2006: 209-210). S. Pletneva dates this event to 1237 (Pletneva 1990: 179). E. Bretschneider also believed that the migration occurred in 1239 (Bretschneider 1910: 323). A. Paloczi Horváth and D. Sinor likewise maintain that the Cumans moved to Hungary in 1239 (Paloczi Horvath 1989: 47; Sinor 1999). A. Kadyrbaev argues that negotiations between Béla IV and Kotyan began in 1237, while the actual migration took place in 1239 (Kadyrbaev 1997: 56). Roger of Torre Maggiore and Alberic of Trois Fontaines both note that Kotyan relocated to Hungary together with his people (Albrici 1874: 946; Rogerii 1892: 549-550, 553, 556). Matthew Paris states that the Cumans migrated to Hungary after being defeated by the Mongols. A similar explanation for their migration is found in Roger Bacon (Matuzova 1979).

Researchers offer varying estimates regarding the number of migrants. P. Golubovsky, A. Kadyrbaev, and S. Pletneva suggest that 40,000 Cumans settled in Hungary (Golubovsky 1884: 234; Kadyrbaev 1997: 56; Pletneva 1990: 179). I. Györffy estimates that there were 240,000 Cumans in Hungary, or 40,000 families (Berend 2001: 71). E. Schütz argues that 40,000 men and their families migrated (Berend 2001: 71). A. Paloczi Horváth places the number of migrants at 70-80 thousand (Paloczi Horvath 1989: 60-61; Spinei 2003: 427). V. Spinei assumes that

there were 40,000 warriors among them (Spinei 2003: 427). The figure of 40,000 mentioned by Roger may not represent an exact count but rather a conventional number typical of European written tradition (Berend 2001: 71). Even if seven tribes migrated, the total number likely did not exceed 100,000. Based on current estimates, their population was approximately 70,000, including around 14,000 warriors.

Results

The Hungarians employed the Cumans in military campaigns against neighbouring states. The details of these expeditions are known from Czech chronicles. During one of the Cuman raids in Moravia, several thousand Christians were killed (*Annales Bohemiae* 1874; *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum* 1874: 290–291). The Cumans also took part in the Battle of Kressenbrunn (*Annales Ottakariani* 1874; *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum* 1874: 310–316). In 1278, Hungarian and Cuman forces participated in the battle on the Moravian plain near Dürnkrot (Zimonyi 2007). The beks (leaders) Alpar, Uzur, Arbuz, Turtul, and Kemenche played a significant role in the political life of Hungary (Osipian 2005: 7, 9; Golubovsky 1889: 13). In 1279, a noble assembly was held at Teteny. Uzur and Alpar (Alpra) accepted a number of conditions imposed by the papal legate Philip of Fermo and the Hungarian barons. Arbuz, Turtul, and Kemenche were likely among those who also agreed to these terms. The rights, freedoms, and obligations of the Cumans were codified in several special documents (*Articuli Comanorum* 1849; *Constitutio Comanorum* 1849; Paloczi-Horvath 1989: 54–55, 79–80).

Ecclesiastically, the Cumans in Hungary were subordinated to the bishops of Eger, Kalocsa, Arad, Csanád, Vác, and Esztergom (Golubovsky 1889: 6, note 6). One of Béla IV's charters records the transfer of Palóc lands to the monastery of Saint Eustace in 1264. Another charter states that the lands of the Cuman Kunchi were granted to Count Ioanke (Golubovsky 1889: 7). In the territory of the Eger bishopric, land exchanges between Hungarians and Cumans took place. Cuman holdings were located in Borsod County (Golubovsky 1889: 7–8). Pope Urban IV addressed letters concerning the Cumans to the archbishops of Esztergom and Kalocsa, ordering them to expel from the kingdom those Cumans who refused to accept Christianity (Golubovsky 1889: 7, 12).

Hungarian chroniclers accused the Cumans of numerous crimes, though the fairness of these accusations remains unclear. One of the most common charges was robbery. The Cumans in Hungary were reluctant to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. Hungarian nobles and the king did not pay them for their service. The Cumans lived off spoils of war, which did not provide a stable income. Consequently, they were compelled to raid neighbouring Hungarian settlements to sustain themselves. They resisted Christianisation because they did not wish to pay tithes. The Catholic Church took this into account, and the Cumans were exempt from tithes until 1364. Cuman nobles sought to preserve their identity and customs. Cuman traditions even penetrated the royal court. The king wore Cuman clothing and ornaments and lived with Cuman concubines named Edua (Aydula), Mandula, and Kupchech. Relying on the Cumans, Ladislaus IV sought to limit the “golden liberties” of the barons. Papal intervention was prompted by reports that the Cumans remained pagans and kept Christians in slavery (Golubovsky 1889: 12–14; Pavlov 2009: 391–392; Shusharin 1978: 45, 48; *Chronicon Dubnicense* 1884: 107; *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum* 1766: 189; Dume 2008: 13–23; Dume 2007: 15–28).

The Roman Curia sent the legate Philip of Fermo to Hungary. A series of strict demands were imposed on the Cumans and the king. These were formalised in the “Cuman Charter.” In practice, the Cumans were required to abandon pagan worship, adopt Hungarian clothing, settle permanently, and live in houses. Each clan was assigned an inquisitor. They were ordered to release Christian captives held in slavery. The Cumans were permitted to become vassals of the barons. They were obliged to serve in the army, and refusal entailed punishment. Cuman nobles were legally equated with Hungarian nobles. The Cumans were removed from the jurisdiction of the palatine. Each clan retained its own leader. Those dissatisfied with the decisions could appeal to the king ([Golubovsky 1889: 14-21](#)).

Why did the Hungarians place such emphasis on the appearance of the Cumans? They believed the Cumans should resemble the surrounding Christian population. Traditional Cuman hairstyles featured one or three braids, with the top of the head shaved. This hairstyle resembled that of pre-Christian Hungarians. For Hungarians, however, the Cuman hairstyle was associated with paganism. Moreover, shaving the head was also a punishment for criminals. The Cumans were required to adopt a Western hairstyle – no shaved crown and no forelock. Saint Ladislaus, depicted as the opponent of the Cumans, was shown with a beard and a traditional Catholic hairstyle. Ladislaus IV asked the papal legate to allow the Cumans to retain their traditional hairstyle. Hair was an important marker of identity. Clothing was equally significant. Cuman women’s kaftans and horn-shaped headdresses have been found in Cuman cemeteries in Hungary. In terms of jewellery, Cuman women did not differ from Hungarian women. Interestingly, in the *Illuminated Chronicle*, the Cumans are depicted wearing conical hats and sometimes helmets. They appear as mounted warriors armed with composite bows, knives, and swords. Similar headgear is found in depictions of Hungarians from the time of the Conquest. The Cumans are also shown wearing long kaftans. Many images associated with the cult of Saint Ladislaus in fourteenth-century Hungarian churches show striking similarities to Cuman clothing found in stone sculptures. In Hungary, Cuman clothing and hairstyles were regarded as signs of paganism. To be considered fully Christian, the Cumans had not only to be baptised and know the prayers but also to adopt Hungarian hairstyles and clothing – in short, to become indistinguishable from the surrounding Hungarians ([Berend 2001: 255-260](#); [Hatházi, Szende 2003: 390-391](#)).

The legal status of the Cumans in Hungary also requires discussion. Initially, they held the status of “guests” under royal protection. King Stephen V referred to himself as “ruler of the Cumans.” Legally, the Cumans were under the jurisdiction of the royal palatine, who also bore the title “judge of the Cumans.” The king himself could also judge them. In 1279, the agreement known as the “First Cuman Law” or the “Cuman Charter” was adopted. Under papal pressure, Ladislaus IV was forced to accept the new legal status of the Cumans ([Berend 2001: 87-92](#)).

A portion of the Cumans opposed these conditions. In 1282 (or 1280), the Cumans were defeated by the baronial army at the Battle of Lake Hód ([Golubovsky 1889: 22](#); [Osipian 2005: 9](#)). The surviving Cumans fled eastward to the domains of the Jochid princes ([Otroshchenko, Rassamakin 1986: 14-36](#)). Some migrants had begun returning to the steppe already after the Great Western Campaign. Among those who left Hungary was Oldamur (Aldimir), a relative of George Terter ([Pavlov 2000](#); [Pavlov 2009: 400](#); [Chronicon Pictum 1883: 226](#); [Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum 1776: 188](#); [Chronicon Dubnicense 1884: 106-107](#)). Oldamur’s later appearance in Bulgaria can be explained by the defeat at Lake Hód. He must have lived in Hungary for a

long time. After 1282, seeking revenge, Oldamur became one of those who led the Mongols into Hungary in 1285 (Pavlov 2000; Pavlov 2009: 400). The conflict with the barons and the papacy continued to resonate after the battle. In 1284, the Cumans raided the estates of Thomas of Csanád and took Christians captive. Although the king promised the Pope to enforce the norms of the “Cuman Charter,” the Cumans continued to follow their customs. Arbuz, Turtul, and Kemenche remained at court. The nobles organised a conspiracy to eliminate the king. The assassins were Arbuz and Turtul. They killed the king but were themselves murdered to conceal the identity of those who had ordered the killing (Golubovsky 1889: 22–24). The Cumans continued to be present at the Hungarian royal court, but they no longer wielded the influence they had enjoyed under Ladislaus IV (Golubovsky 1889: 24).

The integration of individual Cumans into the Hungarian ruling elite is also noteworthy. The daughter of Seyhan married Prince Stephen IV (son of Béla IV). She is known to historians by her Christian name, Erzsébet (Elizabeth). She was the mother of Ladislaus IV the Cuman. The marriage of Stephen and Erzsébet was intended to ease tensions between Hungarians and Cumans in the 1240s. The dynastic union was meant to guarantee the safety of the Cumans in Hungary. Erzsébet was baptised in 1247. Czech chroniclers, such as Bruno of Olomouc, considered her a pagan, yet documents issued in her name show that she was a Christian. Her seals bore the inscription: “By the grace of God, Queen of Hungary and daughter of the emperor of the Cumans.” She appointed her own people to important ecclesiastical positions, such as Miklós. During the reign of Ladislaus IV the Cuman, Erzsébet protected church lands from encroachment by royal vassals. Under Ladislaus IV, she held the banates of northern Serbia (Berend 2001: 261–263; Paloczi-Horvath 1989: 53; Vásáry 2005: 99, 102–103).

Yet Erzsébet was far from saintly. In 1272, Joachim Gutkeled, the Ban of Slavonia, abducted Prince Ladislaus. Stephen V rushed to free his son from Kapronca Castle. During the siege, the king learned that his wife had been involved in the abduction. On 3 March 1272, Erzsébet and Joachim Gutkeled proclaimed Prince Ladislaus king under the name Ladislaus IV. This provoked opposition among a part of the nobility. The former entourage of Béla IV put forward Béla Rostislavich as an alternative claimant. His supporters attacked the queen’s residence, but the troops of Miklós Poki repelled them. In November 1272, Henry Kőszegi (Németújvári), a friend of Joachim Gutkeled, killed Béla Rostislavich. The murder caused a strong reaction among Hungary’s neighbours, including King Přemysl Ottokar of Bohemia, Prince Lev Danilovich of Rus’, and Duke Bolesław of Lesser Poland. Baron Joachim Gutkeled became regent for the underage king and married Maria. This marriage broke his alliance with Erzsébet. She withdrew from his protection, and he abducted Ladislaus IV once again. The king was freed by Peter Csák, an ally of Erzsébet (Voytovych 2012: 121–124).

The figure of Ladislaus IV the Cuman is contradictory and has generated much debate. Church tradition regarded him as a bad king, largely because of his strained relations with the papacy. In 1278, when Ladislaus IV turned sixteen, Pope Nicholas III sent his legate Philip of Fermo to Hungary at the request of the Hungarian nobility. In the *Illuminated Chronicle*, Philip is depicted with cardinal’s insignia, although he was in fact a legate, a papal envoy. Curiously, in the same chronicle, King Ladislaus IV the Cuman is portrayed as a Cuman, wearing Cuman clothing and headgear, while even Attila the Hun is shown as a Christian ruler. The compiler of the chronicle, writing under the Angevin dynasty, hinted at the king’s paganism, although contemporaries such as Simon of Kéza regarded him as a Christian monarch. Thus, the images in the *Illuminated*

Chronicle cannot be taken at face value. The hostility of the nobles toward the king stemmed from Ladislaus IV's support for strong royal authority and his reliance on the Cumans living on royal domains. A similar strategy had been pursued a century and a half earlier by the Georgian king David IV the Builder, who strengthened his power by relying on Cuman military forces and suppressing the nobility. Philip of Fermo sought to undermine the king's authority by emphasising Cuman paganism. Another accusation against the king concerned his refusal to live with his lawful wife, Isabella, and his relationship with the Cuman princess Edua (Aydula). Archbishop Lodomer drew attention to these relations. He also speculated that Ladislaus IV might abandon Christianity and ally himself with the Tatars. This was unfounded, for during his reign, Hungary repelled a Tatar invasion and helped Poland resist their incursions (Berend 2001: 171–179).

Ladislaus IV the Cuman did not step outside the Christian feudal framework. Simon of Kéza called him a son of the Church. Despite his conflict with the papacy, the Hungarian king supported ecclesiastical institutions, granting them lands and privileges. At the same time, Ladislaus IV did not accept the established norms governing relations between European monarchs and the Church. He favoured autocratic royal power. Archbishop Lodomer feared the subordination of church property to royal authority. Although he portrayed the king as an enemy of the Church, this was not the case. One chronicle even attributes to Ladislaus IV an intention to convert to Islam, but the king never entertained such an idea. The Hungarian king resisted the growing power of the nobles who had allied themselves with the papacy. It is worth noting that Hungarian kings had long tolerated the participation of non-Christians in political life. Géza II had accepted Muslims into military service, and Béla IV had invited the Cumans to strengthen his rule. Hungarian monarchs did not exclude non-Christians from political participation in their struggle against the nobility. The papacy, however, regarded non-Catholic groups in Catholic countries as internal enemies. The popes implicitly compared the Hungarian king to Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen of the Holy Roman Empire, seeing strong royal authority as a threat to their interests. Ladislaus IV the Cuman was buried according to Christian tradition in the cathedral of Csanád (Berend 2001: 178–189).

Evidence concerning the gradual displacement of pagan practices by Christianity is also available. Those close to the royal court adopted Christian customs quickly. Among ordinary Cumans, however, traces of pre-Christian beliefs persisted in burial practices for a long time. The abandonment of paganism occurred gradually. Many traditional burial forms survived until the mid-fourteenth century. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Cuman funerary rites displayed a mixture of traditional and Christian elements. The last remnants of paganism disappeared only in the sixteenth century. In the fourteenth century, some pagan elements were still observed in Cuman cemeteries near churches. In some regions, churches appeared relatively late—in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The adoption of Christianity did not proceed uniformly across Cuman communities: some accepted it quickly, while others did so slowly (Berend 2001: 252–253).

The Cumans continued to bury their dead according to ancient pagan traditions, even in the early fourteenth century. Approximately 300 sites associated with traditional Cuman burials have been found in Hungary. The graves are oriented eastward. Cuman cemeteries contain objects of diverse origin (East European nomadic, Byzantine, and Western European). Western European items often include warrior belts gifted by Latin crusaders. Crosses found in graves are also significant as symbols of Christianity and baptism. The Cumans used them as amulets.

Graves contained weapons, jewellery, and knives. Over time, the Cumans began to bury their dead near churches, yet they retained the custom of placing food in graves. Amulets have been found in the graves, including crystals, horse jawbones, and animal bones. Women's graves contained eggs and mirrors. Pagan elements persisted for two or three generations after migration. In the early period, the Cumans in Hungary continued to venerate their ancestors. Only gradually did they abandon the construction of burial mounds (Berend 2001: 248–251; Hatházi, Szende 2003: 389–391, 393–394).

In Hungary, specific terminology existed to denote nomadic settlements. Szállása meant “camp” (close to the Turkic concept of aul), ülése meant “orda,” népe meant “people” (similar to the Turkic el or ulus), and háza meant “house” or “land.” These terms are common in Hungarian toponymy: Törtelszállás, Bagdasülése, Alonnépe, Bugacháza. In the thirteenth century, Cuman settlements in Hungary consisted of nomadic camps. The nomads who arrived in Hungary saw no need to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. However, after the defeat at Lake Hód, the Cumans gradually began to settle. By the fifteenth century, nomadic camps had transformed into permanent settlements. These settlements were usually named after a nomadic leader or tribe. As early as the fourteenth century, the palatine mentioned a Cuman camp near the church of Saints Fabian and Sebastian. Traces of former nomadic life were also visible in settlements such as Túrkeve-Móric and Szentkirály. From the mid-fourteenth century onward, the Cumans increasingly adopted a sedentary way of life.

Discussion

By the eighteenth century, the Cumans had become fully assimilated into the Hungarian population. Yet, shortly before their final absorption into the Hungarian ethnos, a certain revival of Cuman (Kipchak) identity emerged during the same century. This resurgence was connected to the struggle of the inhabitants of Nagykunság and Kiskunság to defend their traditional rights. By that time, however, the language of the Hungarian Cumans had virtually disappeared. The Turkish conquests and subsequent population movements had erased the distinctiveness of this region. A Calvinist Hungarian prayer written in the Cuman language has survived, and the last person known to have spoken Cuman was István Varró.

Nevertheless, some enthusiasts collected materials they referred to as “Cuman folklore,” and performed dances known as “Cuman dances,” although these were in fact derived from Transylvanian Hungarian dance traditions. The movements in Kiskunság and Nagykunság were therefore not rooted in authentic Cuman traditions. The genuine influence of the Cumans on the Hungarians is instead reflected in Turkic toponyms found in Hungary and in the adoption of several Cuman lexical items (Berend 2001: 265–266; Mándoky Kongur 2012: 207–208, 217–218).

Conclusion

Thus, the Christianization of the Cumans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did not automatically lead to their assimilation into the Hungarian population. Many Cumans adopted Christianity only formally and continued to observe their traditional burial practices. In terms of hairstyle, clothing, and customary norms, the Cumans remained distinct from the Hungarians. It was precisely these everyday cultural practices that the Catholic Church sought to suppress.

Cuman assimilation accelerated in the fifteenth century, as their traditional clan tribal social organization disintegrated and Cuman nobles began to identify themselves with the Hungarian nobility. From this period onward, being Christian increasingly came to be equated with being Hungarian. The Hungarian Cumans lost their language and became fully integrated into the Hungarian population.

One of the key mechanisms of assimilation was the incorporation of Cuman nobles into the political structures of the Kingdom of Hungary. Military service, however, did not lead to rapid assimilation, since in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Cumans fought in separate units organized along clan tribal lines. It was precisely this clan tribal social structure that served as the principal safeguard of Cuman identity.

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