

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR  
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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# Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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## Contents

István Zimonyi Preface.....	7
Augustí Alemany A Prosopographical Approach to Medieval Eurasian Nomads (II).....	11
Tatiana A. Anikeeva Geography in the Epic Folklore of the Oghuz Turks.....	37
Ákos Bertalan Apatóczy Changes of Ethnonyms in the Sino-Mongol Bilingual Glossaries from the Yuan to the Qing Era.....	45
Chen Hao Competing Narratives: A Comparative Study of Chinese Sources with the Old Turkic Inscriptions.....	59
Edina Dallos A Possible Source of ‘Tengrism’ .....	67
Andrei Denisov Scythia as the Image of a Nomadic Land on Medieval Maps.....	73
Szabolcs Felföldi Personal Hygiene and Bath Culture in the World of the Eurasian Nomads .....	85
Bruno Genito An Archaeology of the Nomadic Groups of the Eurasian Steppes between Europe and Asia. Traditional Viewpoint and New Research Perspectives.....	95
Zsolt Hunyadi Military-religious Orders and the Mongols around the Mid-13 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	111
Éva Kincses-Nagy The Islamization of the Legend of the Turks: The Case of <i>Oghuznāma</i> .....	125
Irina Konovalova Cumania in the System of Trade Routes of Eastern Europe in the 12 <sup>th</sup> Century...	137
Nikolay N. Kradin Some Aspects of Xiongnu History in Archaeological Perspective .....	149
Valéria Kulcsár – Eszter Istvánovits New Results in the Research on the Hun Age in the Great Hungarian Plain. Some Notes on the Social Stratification of Barbarian Society .....	167

Ma Xiaolin	
The Mongols' <i>tuq</i> 'standard' in Eurasia, 13 <sup>th</sup> –14 <sup>th</sup> Centuries .....	183
Enrico Morano	
Manichaean Sogdian Cosmogonical Texts in Manichaean Script .....	195
Maya Petrova	
On the Methodology of the Reconstruction of the Ways of Nomadic Peoples .....	217
Katalin Pintér-Nagy	
The Tether and the Sling in the Tactics of the Nomadic People .....	223
Alexander V. Podossinov	
Nomads of the Eurasian Steppe and Greeks of the Northern Black Sea Region: Encounter of Two Great Civilisations in Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.....	237
Szabolcs József Polgár	
The Character of the Trade between the Nomads and their Settled Neighbours in Eurasia in the Middle Ages.....	253
Mirko Sardelić	
Images of Eurasian Nomads in European Cultural Imaginary in the Middle Ages .....	265
Dan Shapira	
An Unknown Jewish Community of the Golden Horde .....	281
Jonathan Karam Skaff	
The Tomb of Pugu Yitu (635–678) in Mongolia: Tang-Turkic Diplomacy and Ritual .....	295
Richárd Szántó	
Central Asia in the Cosmography of Anonymous of Ravenna .....	309
Katalin Tolnai – Zsolt Szilágyi – András Harmath	
Khitan Landscapes from a New Perspective. Landscape Archaeology Research in Mongolia.....	317
Kürşat Yıldırım	
Some Opinions on the Role of the Mohe 靺鞨 People in the Cultural and Ethnical Relationships between Tungusic, Turkic and Mongolian Peoples....	327
Ákos Zimonyi	
Did Jordanes Read Hippocrates? The Impact of Climatic Factors on Nomads in the <i>Getica</i> of Jordanes .....	333
István Zimonyi	
The Eastern Magyars of the Muslim Sources in the 10 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	347

## Cumania in the System of Trade Routes of Eastern Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century\*

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The role of Cumania (the Polovtsian steppe) in the system of trade routes of Eastern Europe is analyzed in this paper on the basis of the treatise of the Arab geographer al-Idrīsī (1100–1165), whose geographical work is one of the most valuable written sources on the history of the Eurasian steppes in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Repeatedly studied as a source on the history of various countries and peoples, the treatise of al-Idrīsī, however, has never been considered in the context of medieval urbanism and border studies — at least in relation to Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the Eastern European sections of al-Idrīsī's work contain unique data about Cuman settlements in the context of his information on the trade routes of the region.

### Al-Idrīsī's geographical treatise and his descriptive strategies

Al-Idrīsī is the author of the geographical treatise entitled “The Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands” (*Kitāb Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fī'khtirāq al-āfāq*, 1154), which is a description of all areas of the ecumene known to the author, accompanied by detailed maps (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984). Al-Idrīsī was a unique figure in medieval Arab geography and cartography. He was an Arab scientist, deeply rooted in Islamic geographical tradition, but he worked in Palermo at the court of the Christian ruler Roger II (1098–1154), king of Norman Sicily, and therefore had access both to Arabic and European sources. That is why his reports about European countries are very rich and in many ways unprecedented in Islamic geography.

Al-Idrīsī followed the Ptolemaic system of dividing the inhabited quarter of the Earth into seven latitudinal zones called ‘climates’ (*iqḷīm*). In its turn he divided each climate into ten longitudinal sections (*juz'*), numbered from west to east — beginning from the Atlantic coast of Africa. Both the text and the cartographic part of his treatise are structured according to climate and sectional divisions. Complete copies of the manuscripts of *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq* contain a one-page

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round world map, placed at the very beginning of the treatise, and 70 sectional rectangular maps on separate sheets, located at the end of the description of each section (Maqbul Ahmad 1992: 156–174). Theoretically, these sectional maps, put together, would make up a map of the whole world.

The method of describing the inhabited world by climates and sections served al-Idrisī as a general framework which enabled him to imagine the inhabited world as a whole. But when it was necessary to characterize a particular country or region, the basic way he depicted earth and water areas was through route data, which described the roads between various settlements and at the same time gave some information about surrounding geographical objects (seas, rivers, lakes and mountains), as well as flora and fauna, minerals, local production, the conditions of everyday life and trade, and some ethnographic details.

Each section's contents were presented, in al-Idrisī's own words, "in the form of a complete story, according to the rules of in-depth research" (al-Idrisī 1970–1984: 58), that is "one city after another, one region after another, without omitting any message about anything that it contains or what is worthy of mention" (al-Idrisī 1970–1984: 121). For example, in the sections devoted to the description of Eastern Europe, many routes are mentioned: in the fifth section of the sixth climate five detailed routes are listed; the sixth section of the sixth climate consists of three long routes, full of ethnographic interpolations; the sixth section of the seventh climate depicts one route. Only the fifth section of the seventh climate, very small in volume, does not contain route data.

A characteristic feature of al-Idrisī's map is the absence of political boundaries. This is related to the text, where the boundaries between political units are described vaguely or not at all. This feature of the description has already been noticed in historiography and linked to the fact that for al-Idrisī cities, not countries, were the main objects of the landscape and therefore the geographer "described entire regions in terms of the urban settlements they contained" (Brauer 1992: 84). The central position of cities in the structure of the description, in its turn, was determined by the specific nature of the key sources of al-Idrisī. Beginning with the work of W. Tomaschek it has been repeatedly noted that a significant part of al-Idrisī's reports on East, South-East and Central Europe actually consist of a list of routes based on various types of oral and written sources (Tomaschek 1887: 285–373; Kenderova 1986: 35–41; Konovalova 2006: 60–61; Ducène 2008: 14). However, beyond the scope of this study there remains the question of the geographical specificity of the space that route data reflects as well as the development of adequate methods of its interpretation.

Route data is based primarily on verbal sources, which represent the so called "egocentric" system of spatial orientation, where the location of an object is determined in relation to the perceiving subject. Geographical egocentrism was the basic feature of spatial perception in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In this system of orientation, the subject of observation assumes himself to be at the center of the world he observes, and perceives all objects around him in relation to himself as to

the central point. The egocentric picture of the world was imprinted in geographical descriptions, where cities, countries, mountains, rivers and other elements of space were characterized in relation to the location of the author or his informers. The same spatial perception persisted even in the case when the perceiving subject was moving in space: the only difference was that all visible objects were now viewed from the mobile center (bibliography see in: Konovalova 2006: 52–71). The egocentric perception of space also resulted in specific orientational terms used in geographical works, such as ‘behind’/‘in front of’, ‘farther’/‘nearer’, ‘higher’/‘lower’, ‘on this/that side’, ‘between’, ‘opposite’, and so on. These terms are meaningful only within the subjective space of the observer and are understandable only when the reference point in this observation system is known.

This method of description, emanating from a multitude of subjective points of view on the organization of a particular space, made it problematic to characterize large objects, such as, for example, the territory occupied by particular people. And very indicative in this respect is the description of Cumania in the work of al-Idrīsī.

### Information about Cumania in the structure of *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*

In al-Idrīsī’s work there is no all-in-one description of Cumania. Information about it is scattered in different parts of his writing – in the fifth and sixth sections of the sixth and seventh climates. By its nature, the data on Cumania is twofold. On the one hand, it includes al-Idrīsī’s ideas about Cumania in general, on the other – it is represented by information about the cities that al-Idrīsī attributed to the Cumans.

‘Cumania’ (*ard/bilād al-Qumāniyya/al-Qumāniyūna*) for al-Idrīsī is primarily a political term, the name of the country (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 905, 909, 913, 914, 916, 957, 958). Only twice is the word ‘Cumans’ (*Qumāniyūna*) used as an ethnonym (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 915, 916), as has already been noted in historiography (Drobný 2012: 208). At the same time, the Cumans are characterized by al-Idrīsī as a people, although for other peoples of Eastern Europe – the Khazars, the Rus, the Volga Bulgars – more or less detailed descriptions are given, most of them taken from Arabic geographical literature of the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Obviously, al-Idrīsī lacked ethnographic information about the Cumans. This is due to the fact that the ethnonym ‘Cumans’ is not found at all in Islamic literature before al-Idrīsī. Therefore, the most likely source of information about Cumania in the work of al-Idrīsī were the reports of Western European informants, since the word ‘Cumans’ (*Cumani, Comani*) was the usual designation of the Polovtsy in Western European literature. It is significant that the very name of this people is derived by al-Idrīsī from the name of the city ‘Black Cumania’ (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 915).

From the text and inscriptions on the map it is obvious that by the term 'Cumania' al-Idrīsī meant a large area stretching from the Black Sea into the interior of the continent. According to al-Idrīsī, the southern border of Cumania was the Black Sea: this is stated in the introduction to the fifth and sixth sections of the sixth climate, where al-Idrīsī lists the countries along the Black Sea coast (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 905, 914). In one of his descriptions of the Black Sea, one can also find an indication of exactly where Cumania touched the sea: among the countries located along the coast, Cumania is positioned between Khazaria and Rus' (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 905). The city of *Jālīṭa* (Yalta) in the Crimea is described as a Cuman locality (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 909). In the west Cumania stretched to the Dnieper River — an inscription on the map shows this (Miller 1927: 56). An indirect confirmation of the fact that the Dnieper was the western border of Cumania in the Black Sea steppes is al-Idrīsī's statement that the territory of Rus' that touched the sea lay between the Dnieper and the Danube (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 12, 905; see interpretation of these passages in: Konovalova 2006: 164–165). Judging by the inscription on the map, the eastern border of Cumania ran somewhere between the main course of the *Athil* river and its branch, which flows into the Black Sea, that is, between the Lower Volga and the lower reaches of the Don (Miller 1927: 56).

Al-Idrīsī's data on the western and eastern borders of Cumania were accurate and up-to-date at the time of the author. For example, Cumans (under the name of the 'Polovtsy') are mentioned for the first time in the *Ipat'evskaia Chronicle* in the entry for the year 1152: "The whole Polovtsian land, what is it between the Volga and the Dnieper" (PSRL 1998: 455). As for Cumania's northern border, al-Idrīsī apparently did not have clear information about its location. From the description of the northern part of Cumania, given in the fifth and sixth sections of the seventh climate, it can be concluded that the closest neighbors of Cumania in the north were the Rus and the Volga Bulgars (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 957–958).

According to the observations of B.A. Rybakov, al-Idrīsī described Cumania as consisting of three parts — 'Black', 'White' and 'Outer'. Rybakov identified 'Black' and 'White' Cumania, respectively, with the Dnieper and Don Polovtsian unions, and 'Outer Cumania', from his point of view, should be understood as 'Wild Polovtsy' (*polovtsy dikiie*), the nearest neighbors of Rus' (Rybakov 1952: 42–44). Subsequently, this assumption became widespread in historiography. The interpretation of information about 'Black' and 'White' Cumania was supported by many authors (Fedorov-Davydov 1966: 149–150; Dobrodomov 1978: 122; Kononov 1978: 167–168; Pletneva 1985: 249, 251–253; Pletneva 1990: 101), who also looked for 'Outer' Cumania in the region of the Crimean and Kuban Polovtsian camps (Pletneva 1985: 253). Along with this was suggested that the terms 'Black Cumania' and 'White Cumania' did not have a political, but rather a purely geographical meaning: while the term 'White Cumania' seems to have designated the central regions of the Polovtsian steppe (which can be hypothetically called 'Inner Cumania'), 'Black Cumania' was identified with the peripheral areas of the Cuman lands, i.e. 'Outer Cumania' (Ciociltan 1992: 1114–1115).

But there is no reason to consider 'Outer' or 'Inner' Cumania as a special part of the Polovtsian steppe. Since the ethnonym 'Cumans' was not used in Islamic sources before al-Idrīsī, it can be assumed that this ethnotoponym ('Outer / Inner Cumania') was most likely created by al-Idrīsī himself and was not obtained from the geographer's informants, because this term is not found among the route data, but only in the introduction to the section, which briefly lists those countries which will be discussed in this part of the work (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 958). In addition, adjectives of the 'inner' / 'outer' type make sense only in connection with the location of the informant, in relation to which certain elements of space are arranged. It is not by chance that in the manuscripts of the sixth section of the seventh climate of *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq* both toponyms are interchangeable: in the introduction to this section in the St. Petersburg (The National Library of Russia, Ar. Sc. 176) and Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, Arab. 2222 / Suppl. Ar. 893) manuscripts 'Outer Cumania' (*Qumāniyya al-khārija*) is mentioned, while in the earliest extant manuscript of al-Idrīsī's work (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Arab. 2221 / Suppl. Ar. 892) 'Inner Cumania' (*Qumāniyya al-dākhila*) is used instead.

The idea that al-Idrīsī considered 'Black' and 'White' Cumania as parts of the Polovtsian land is also inaccurate, since his text (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 915, 916, 920) and the map (Miller 1927: 56) leave no doubt that al-Idrīsī and his informants meant not regions, but settlements with such names, to which we now turn.

### Cities attributed to the Cumans

In different parts of his work, al-Idrīsī names a number of Cuman cities. Almost all of them are listed in the descriptions of trade routes. In this case, the distances between them and the direction of movement are indicated, as well as individual signs and characteristics of a particular point. It can be assumed that information about these settlements was obtained mainly from oral sources. The localization of most of the Cuman cities is uncertain and at present can hardly be accurate at all.

Three Cuman cities are places on the Northern Black Sea coast. First of all, there were 'White Cumania' and 'Black Cumania': "From the city of al-Khazariyya to the city of Kira – twenty five miles, and from the latter to [the city of] Qumāniyya, after which the Cumans are named and which is called 'Black Cumania' (*Qumāniyya al-sawdā*) – twenty five miles. Between Qumāniyya and Kira there is a large and high impassable mountain. This city is called 'Black Cumania' because a river flows near it, which [first] comes into its territory, then goes down into the gorge of these mountains, and then flows into the sea. Its water is black like smoke. This is well known and is not denied [by anyone]. From the city of 'Black Cumania' to the city of Maṭlūqa, which is also called 'White Cumania' (*Qumāniyya al-bayḍā*), it is fifty miles. 'White Cumania' is a big prosperous city. From it to the city of Mātrīqā, whose name is transmitted [as well as] Maṭrakhā, it is a hundred miles of voyage" (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 915–916). On

the map, both cities are marked on the Black Sea coast in accordance with the text (Miller 1927: 56).

The information about the cities ‘Black Cumania’ and ‘White Cumania’ is twofold. On the one hand, it is possible to identify specific details in it, such as an indication of distances between cities, a brief description of the city of ‘White Cumania’ and high mountains, certain elements of the description of the river coming out from the gorge. On the other hand, all these specific details, based on some real observations of al-Idrīsī’s informers, are not enough to localize these Cuman cities. It is obvious that the geographer’s informants did not know how these two cities were called by the locals and therefore al-Idrīsī associated their names with the ethnonym. In addition, the informers tried to explain the name of the city ‘Black Cumania’ with the ‘black as smoke’ color of the water in a river that flowed near the city. An attempt to correlate the name of the city ‘Black Cumania’ with the peculiarities of a river flowing nearby could have a real basis.

The description of ‘White Cumania’ as a big prosperous city shows that under this name a real trading port was meant. The second name of ‘White Cumania’ – *Maṭlūqa* – has a great similarity with another two of al-Idrīsī’s toponyms, *Mātrīqā* and *Maṭrakhā*, which denote the port city at the east side of the Strait of Kerch that was mentioned in the Old Rus *Primary Chronicle* as *Tmutorokan*. Obviously, al-Idrīsī could have received information about such a strategically important point as it was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, from several informants. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the name *Maṭlūqa*, also known as ‘White Cumania’, is one of the variants of the toponym *Tmutorokan*, and the distance of one hundred miles between them was indicated by an error that arose in the process of coordinating data about this city from a number of sources. The comparison, proposed by S.A. Pletneva, of ‘White Cumania’ with *Belaia Vezha* (Sarkel) (Pletneva 1975: 294) seems to be wrong, since in the times of al-Idrīsī, at the site of the *Belaia Vezha* there was only a Polovtsian wintering place (Beilis 1984: 211).

One more Cuman city on the sea shore is *Jālīṭa*, mentioned in the fifth section of the sixth climate as one of the points of the sea route from Constantinople to *Maṭrakhā*: “From [the city of] *Karsūna* to *Jālīṭa* – thirty miles; this town belongs to the land of the Cumans” (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 909). The identification of *Jālīṭa* with Yalta, located at a distance of fifty modern nautical miles east of Chersonese (*Karsūna*), is quite obvious (Konovalova 2006: 177, with bibliography). There is no doubt that al-Idrīsī received information about this city from persons who sailed the route.

Another group of Cuman cities lay at a more or less significant distance from the Black Sea coast: “Among the cities of the Cuman country or the Land of the Cumans there are the cities *Fira*, *Nārūs*, *Nūshī*, and *Qīniyuw*. As for the city of *Nūshī*, it is located to the north of ‘White Cumania’ – there are fifty miles between them. It is a lively city of medium size, with an abundance of grain. It stands on the river, which irrigates most of its fields. From the city of *Nūshī* to the city of *Qīniyuw* to the north-east – a hundred miles, or four stages. The city of *Qīniyuw*

is a big city at the foot of a high mountain; it has an extensive populated area and is very lively. Similarly, from the city of *Nūshī* to the city of *Nārūs* – a hundred miles to the north-west. This city is small, and has markets where trading is conducted. From the city of *Nārūs* eastward to the city of *Şalāw* (Pereiaslavl' Russkii) – one hundred thirty-five miles, and from the city of *Nārūs* to the city of *Fīra* – fifty miles to the west, and from *Fīra* to the city of *Nābī* twenty five miles to the west” (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 916–917). All these cities are marked on the map to the east of the Dnieper, and their position roughly corresponds to the text (Miller 1927: 56).

It is known that Polovtsians wandered in the immediate vicinity of the borders of Pereiaslavl', Chernigov and Kiev principalities; they knew many Old Russian cities along the Sula, Ros', Seim, and Dnieper rivers, which were targets of Polovtsian attacks. Due to the fact that the information on the Cuman cities is placed after the message about *Maṭrakhā*, and their description begins from the city of *Nūshī*, the distance to which can be taken from the 'White Cumania' associated with *Tmutorokan*, it is possible to conclude that the Cuman cities should be sought on the trade route from Azov to the outlying Russian lands of Pereiaslavl', Chernigov and the Kiev principalities.

Since the names of the Cuman cities given by al-Idrīsī cannot be taken for proper Polovtsian toponyms, they are usually compared with the chronicle cities of the Old Russian principalities, which were near the border with the Polovtsian steppe (Rybakov 1952: 36–38; Beilis 1984: 213–214, 223–225). In fact, the Polovtsy had no cities as such, but there were only small 'towns' that emerged in the wintering grounds (Pletneva 1985: 255). From the chronicle under the years 1111 and 1116 it is known that there were three such towns – *Sharukan'*, *Sugrov* and *Balin* (PSRL 1998: 266, 284). The likely area of their location is presumably the Middle Donets (Pletneva 1985: 280; Pletneva 1990: 61–62).

The city of *Fīra* (mentioned in manuscripts also as *Kīra*) can be compared to the chronicle's *Vyr'* located in the basin of the Seim river, often devastated by the Polovtsy, on the southeastern border of the Chernigov principality, and the city of *Nārūs* – with the city of *Baruch* in the Pereiaslavl' principality (Beilis 1984: 213), which was located on the border with the Polovtsian steppe and was well known for the Polovtsy, so that al-Idrīsī's informant could take it for a proper Cuman city. In addition, the fact that the bands of nomadic Oghuz ('Torks' of the chronicle) settled in the service of the Old Russian princes and lived in tandem with the Russian agricultural population could also affect the assignment of *Baruch* to the Cuman cities. It is known that in 1126 the Polovtsy undertook a campaign against Pereiaslav land in order to capture the Tork's dwellings located at *Baruch*. During the raid, the Torks, together with the Rus, took refuge behind the walls of this city (PSRL 1998: 289–290; Pletneva 1990: 76).

The name *Qīniyuw* is considered either as one of the variants of the name 'Kiev' (Beilis 1984: 224) or is compared with the city of Kanev, which, like Kiev, was also frequently visited by merchants and travelers (Kuza 1989: 73). Moreover,

Kanev was more likely to be identified by al-Idrīsī's informers as a Cuman city, since in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kanev became the place where the center of missionary episcopacy, which was engaged in the Christianization of nomads, including the Polovtsians, was transferred from Iur'ev (Podskal'ski 1996: 58–59).

The city of *Nābī*, whose name is also found in the spelling of *Nāy*, appears in the fifth section of the sixth climate as part of another route – through the Old Russian cities of the Dnieper region, where it is said that it was six days away from Kiev (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 913). T. Lewicki identified this point with the city of the *Koui* nomadic horde, which was part of the 'Black Caps' (*Chernye klobuki*) dependent on the Kiev princes and located in the basin of the Ros' river (Lewicki 1958: 13–18; Beilis 1984: 224). Despite the lack of data on this city, there is no doubt that the mention of it in connection with the story of the Old Russian cities of the Dnieper basin and its assignment by al-Idrīsī's informants to the Cuman cities make it possible to search for this point in the Russian-Polovtsian borderland.

The location of the city of *Nūshī* also seems to be uncertain. V.M. Beilis noted that the third grapheme of the word can be read without diacritical points (*Nūsī*), and compared this toponym with the name of the city *Nosov* in the Pereiaslavl principality (PSRL 1998: 360; Beilis 1990: 92).

In the fifth and sixth sections of the seventh climate, in the context of the story about the northern regions of Cumania, al-Idrīsī also mentions a number of Cuman toponyms. According to him, in the upper reaches of the Dnieper River (*Danābris*) there were "Sinūbulī and Mūnīshqa – prosperous cities from the country of al-Qumāniyya" (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 957). Both toponyms are, most likely, two names of the same settlement – Smolensk (for more details see: Konovalova 2006: 203–206). Assigning them to the Cuman cities could have been connected with the location of Smolensk on the trade route that led through the Polovtsian Steppe to the north along the Dnieper. It was along this way that objects from the Baltic cultural circle found in Polovtsian burials were imported by the Polovtsy (Uspenskiy, Gołębiowska-Tobiasz 2017: 454). In the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the geography of the Polovtsian military presence on the territory of Rus' was significantly expanded thanks to the use of the Polovtsian troops in the internecine wars of the Russian princes. In particular, under the year 1147, the chronicle reports on the appearance of Polovtsy in the territory of Smolensk (PSRL 1998: 357–359; Temushev 2017: 131).

Finally, al-Idrīsī names two cities in the northern part of Cumania – *Ṭarūyā* and *Aqlība*: "Both of them are prosperous cities, similar to one another and composed of the same stone. Between *Ṭarūyā* and the city of *Ṣalāw*, one hundred miles to the south along sparsely populated steppes. From *Ṭarūyā* to the town of *Aqlība* eight days of travel. This is the most extreme region of Cumania in our time." (al-Idrīsī 1970–1984: 958). The mention of these cities on the same route as the city of *Ṣalāw* (Pereiaslavl' Russkii) suggests that *Ṭarūyā* and *Aqlība*, like the Cuman cities from the sixth section of the sixth climate, could be identified with

the urban centers of the southern Russian principalities, in particular with Chernigov, whose rulers often used Polovtsian troops in their own interests, and the fortress city of *Voin'*, which stood on the border with the Polovtsian steppe (Konovalova 2006: 271–272).

## Conclusion

Analysis of al-Idrīsī's information on Cumania shows that he used predominantly modern data received from informers, who visited Cumania personally or heard about trips there from eyewitnesses. The bulk of information about Cumania is made up of reports about Cuman cities, and the typical characteristics of these settlements mentioned by al-Idrīsī relate mainly to their commercial functions.

At the same time, the information that al-Idrīsī had about the Cuman cities, as a rule, is not specific enough and is also very concise, which makes it problematic to localize the settlements named by the geographer with a sufficient degree of certainty. Yet it is quite obvious that most of al-Idrīsī's information about Cumania was somehow connected with the trade route that led from the Azov Sea to the south-eastern outskirts of Rus' and further to the north along the Dnieper. The cities attributed by the geographer to the Cumans, were actually Old Russian settlements that lay in the border strip and had in some cases an ethnically mixed population, in which the Turkic element was also present. Although al-Idrīsī mistakenly takes a number of Russian cities for Cuman ones, the very fact that the geographer attributed them to the Cumans is important. All the cities that al-Idrīsī considers as Cuman appear in his treatise in the same context, namely in the stories about the trade routes in which these cities were connected with each other and with other settlements.

Al-Idrīsī's description of Cumania as a geographical and political unit relied on the idea of the vast size of its territory, but this notion, however, was not backed up by the geographic data, and as a result al-Idrīsī attributed to Cumania significant areas of Eastern Europe that in fact were not well known to him. Thereby al-Idrīsī managed to combine a number of isolated other stories about different parts of Cumania in order to form a holistic view of the Polovtsian lands and fit them into an international context.

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