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REVIEW

by Prof. D.Sc. VALERY STOYANOV on the habilitation work of Chief Assistant Dr. KONSTANTIN GOLEV, participant in the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" at the Section "Auxiliary Sciences of History and Informatics" of the Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The presented habilitation thesis of Dr. KONSTANTIN GOLEV — *Eurasian Nomads in Turning Times. Cumans–Kipchaks and Mongols in the Maelstrom of the Thirteenth Century* — is a serious monographic study devoted to one of the most dynamic and fateful periods in the history of medieval Eurasia, not by chance defined as "turning times". The book was published in 2026 by Academic Publishing House "Prof. Marin Drinov" of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, with ISBN 978-619-245-649-8 and with a volume of 412 pages.

The research is focused on the history of the Cumans-Kipchaks and Mongols in the 13th century, but its actual chronological and geographical scope is wider. The author examines processes occurring in the vast space from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Central Asia and the Middle East, placing at the center of analysis the interactions between nomadic and settled societies, military conflicts, migratory movements, political transformations, and cultural contacts.

The main merit of the work is that it does not present the history of the Cumans-Kipchaks and Mongols as two isolated narratives. Rather, the very title and structure of the monograph demonstrate an aspiration to examine them in a common historical context. This allows both the differences between the two nomadic communities and the processes of interaction, conflict, and transformation caused by Mongol expansion to be traced.

Particularly essential is the author's chosen temporal focus on the thirteenth century, defined as a "turning point in time". This characterization is not merely rhetorical. It is connected to the fundamental changes caused by the emergence and expansion of the Chinggisid empire — changes that affect the political map of Eurasia, the movement of populations, military organization, international contacts, and relations between different cultural and religious communities. The author himself associates the thirteenth century with large-scale historical transformation that affects both nomadic and settled societies. In this sense, the monograph is significant not only for the study of Cumano-Kipchak and Mongolian history. It offers a broader perspective on historical processes in Eurasia and places nomadic societies in an active role in the formation of the medieval political and cultural world.

The scientific relevance of the research is also determined by the development of contemporary historiography on the Mongol Empire and nomadic societies. The author is well acquainted with the main directions in international literature and deliberately situates his research in relation to the works of scholars such as Peter Golden, Thomas Allsen, Peter Jackson, Michal Biran and other leading representatives of contemporary historiography.

Particularly important is that the monograph is the result of prolonged research work, not an isolated scientific project. In the presented report on scientific contributions are indicated a series of previous studies by the candidate on the Cumans-Kipchaks and the Mongols — from the image of the Cumans in the early sources of Kievan Rus and their relations with the Balkans to the Mongol conquest of Crimea, Cuman-Kipchak refugee movements and the beginning of the conflict between the Jochids and the Ilkhanids. The present work to a significant extent synthesizes and develops these scientific inquiries.

Overall, the book can be characterized as a mature historical study that combines concrete cases with a broader conception of the historical dynamics of nomadic societies and their interaction with the external world.

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The monograph is organized into an introduction, exposition in five chapters, concluding summary and a reference section, including abbreviations and a bibliography. The first chapter is more of a methodological and historiographical nature, whereas the following four chapters present independent studies on specific problems from the history of the Cumans-Kipchaks and the Mongols. The author defines these studies as case studies, each of which has its own introduction, analytical section and conclusions.

This structure is advantageous, as it allows the combination of two seemingly different objectives: on the one hand, to present the general historiographical and methodological framework, and on the other hand, to develop specific historical problems with the necessary depth.

The first chapter — "Cumans-Kipchaks and Mongols in the Mirror of Medieval Sources and the Focus of Contemporary Science" — contains information about historiographical trends in the study of Cumans and Mongols. It is extremely rich. With respect to the Cumans, it appears to be a kind of continuation of my attempt to summarize Cumanic studies until the end of the 20th century. Here the author reveals and presents the methodology, terminology, and sources upon which he relied. With this, the chapter fulfills the function of a methodological foundation for the entire study. Historiographical trends, methodology, terminology, and sources are examined. This approach is particularly important for a study that works with heterogeneous written traditions and with terms whose meaning changes depending on the historical and historiographical context.

The special section devoted to terminology should be positively evaluated. The distinction between medieval designations and modern scientific terms — including the concepts of "Cumans," "Kipchaks," "Mongols," "Tatars," "Desht-i Kipchak," and "Golden Horde" — is a necessary condition for precise historical analysis. The author deliberately formulates his own terminological position, such as determining in what sense he uses the concept of "Mongols" for the period until the dissolution of the unified Mongol Empire in 1260 and for the subsequent decades in the Golden Horde.

The source base of the work is diverse and corresponds to the scope of the set tasks. Information from Byzantine, Russian, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Syrian, Persian, Arabic, and Mongolian sources has been used. This multi-directional approach is one of the substantial advantages of the

research, as it allows the same event or historical process to be examined through different regional and cultural perspectives. Particularly important is the use of different versions and editions of medieval historical works. The author, for example, draws attention to the necessity of examining the information about the early history of the Mongols in the *Yuan Shi*, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, and the *Jami' al-tawarikh* comparatively, as they preserve different versions of the official Chinggisid historical narrative.

GOLEV's methodological approach is in accordance with the nature of the sources. The scholar is not limited solely to the reconstruction of political history, but applies contextual and comparative analysis, in which written evidence is examined with regard to its origin, author's position, political environment, and possible biases. This is particularly evident in the use of the Persian historiographical tradition, where textological and contextual analysis allow contradictory political interests and different versions of the same events to be illuminated.

As a result of this approach, the source base is not simply gathered and described, but has been transformed into an analytical tool. This is precisely what allows the author to place specific historical cases within the broader dynamics of Eurasian political, military, and migration processes.

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The genuine scientific value of the monograph is most fully manifested in the historical analysis of specific processes and events through which the author verifies and develops his initial conception of the "turning times" of the thirteenth century. Here it is particularly important that GOLEV does not view nomadic societies as a static historical subject, but traces the changes in their political organization, military activity, and relations with the so-called "External world".

It is precisely this perspective that allows for an essential distinction to be made between the Cuman-Kipchak and Mongol models of political development. The author characterizes the Cumans-Kipchaks as a heterogeneous, polycentric, and fundamentally stateless community, distributed from Irtysh to the Danube. Their political organization was not based on a single central ruler, but on a multitude of tribal and clan elites.

This feature has been used convincingly as an explanatory tool for the nature of Cumano-Kipchak relations with neighboring states. Instead of invariably seeking a contrast between "nomads" and "settled peoples," the author demonstrates a broad spectrum of interactions—from military raids to commercial, political, and dynastic alliances. Particularly indicative are the relations with the Assenids and with the Khwarazmian shahs, in which Cumano-Kipchak elites utilize the network of alliances with settled rulers to gain access to resources and political influence.

This observation is essential because it allows the author to avoid one of the traditional stereotypes in older historiography—the portrayal of nomads primarily as a destructive external force in relation to settled societies. In the monograph, war, alliance, migration, and dynastic marriage are treated as interconnected mechanisms of political interaction. It is precisely this more nuanced picture that is among the strengths of the historical analysis.

Particularly productive is the comparison between the Cumans-Kipchaks and the Mongols. The author places the two models at opposite ends of a common socio-political spectrum. While the Cumans-Kipchaks manage to exist for a prolonged period without a centralized state, the Mongols under Genghis Khan create a highly centralized political structure that substantially surpasses previous nomadic empires in scale and conquering capabilities.

This comparison is not merely typological. It allows for an explanation of why Mongol expansion provokes such profound changes in the political map of Eurasia. According to the author's conception, it is precisely the combination of the mobility of nomadic societies with centralized political organization that creates the prerequisites for an expansion unprecedented in scale. In this sense, the Mongol phenomenon is presented not as merely another steppe expansion, but as a qualitatively new stage in the development of nomadic statehood.

A significant place in historical argumentation is occupied by the problem of the seasonality of nomadic movement. Already in the introduction, the author warns against an overly simplified understanding of nomadic migrations as a mechanically repeating seasonal cycle. According to him, behind the apparent cyclicity lie significant fluctuations in the socio-political organization and military activity of steppe societies. This thesis has methodological significance for the entire study, as it allows the concrete movements of the Cumans-Kipchaks to be viewed as historically conditioned processes, rather than as purely natural consequences of the pastoral way of life.

In this context, the analyses of the interaction between the economic needs of nomadic societies and their military activity are particularly interesting. The author uses the views of A. Khazanov, P. Golden and other researchers to show that contact with the settled world is structurally necessary for nomadic societies. Trade, raids and military service can be different mechanisms for obtaining resources from the Outside world.

It is particularly valuable that this theoretical proposition does not remain solely at the level of general reasoning. It is verified through concrete historical examples. For instance, the participation of Cumano-Kipchak contingents in the armies of their settled allies demonstrates that nomadic groupings could expand their political and military presence far beyond their immediate steppe habitat without establishing their own centralized state.

A second important analytical line is connected with the migrations and refugee movements caused by Mongol expansion. Here, the author has the opportunity to trace how the political transformation of the steppe exerts direct impact on Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Black Sea region. In this aspect, migration is not viewed simply as a demographic movement, but as a process with profound political and social consequences.

Of particular significance for Bulgarian historiography is the positioning of the Cumano-Kipchak presence on the Balkans in the context of the broader Eurasian processes. The relations between the Cumans and the Assenids are not an isolated Balkan phenomenon, but part of a network of political relations in which steppe elites interact with various dynasties. It is precisely in this way that the sustainability of certain alliances, cemented through dynastic marriages, is explained.

This approach is particularly productive because it places medieval Bulgarian history in direct relation to the history of the Eurasian steppe. Balkan events are not detached from the processes of the East, but are presented as part of a general system of political interaction in which the movement of people, military contingents and political alliances cross traditional regional boundaries.

Separate attention is warranted by the use of written sources of diverse origins. The author consciously works with different historiographical traditions, without automatically accepting information from any of them. This approach is particularly necessary in the reconstruction of events for which the evidence is fragmentary or has been preserved by authors situated in different political and cultural contexts. As a result, the monograph offers not merely a reconstruction of a sequence of events, but an interpretation of historical mechanisms. This is, in my view, one of the principal scholarly contributions of the work: the author manages to move from the concrete historical fact to the explanation of the process, without losing the connection to the source base.

Particularly positive should be assessed the comparative character of the study. The comparison between the Cumano-Kipchak polycentric model and the Mongolian centralized imperial system allows different possible forms of political organization of nomadic societies to be revealed. Thus, "nomadic statehood" is not presented as an unambiguous and inevitable historical direction, but as a result of concrete interaction between internal structures, external pressure, economic needs, and political leadership.

In this sense, the historical value of the work consists primarily in linking microhistorical observations with macrohistorical perspective. Concrete cases — military campaigns, migrations, alliances, dynastic marriages, and political conflicts — have been used to test more general theses concerning the dynamics of Eurasian nomadic societies.

It is precisely this that makes the monograph significant not only for specialists in Cumano-Kipchak and Mongolian history. It offers a model for understanding relations between steppe societies and sedentary states, which can also be used in the study of other periods of Eurasian history.

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Based on the analysis of the work, several main scientific contributions can be distinguished.

First, the monograph offers a new synthetic interpretation of the thirteenth century as a pivotal period in the history of Eurasian nomadic societies, whereby Mongolian expansion is examined not in isolation, but in connection with preceding and parallel processes in the Cumano-Kipchak world.

Second, there is a substantial contribution to the history of the Cumano-Kipchaks as a polycentric political community. The author demonstrates that the absence of a centralized state does not imply the absence of complex political organization or stable relations with settled states. On the contrary, it is precisely the decentralized structure that creates specific opportunities for alliances and dynastic interactions. Here I would also add the long-established interconnection between the

lack of a centralized state within the bounds of Kievan Rus and that among the nomadic unions of the Cumans-Kipchaks.

Third, significant is the contribution to the history of contacts between the nomadic world and the Balkans, especially through the examination of Cumano-Bulgarian relations in the context of the broader system of Eurasian political relations.

Fourth, the monograph has a contribution to the history of the Mongol Empire and the subsequent development of the Chinggisid states, as it emphasizes the political and structural differences between the different forms of nomadic statehood.

Finally, the source-critical contribution of the work should also be emphasized. The use of heterogeneous sources and their comparative reading allows the author to reconstruct processes that cannot be adequately represented on the basis of a single historiographic tradition.

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The high scientific value of the presented habilitation thesis does not prevent some recommendations from being formulated. These have primarily the character of discussion questions and do not affect my positive overall assessment.

First and foremost, I would be pleased if, in the future development of the research, the analytical category of "nomadic societies" were to be more clearly distinguished from the concrete historical specificities of individual nomadic political communities. The author convincingly demonstrates the difference between the polycentric structure of the Cumans-Kipchaks and the highly centralized organization of the Chinggisid Empire. This very opposition is one of the productive moments of the monograph. In some cases, however, the broader generalizations about the "nomadic world" could be further nuanced through even more rigorous differentiation of the various historical and regional models.

Second, it would be beneficial to deepen the comparison between the different types of relations of nomadic groups with sedentary societies. The monograph convincingly demonstrates war, trade, military service, dynastic marriages, and political alliances as interconnected mechanisms. This proposition opens the possibility for a broader comparative study of the mechanisms through which nomadic elites integrate the resources and political opportunities of the Outside world.

Third, I would recommend that in future publications the regional differentiation of the Cumano-Kipchak world be traced in even greater detail. The author himself emphasizes the enormous territorial scope of Dasht-i Kipchak—from the Irtysh River to the Danube—and the polycentric character of this community. Precisely for this reason, it would be interesting to investigate to an even greater extent the differences between individual regional groupings and their relations with specific sedentary states.

Of course, these remarks do not diminish in the slightest the scientific value of the presented work. On the contrary, they stem from its broad scope and from the possibilities for developing the problems posed in it. A strong point of the monograph is precisely that it does not close the

discussion, but poses a number of questions that can become the subject of subsequent specialized research.

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The presented habilitation work of Dr. KONSTANTIN GOLEV "*Eurasian Nomads in Turning Times. Cumans–Kipchaks and Mongols in the Maelstrom of the Thirteenth Century*" represents a mature, independent, and scientifically significant historical study devoted to important problems from the history of medieval Eurasia. The author's theses and arguments are richly illustrated with excerpts and quotations from sources of varying provenance. In places, they are analyzed in comparison with each other. All of this endows his work with both an in-depth source-analytical character, corresponding also to the mission of the scientific institution that announced the competition.

The main merit of the monograph consists in the combination of in-depth source analysis with an attempt at broader historical interpretation of the processes. The author does not limit himself to the reconstruction of individual events but seeks the mechanisms that determine the development of nomadic societies and their relations with the sedentary world. Particularly productive is the comparison between the polycentric Cumans-Kipchak model and the centralized political model created by Genghis Khan and the first generations of Chinggisids.

A significant contribution is also the inclusion of the history of the Cumans-Kipchaks and Mongols in a unified Eurasian perspective. In this manner, processes that are traditionally examined within separate regional historiographies are placed in a common context. Of particular importance to Bulgarian historical science is the consideration of Cumano-Bulgarian relations as part of the broader system of political interactions between the steppe and the Balkans. The author demonstrates that Cumano-Kipchak contingents were able to extend far beyond their immediate steppe territory precisely through alliances with sedentary ruling dynasties.

It is necessary to emphasize the high standard of the source base utilized. The combination of different historiographical traditions and their critical comparison enable the author to avoid one-sided reconstruction of complex political processes. This is especially significant for the thirteenth century, when identical events were documented by authors belonging to different political and cultural environments.

The monograph possesses an independent scientific character, develops clearly defined problematic areas, and contains original contributions to the history of the Cumans-Kipchaks, the Mongol Empire, and the relations between nomadic and settled societies in Eurasia. It represents a logical continuation and synthesis of the candidate's prolonged research work on the aforementioned problematic areas, reflected in his list of publications, most of which appear in prestigious world scientific publications.

On the basis of the analysis conducted, I consider that the monograph meets the requirements for a habilitation thesis and possesses the necessary qualities for holding the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the corresponding professional field.

For the reasons set forth above, I give my positive evaluation of the habilitation thesis of Dr. KONSTANTIN GOLEV and confidently recommend to the esteemed Scientific Jury that he be awarded the academic position of "Associate Professor" in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, scientific specialty "Documentation, Archival Science, Paleography, including Historiography and Source Criticism".

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