



QEPČĀQ

QEPČĀQ, the name of a Turkic nomadic confederation (Turkic *Qipčaq*), which, in ca. 1030-1237, dominated the *Dašt-e Qepčāq*—the steppe zone stretching from the Pontic region to Khwarazm (K̄wārazm; see [CHORASMIA](#)) and western Siberia—until its conquest by the Mongols. The Qepčāqs played a vital role in the history of Rus' (Russia), Khwarazm, Transcaucasia, Byzantium, Hungary, the Islamic world, and Chinghizid/Yüan China. Today, the bulk of the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia, the Volga-Ural zone, and the North Caucasus derive from elements of this tribal union. Fully integrated into the affairs of the states surrounding them (especially Rus', Georgia, and Khwarazm), the acephalous Qepčāq union never created a state in the steppe, in the absence of external catalysts to do so.

Origins. The ethnogenesis of the Qepčāq remains a complex question. In the sources they appear under a variety of names (see Pritsak, 1982, pp. 321-31; Györffy, pp. 200-19; Golden, 2005, pp. 248-50): 1) *Qipčaq*, first attested in the Uighur Šine-Usu/Selenga Stone inscription of El-etmiš Bilge Qağan (r. 747-59), as *Türk-Qibčaq* (Aïdarov, p. 344; Malov, p. 34; Klyashtornyĭ, 1986, pp. 153-64; although the reading of the name and the significance of the passage are disputed); Ar.-Pers. *Ḳeffāq*, *Qeffāq*, Georg. *Qivč'aqi*, Arm. *Ḳbšax*, Mong. *Kibčāg*, pl. *Kibča'ut* or *Kimčāg*, pl. *Kimča'ud*, Yüan-era Chin. *Ch'in-ch'a* (< Mong. *Kimčāg*); 2) *Quman*; Lat. *Comani*, *Cumani*, Gk. *Komanoi*, *Koumanoi* (Moravcsik, II, pp. 167-68) > Arab. *Qomāniya* (Edrisi, pp. 905, 909, 913, 914, 916, 920, 957, 958), Old-Rus. *Kumani* (*PSRL*, I, p. 234), Georg. *Komani*, Syriac *Qoman*; 3) *Qun*, Hung. *Kun*; 4) as loan translations (probably of *Quman*) denoting 'pale, light-



yellow, grey’: Rus. *polovtsi*, Polish-Latin *plauci*, Czech-Latin *Plawci* (> Hung. *Palócz*), Lat. *Pallidi*, German/Germano-Latin *Falones*, *Phalagi*, *Valvi*, *Valwen*, Arm. (Matt’eos Urhayec’i) *Ḳartêšk’n* > Mod. Arm. *karteaş/kartyaş* ‘blonde, fair, light, flaxen, fallow, pale’ (Marquart, pp. 27-29, 55; Rasovskii, pp. 252-53; Németh, 1940, pp. 99-107; Menges, pp. 70-73; Pritsak, 1982, pp. 328-31).

The etymology of *Qepčāq* is unclear. Rašid-al-Din (1994, I, p. 53; repeated by Abu’l-Ġāzi, pp. 18-19/43) records a folk etymology deriving the name *Qībčaq* from Turkic *qobuq/qovuuq* meaning ‘hollow, empty’ (Clauson, p. 583)—a word denoting a ‘tree (the center of which) is rotted out, hollowed.’ While the ethnonym *Qepčāq* occurs as a tribal and/or clan name among the modern Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Qara-Qalpaqs, Qazaqs, Kirghizs, Altay Turks, Noghays, and Crimean Tatars, the name *Quman* is unknown among the present-day Turkic peoples.

Central Asian, or eastern, Qepčāqs were also known as *Qangli* (Arab. and Pers. *QNKLY/QNGLY*, Lat. *Cangle*), which is an ethnonym of uncertain origin, perhaps connected with the Kengeres/Kangar people and with the toponym *Qang* (Iran. *Kangha*, Chin. *Kangju*, Šāniyazov, 1990, pp. 5-91). Maḥmud Kāšġari (writing in 1077) records it as a Qepčāq anthroponym, and as a term for “a wagon for carrying loads” (Kāšġari, II, p. 343). Turkic tradition also associated the ethnonym with the latter meaning (Rašid-al-Din, 1969, p. 20; Bang and Rachmati, pp. 700-1; Abu’l-Ġāzi, pp. 17-18/43). Contemporary Georgian and Latin sources make it clear that the Qumans, Qepčāqs, and Qangli are identical or “related” (Biró, pp. 161-64; van der Wyngaert, pp. 194, 218).

9th- and 10th-century Muslim sources note the Qepčāqs among the Turkic tribes (cf. Ebn Kordādbēh, p. 31; Ebn al-Faqīh, p. 329; *Ḥodud al-‘ālam*, 1959, pp. 59, 87; *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, 1971, pp. 83, 101), in particular within the orbit of the Kimek union (centered in western Siberia), but shifting westward towards the Volga River. The Qun were further to the east, near the Mongolic Qay (cf. Biruni, p. 145; Yāqut, I, p. 31). Around 1017, Bar Hebraeus (I, p. 186; see [EBN AL-‘EBRI](#)), *Ebn al-Aṭir* (IX, pp. 297-98), and Maḥmud Kāšġari (II, pp. 120, 330; tr. Dankoff, p. 157) report large-scale attacks on the Qara-khanids (see [ILAK-KHANIDS](#)) by nomads coming from “Ḳaṭā/Ḳaṭāy.” Another massive nomadic incursion in 1046 advanced as far as Kāšġar (Bar Hebraeus, I, p. 205). Marwazi (pp. 18/29-30), writing in ca. 1120 (repeated by Moḥammad ‘Awfi, see Marquart, p. 40; Pelliot, 1920, p. 135), reports a chain of migrations in which the Turkic Qun, fleeing the “Qitāy” and pursued by the Qāy, entered the territory of the “Šāri.” The latter attacked the “Turkmen” (Qarluq/Qara-

khanids) who pressed the Oghuz (see *GOZZ*) who displaced the Pechenegs. Matthew of Edessa (Marquart, pp. 54-55; Matthieu d'Edesse, p. 89), who wrote in 1050-51, provides details of a similar cascade of peoples precipitated by the “nation of the Snakes” whose attack on the “Pale Ones” (*zkartêšk'n*) pushed the latter into the “Uz” (Oghuz) who, in turn, expelled the Pechenegs to the Byzantine frontier. By ca. 1020-30, but not later than 1050, the Qun and perhaps other migrations had re-shaped the Kimek union. It was reconstituted under the leadership of the Qepčāq (ca. 1040-50), absorbing the Qun and others (Czeglédy, pp. 47-48, 50; Klyashtornyĭ, 2005, pp. 243-48, Golden, 2005, pp. 251-60), including the tribes that later fled after the collapse of the Qitan/Liao state in the 1120s.

By the early 1030s, the Qepčāqs were both raiding the state of the Khwarazmshahs and serving in its army (Bayhaqi, pp. 86, 682-84). The movement of Qepčāq groupings to the Caspian-Pontic steppes increased Pecheneg and Oghuz pressure on the Byzantine and Irano-Islamic borders. The Saljuqid Čağrı Beg (r. 1040-63) converted a Qepčāq “amir” to Islam in the region of Khwarazm in the 1040s (Hosayni, fol. 16b/p.43), which was apparently an isolated event.

The Qepčāq Tribes. The Qepčāq confederation, containing Turkic, Mongolic, and Iranian elements, comprised three large sub-confederations: the Quman union in the west, divided into Ural-Volga, North Caucasian, and Pontic-Danubian units; the Qepčāq-Qangli in Central Asia and Kazakhstan; and the west-Siberian Qepčāqs (Rasovskiĭ, pp. 166-75; Pritsak, 1982, pp. 342-68; Golden, 1995-97, pp. 108-22). Regional groupings, e.g., the Ural-Volga-Don-centered *Polovtsi Dikii* (‘Wild Qumans’), were involved in Rus’ internecine strife (Golden, 1979-89, pp. 298-309; Pritsak, 1967, II, pp. 1615-23). Despite marital ties with the ruling houses of Rus’, Georgia, Khwarazm, and later Hungary, the Qepčāqs were often fickle allies.

In the period 1061-1120, the Qepčāqs secured their new habitat and probed the weaknesses of their neighbors. They raided Rus’, Byzantium, and Hungary. Vladimir II Monomakh (Grand Prince of Kiev, r. 1113-25) launched a series of campaigns into their lands in 1103, 1109, 1111, 1113, and 1116, causing the Qepčāq horde under *Ötrök/Äträk (Rus. *Otrok*, Georg. *At’rak’a*) to take refuge in Georgia, whose ruler, David Aġmašenebeli (r. 1089-1125), was Ötrök’s son-in-law. Here, the Qepčāqs became one of the mainstays of the dynasty against the Saljuqs and the turbulent Transcaucasian nobility. Even though Ötrök returned to the steppes after Monomakh’s death, Qepčāqs continued to serve



the Georgian crown, playing an important role in establishing Georgia as a major regional power. The Qepčāqs who settled in Georgia, converted to Orthodox Christianity and ultimately Georgianized (Golden, 1984, pp. 45-87). This Georgian connection is an oft-neglected source of Christianity among the Qepčāqs.

In 1185, the Qepčāq chieftain Kōnček enlisted a “Muslim” (Rus. *Besurmenin*, probably from Khwarazm) specialist in “Greek fire” (*PSRL*, II, pp. 634-35) in his unsuccessful attack on Kiev. Overall, however, the Qepčāqs never really attempted to conquer Rus’. Their raids were primarily for food, goods, and captives to be ransomed. The Rus’ reciprocated with devastating campaigns, seizing Qepčāq herds.

We know little of Qepčāq culture in the pre-Chinghizid period. Overwhelmingly shamanists, they were also touched by Islam in Central Asia and by Christianity in Eastern Europe and Transcaucasia (Golden, 1998). The Qepčāq/Quman language became the *lingua franca* of the region, and as such it passed to non-Turkic communities such as the Crimean Armenians and Jewish Qaraim. We have no evidence that the Qepčāqs used the Turkic runic script. Middle Qepčāq texts and glossaries have come down us from the later Mongol and Mamluk spheres.

Qepčāqs in the Chinghizid Era. The Mongol conquest of the Qepčāqs in 1217-37 (Allsen, 1983, pp. 5-22) ended the latter’s union as a cohesive polity. Some western Qepčāqs, under Kōten (Hung. Kötöny), fled to Hungary, where they ultimately settled in the regions that still bear their name: Nagy Kunság and Kis Kunság (Greater and Lesser Cumania). Subsequently, the Qepčāqs that remained in the steppe largely assimilated the incoming ethnic Mongols (‘Omari, p. 73), forming the mass of tribes that constituted the Chinghizid *ulus* of Joči. The latter’s son, Berke Khan (r. 1257-67), a convert to Islam, began an *entente* with the Mamluk realm, also based on Qepčāq Turkic soldiery, which was directed against his kinsmen, the [Il-khanids](#) of Iran. The conversion of the Jochid Özbek Khan (r. 1312-42) secured the paramountcy of Islam, which then spread among his Tataro-Qepčāq subjects. The wars between Tamerlane (Timur, r. 1371-1405) and his onetime protégé, Toqtamiš (r. 1377-97), in the mid-1380s and 1390s devastated the Volga region and reshuffled the Qepčāq tribes. Qepčāqs and Qepčāqized Mongols formed the manpower base for the Noghgay Horde of Edigü (d. 1420), and the Özbek/Uzbek horde of the Jochid Abu’l-Ḳayr (d. 1468), from which the Qazaqs/Kazakhs broke away in the mid-15th century (Pishchulina, pp. 233-34; Akhmedov, pp. 11, 13-15, 38). The

subsequent Uzbek conquerors of Transoxiana were led by Abu'l-Ḳayr's grandson, Moḥammad Šibāni/Shaybani (r. 1500-10).

Between 1420 and 1466, Jochid-led Tataro-Qepčāqs formed the khanates of Crimea, Kazan, Astrakhan, Qasim (the 'Kasymov' khanate, a client state of Moscow), and Siberia (Grekov and Yakubovskii, pp. 418, 421-22; Safargaliev, pp. 244-51).

The Qepčāqs figure prominently in the ethnogenesis of many of the Central Asian and North-Caucasian Turkic peoples: 1) the Qaračay-Balqars and Qumuqs of the North Caucasus; 2) Crimean-Volga-Ural-Siberian Tatars and Bashkirs; 3) the Noghays, Qazaqs, Qara-Qalpaqs, Kirghizs, and some of the Altay Turks. The Qepčāqs also played an important role in the ethnogenesis of the Özbegs/Uzbeks, whose name was given to the land they conquered in the beginning of the 16th century.

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