

## Section 4. History

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### SOME PERSPECTIVES IN HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE EXISTENCE OF KIPCHAK STATEHOOD

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#### Abstract

The study presents a brief analysis of historiography devoted to the topic of the statehood of the Kipchaks, whom European peoples called Cumans or Comans, and Russians called Polovtsians. The approaches of some Western, Russian-Soviet and Kazakh scientists on the presence and nature of the Kipchak statehood are briefly described. The well-known American Turkologist Peter Golden, who accepted the Kimek Khanate (Kimek Confederation) as a form of nomadic statehood, adheres to the opinion about the absence of statehood in relation to the Kipchaks. He considered the Kipchak khans to be leaders and their state formations to be simply a confederation of tribes.

Most Russian-Soviet historians such as S. A. Pletneva, G. A. Fedorov-Davydov, Z. M. Sharapova and others defended the opinion that the economy, social structure and culture of the Kipchaks had not matured to the level of an early feudal state. Some of them, influenced by the works of V. V. Bartold, believe that the Kipchaks did not have a single state. However, their various ethnopolitical and territorial associations reached the level of state formations – Khanates.

The attitude of Kazakh scientists to this problem differs significantly from others. Orientalist B. E. Kumekov considers the Kipchaks to be the heirs of the traditions of the Kimek statehood. He is also supported by N. E. Kuzembayev, A. Sh. Kadyrbayev and others. Kazakh scientist S. M. Akhinzhanov has his own view to the problem. He adheres to the opinion of the absence of a single state of the Kipchaks. However, the scientist considers separate ethno-territorial associations – Eastern Desht-i Kipchak and Western Desht-i Kipchak to have reached the level of an early feudal state.

**Keywords:** *early feudal state, Kazakh scientists, Kipchak Khanate, military-nomadic form of statehood*

#### Introduction

The ethnopolitical map of Central Asia began to change significantly at the turn of

the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, which was largely due to the events taking place in the Kimek Khanate, which led to the collapse of this state

entity. According to researchers, the centrifugal aspirations of the Kipchaks played the decisive role, *striving for self-determination and the creation of their own statehood* (Kumekov B. E., 1996, p. 326–327; Kumekov B. E., 2023, 300). It is also noted that as a result of these turbulent events, the Kimeks themselves, who created a *nomadic and semi-nomadic state with their own ethnopolitonym* (Alymkulova S. K., Choroiev T. K., Butanaev V. Y., 2023, 302) ceded political hegemony to the Kipchaks (Kumekov B. E., 2023, 300).

The territory of Desht-i-Kipchak is conventionally divided (along the Ural /Yaik River) into two parts – to the east of the Ural River – *the eastern (Central Asian) branch, covering the real Kipchaks (the so-called Kangly in the Mongolian period) and to the west of the Urals, the western (Danube-Ponto-Caspian or East European) branch of the Cumans-Polovtsians* (Stoyanov Valery. 2021, 362). At the same time, there was no unified administrative and political system in *Desht-i-Kipchak*. The largest Kipchak groupings were located in the region of the Dnieper, Dniester, Ural and lower Volga; such confederations or hordes were most often called by the ancient Turkic term *il*, while ethnoterritorial groupings were known as *ulus*. There were several groupings in *Desht-i-Kipchak*, headed by khans (Agajanov S. G., 1998, 79).

It is believed that at first, after settling in the southern Russian steppes, the Kipchaks were mainly concentrated in two large hordes (Knyazky I. O., 1996, 53). The Western Dnieper union is the possessions of the Bonyakids (from the lower sides of the Dnieper to the Danube) (Rybakov B. A., 1952, 44; Papaskiri Z. V., 1982, 86; Dzichonaia I. R., 2012, 82). As it turns out, B. A. Rybakov mistakenly identified at one time with the *White Cumania* of the 12th century Arab geographer, al-Idrisi, as well as the eastern Don union – “the unknown land”, the possessions of Sharukan the Old (Volga, Pomorie, Surozh, Corsun, Tmutarakan, Great Don /Northern Donets) (Rybakov B. A., 1952, 44; Papaskiri Z. V., 1982, 86; Dzichonaia I. R., 2012, 82) – with the *Black Cumania* of the same author (In fact, as I. G. Konovalova, a recognized authority in the field of source studies and the history

of medieval Islamic geography and cartography, has convincingly shown, in the work of the eminent Arab geographer, “*Black Cumania*” and “*White Cumania*” are only the names of Polovtsian cities (settlements), and not individual regions (large nomadic camps) of the entire Polovtsian land. According to I. G. Konovalova, “*White Cumania*” is Tmutarakan) (Konovalova I. G., 2006, p. 219–221; Konovalova I. G., 1992, p. 31–34).

### **Approaches on the issue of statehood among the Kipchaks in historiography**

One of the most discussed topics in scientific Kipchak studies is the question of the existence of statehood among the Kipchaks. The first scientist who expressed his authoritative opinion on this issue was Academician V. V. Bartold, pointing out that *there were separate... khans, but there was never a khan of all Kipchaks* (Bartold V. V., 1968, 99; Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91), in fact, denied the existence of Kipchak statehood (According to some researchers, the above statement by V. V. Bartold does not at all mean that the venerable scholar questioned “the fact of the existence of statehood among the Kipchak tribes **in general**,” and that in this passage the author (i.e. V. V. Bartold) spoke only about the absence of **a single** state among the Kipchaks) (Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91) (In support of this interpretation, V. V. Bartold’s judgment is given regarding the conditions for the formation of the state, according to which: “*one of the extraordinary circumstances under the influence of which the state was created could be the aggravation of the class struggle between the rich and the poor, between the beks and the common people. In a nomadic society, differences in property and class already reach such limits that such an exacerbation is entirely possible*”) (Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91; Bartold V. V., 1968, 23).

D. A. Rasovsky offered interesting observations on the issue of the Kipchak statehood. According to the scholar, the Kipchaks, unlike their Seljuk and Ottoman brethren (who *being nomads, left their steppes, made their way to countries with a settled population, conquered these countries and created a new statehood there, first semi-nomadic, then turning into a purely settled one*), nev-

er created any state (Rasovsky D. A., 2012, 198). As one of the arguments for this conclusion, D. A. Rasovsky also cites the fact that the Kipchaks, even when they entered the capital... of Russia, Kyiv..., never tried to take advantage of their dominant position and did not try to create their own, new, statehood here (Rasovsky D. A., 2012, 198).

The prominent orientalist A. U. Yakubovsky also did not see a single state structure in *Desht-i-Kipchak* and spoke only about the existence here (at the beginning of the 13th century – on the eve of the Mongol-Tatar invasion) of several nomadic principalities (Yakubovsky. 1950; Grekov B. D., Yakubovsky A. Yu., 1950, 18). A. I. Popov (Popov A. I., 1949, 99; Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91) and Z. M. Sharapova (Sharapova Z. M., 1953, 131; Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91) reasoned similarly. G. A. Fedorov-Davydov, another authoritative specialist in the nomadic world, believed that these were only separate unions of tribes. In addition, he stated, *This unions of tribes never covered the entire Polovtsian population in the history of pre-Mongol Polovtsian steppe. Even the powerful khans Bonyak and Tugorkan had power mainly over the western Polovtsian lands and their contemporary Khan Sharukan ruled in the Donetsk steppes. His descendant, Khan Konchak, went further than others, who possibly... managed to create a relatively strong unification of part of the Polovtsians within the framework of the nomadic state and transfer power over this unification into the hands of his son Yuri. But Konchak's state had neither a governing apparatus nor a tax system and was... only the embryo of a state* (Fedorov-Davydov G. A., 1966, p. 147–150; Kuzembaev. N. E., 2013, 91).

The era of Konchak-Yuri was also clarified by S. A. Pletneva. According to her observations, *not a single steppe association, apparently, could compare with Konchak's domain. However, despite its strength and wealth, its significant territorial size... the emergence of a ruling class of feudal lords* (In another place of her fundamental study, S. A. Pletneva speaks of the rapid transition of the Kipchaks *“to a class society,” which was facilitated by “communication with developed feudal states that surrounded the Polovtsian steppe... from all sides”* From the second half of the 12th century, *“in the*

*steppes, it was no longer amorphous tribal associations that roamed,... but hordes headed by feudal lords, which united strong cells – ails (koshi).”* (Pletneva S. A., 1990, 145) *with a fairly well-developed hierarchy in the Polovtsian environment, despite even such an effective factor as a strong central authority, Konchak's association did not become a state* (Pletneva S. A., 1990, 168). She considered the main reason for this situation to be the absence of the necessary prerequisites for the formation of a state, primarily an economic base, which continued to remain *nomadic-pastoral*, while for the formation of a state, a mandatory condition, according to S. A. Pletneva, is the merger of *two economic systems: agricultural and pastoral* (Pletneva S. A., 1990, 168). This economic background, as well as the presence of *strong vestiges of the tribal system in social relations (the patriarchal veil)* remained an obstacle to the formation of state structures. That is why *there was no need to create an army or courts (the khan himself judged according to customary law); a single monotheistic religion was not accepted, although the movement towards its acceptance had already begun* (At the same time, S. A. Pletneva notes that the proximity and constant contacts with Christian (Byzantium, Russia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary) and Muslim countries could naturally contribute to the penetration of *“these two religions into the nomadic steppes”*; Pletneva S. A. Polovtsians., 1990, p. 143; According to the conclusion of the famous American Kipchak scholar, P. Golden, who has specially studied the religion of the Kipchaks, *“despite the fact that the Kipchaks had reached the state of a complex, stateless form of political organization, the impulses to adopt a monotheistic faith, which could possibly have helped strengthen the ideological arguments of the leaders and their “governments” striving for centralized power, were very weakly expressed”*; Golden P., 2008, 309). *The Polovtsians did not master writing either. Thus, neither the economy, nor the social structure, nor the culture were yet ripe for the creation of even an early feudal state* Polovtsy (Pletneva S. A., 1990, 168). Despite the fact that in her early works, S. A. Pletneva considered it possible to assert

that the Don union of Polovtsians, which was already under the hereditary power of Yuri Konchakovich, which passed from father to son (and not... from uncle to nephew), had already begun to take shape by 1224 **as an early feudal nomadic state**, similar to the Khazar Khaganate of the 8th century. It is possible that the Dnieper Polovtsians also joined this union (Pletneva S. A., 1975, 300).

This thesis was fully shared by S. M. Akhinzhanov (Akhinzhanov S. M., 1995, 145), although, having generalized all the sources regarding the Kipchak society as a whole, the Kazakh researcher came to the conclusion that it in pre-Mongol times was only at the stage of state formation, the peculiarity of which was the presence of a large number of remnants of tribal relations in all spheres (Akhinzhanov S. M., 1995, 290). And other Kazakh scholars seem to be inclined to believe that the Kipchaks did have their own statehood. Thus, according to academician B. E. Kumekov, the Kipchaks became the successors of the Kimek statehood (Kumekov B. E., 1996, 327; Kumekov B. E., 2023, 300). N. E. Kuzembaev partially agrees with him, who also emphasizes the influence of ancient Turkic and Kimek state traditions and believes that, being the heirs of these traditions, the Kipchaks actually possessed the necessary potential to create their own state. However, the scientist, showing some caution, refrains from recognizing a single state or separate state entities among them. A number of unresolved problems are considered to be obstacles on this path, first of all, problems of the specifics of nomadic society, ethnic composition, administrative-political structure and social organization, customary law, taxation, writing (Kuzembaev N. E., 2013, 95). We find a similar conclusion in a recent publication with co-authors such as S. K. Alymkulova, T. K. Choroiev and V. Y. Butanaev, which notes that due to their habitation in the most remote parts of the steppe of Eurasia, the Kipchaks did not create any single Khanate for the entire steppe (Alymkulova S. K., Choroiev T. K., Butanaev V. Y., 2023, 303).

Unlike Kazakh scholars, their colleagues from Russia and other countries are more categorical, denying the existence of statehood among the Kipchaks. For example,

according to Y. A. Yevstigneyev, the leadership of the Kipchaks in Desht-i Kipchak did not mean that they created their own state (Yevstigneyev Y. A., 2012, 98). In another publication, the same author quite clearly writes that the country called Desht-i Kipchak, the Kipchak Steppe (contrary to the opinion of some Kazakh scholars) (Kumekov B. E., 1995, 71) has never been a state (Kumekov B. E., 1995, 71). I. O. Knyazky holds the same view, according to which the Kipchaks did not have a state (Kumekov B. E., 1995, 71).

This thesis is most actively defended by the American Turkologist P. B. Golden, who unequivocally believes that there was never a central authority in the Kipchak confederation (Golden P. B., 1992, 279). Although the scholar admits that the Kipchaks at the beginning of the 13th century (during the leadership of the last representative of the Sharuknids, Yuri /Yuri Konchakovich/) were on the threshold of establishing complete dominion over the Cumans, in his opinion, this process ended by the Mongol invasion (Golden P. B., 1992, p. 279–280) and, as a result, their state never developed. It was precisely the **absence of a state**, according to P. B. Golden, that was one of the most remarkable features of the history of the Kipchaks of Western and Eastern Eurasia (Golden P., 2004, 107). It was precisely **the statelessness characteristic of the Kipchak political organization**, P. B. Golden concludes, that was typical for the majority of nomadic communities in the region (Golden P., 2004, 108).

The approaches of the Ukrainian historian Y. V. Pilipchuk seem somewhat contradictory. In his doctoral thesis he wrote (with reference to B. E. Kumekov) (Kumekov B. E., 2003, p. 74–77) that none of the Kipchak leaders encroached on the title of Khagan and the unions (chiefdoms) of the same Donetsk and Eastern Kipchaks represented only quasi-imperial state formations, possessing the basis of the ancient Turkic model, but were never able to evolve to the level of a nomadic empire (Pilipchuk Y. V., 2019, 297). In a recent publication, he already spoke about the existence of a “strong state” among the Kipchaks of the Donetsk-Don Union, the foundations of whose power were laid by Otrok. This “strong state” was passed on to his son Yuri by Konchak (Pilipchuk Y. V., 2024; Kamoliddin Sh. S., 2024, 22; It should be



noted that Y. V. Pilipchuk, in our opinion, quite reasonably emphasizes the highest authority of Otrok and, based on this, considers it fairer to call the ruling dynasty of the Donetsk Kipchaks the Otrokids instead of “Sharukanids”; Pilipchuk Y. V., 2024, 22). The absence of signs of statehood (the presence of a system of state administration bodies, written legislation, etc.) is written about by Y. V. Zelensky, who also believes that the Kipchaks *did not form a single state* (Zelensky Y. V., 2012, p. 60–61).

However, not everything is so clear. Some researchers actively call for taking into account the specifics of nomadic society and on this basis to determine the nature of nomadic statehood (Kychanov E. I., 1997, p. 301–302; Kumekov B. E., 1996, 94). It is believed that

*this form of the problem is the only actual one and leads to a real understanding of the uniqueness of the state structure forms of the medieval nomads of the Eurasian steppes* (Kumekov B. E., 1996, 94). They come to the conclusion that the Kipchaks created early state formations – *states of the original type*, thereby clearly recognizing the existence of statehood among them (Kadyrbaev A. Sh., 1990, 34; Kumekov B. E., 1996, 94).

### Conclusion

To sum up all of the above, this approach seems promising to us, and we are also inclined to the point of view that the Kipchaks were able to create a unique type of statehood – specifically a military-nomadic state.

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