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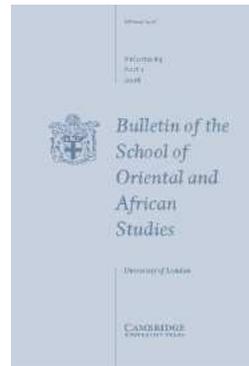
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## ISTVÁN VÁSÁRY: Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365. xvi, 230 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. £48.

GEORGE LANE

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While Georgian kings began looking to the Christian power to their north as a potential ally against their threatening Muslim neighbours from the late sixteenth century, it is only in 1699 that Armenians first appealed to Russia to free their homeland. Armenians had originally sought the help of princes of western Europe, and it is on the advice of one of these, the Palatine Elector, that they petitioned the Russian Tsar. The Palatine Elector's advice was pertinently based on the geographical proximity of Russia to the Caucasus. The first Armenian petition to the tsars would be followed by many others throughout the eighteenth century. Indeed, the history of relations between the Armenians of Transcaucasia and the Russian Empire during that period is mostly one of Armenians hoping for a Russian invasion that would free Eastern Armenia from the oppression of the Persian shahs and local khans. These hopes would be repeatedly dashed as Russia either intervened in the wrong location, as with Peter's invasion of Gilan and Mazandaran, or did not intervene at all—even though in some cases Russia was the party that had initiated contact and had approached the Georgians and Armenians with promises of support.

Whatever the particular beginning and development of each episode, all had similar endings, with Armenians and Georgians abandoned to their own fate, at the mercy of Muslim neighbours retaliating against them for their co-operation with Russia. By the time Russia would finally cross the Caucasian barrier and annex the region, Eastern Armenia would be devastated, with large swathes of its territory emptied of its Armenian population, either completely deserted or partly repopulated with Turkic or Kurdish elements. That Armenians persisted in appealing to Russian support despite multiple abandonments is a testament to their desperate situation and perhaps to their political naivety, in their failure to understand that Russia, like other states, would first and foremost pursue its own interests rather than rush to the help of its Christian brethren.

It is often said that history repeats itself. Sections of this volume dealing with hostilities in Karabagh between the Armenian *meliks* and Turkic khans carry many parallels with the struggles in the region in 1918–20 and 1988–94. Indeed, in addition to serving the needs of historians of the period, this study will be of much help to all those interested in the modern-day conflict over Karabagh.

*Armenians and Russia, 1626–1796* is an indispensable tool for all students of the past and present of Armenia and the entire Caucasus. It can only be regretted that a number of misspellings and grammatical errors managed to slip into the published text. In spite of these mistakes, however, Bournoutian should be commended for the publication of this volume, which is a considerable accomplishment in itself.

HOVANN H. SIMONIAN

ISTVÁN VÁSÁRY:

*Cumans and Tatars: Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365.*

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The Cumans, the Pechenegs, the Qipchaq Turks if not the same people they certainly shared the same homeland known variously as the *Dasht-i-Qipchaq*,

Cumania, *Pole Poloveckoe*, Valania, the Pontic steppes, or the Eurasian steppes. They were nomadic warriors whose impact and influence has often been overshadowed and obscured by their neighbours and the tumultuous events which periodically engulfed the whole Balkan region. If there is one complaint about this most welcome and very thorough study of these so often overlooked people it is that their possible, very tangible, link to the founding of the Ottoman Empire has not been explored or even acknowledged in any meaningful way.

Vásáry's study concentrates on the relationship between the nomadic tribes and the settled peoples of the Balkans and Bulgaria in particular. His is the first extensive examination of the early medieval period of this region. His study charts the formation of the second Bulgarian Empire from 1185 and follows the infiltration of the Cuman elite into the Balkan polities with the knowledge and approval of the ruling circles of the Qipchaq Khanate or *Ulus* of Jochi [Golden Horde].

Between 1185 and the 1330s the Cumans' decisive role saw the founding of three successive Bulgarian dynasties. Without the Cumans' unwavering aid it is doubtful whether the second Bulgarian Empire could have stood, though fierce arguments over the ethnic composition of the resulting state and the role of the Vlaxhs and Bulgars in the re-establishment of the empire are ongoing. Bulgarians tend to play down the role of the Romanian Vlaxhs while some Romanians would claim that the empire was the first Romanian state in history. Vásáry dismisses both stands as anachronistic while pointing out that both disgruntled groups lived harmoniously under the domination of the Byzantines against whom they jointly revolted in 1185. Both groups had long wanted to end the Byzantine oppression but it was not until the military might of the Cumans was added to the equation that an uprising became feasible. According to Vásáry the Bulgars furnished the revolt with an ideology, the trans-human pastoralist Vlaxhs contributed energy and impetus while, decisively, the Cumans provided the arms and warriors.

Vásáry's monograph traces the Cumans' advance from their westernmost wanderings in the Balkans at the end of the twelfth century to the middle of the fourteenth century; the year 1185 was the turning point in Cuman and Balkan history. The Cumans played a crucial role in the history of this period though with the advent of the Mongols and the central role the Cumans or Qipchaqs assumed in the early Mongol Empire and in particular the Qipchaq Khanate [Golden Horde], their central place in the history books was assured. Vásáry concludes his history in the mid-fourteenth century for clearly stated reasons. He sees Berdibek Khan's death in 1359 and the subsequent anarchy that embroiled the Qipchaq Khanate (Golden Horde) as signalling the end of the Tatar period in the Balkans. These events contrast with the Ottoman advance into Eastern Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century and fall beyond the scope of his study and therefore form a historical boundary for his work.

*Cumans and Tatars* establishes that there was a strong Turkish presence in the Balkans long before the arrival of the Ottomans and that the various Romanian and Bulgarian dynasties owed much to the influence and involvement of Turkic Cumans and Tatars. One of Vásáry's stated aims is to dispel the 'rosy clouds of nostalgia that hang over the mediaeval golden age of the pre-Ottoman Balkans' (p. 167) through which nationalist historians are inclined to view the era. However, Vásáry, a former Hungarian ambassador to Turkey and currently a professor of Turkic and Central Asian studies at Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest himself betrays a passive sympathy

for Hungarian influence in the area which he certainly does not extend to Romania and Bulgaria.

Vásáry employs an impressive array of source material and is able to consult material written in obscure languages from problematic texts. He relies heavily on Byzantine Greek accounts for the main narratives simply because they are by far the most plentiful and easily accessible as well as often being 'complete'. The opening chapter contains short biographical sketches of five principal Byzantine historians, a useful and thoughtful addition. The problem besetting all historians of nomadic peoples, namely the lack of primary source material written by the tribal people themselves, is softened in the present work by the availability of material from Turkish, Arabic, Latin, Slavic, Hungarian and other medieval writers. The detailed consultation of primary source material allows for a strong sense of narrative, while Vásáry's linguistic knowledge of Turkish dialects and the relevant nomenclature strengthens his underlying arguments. His attention to detail enables the author to produce some readable and compelling narrative and vividly descriptive quotations with which to embellish this absorbing monograph.

It is unfortunate that the links with the Ottomans through the collapse of the Khanate of Nogai have not been explored in Vásáry's work. The Ottoman scholar, Colin Heywood threw light into the 'Black Hole' of the origins of the Ottoman Empire with his research into the conflicts within the Qipchaq Khanate (Golden Horde) at the end of the thirteenth century. Heywood suggested that the death of the Mongol prince, Nogai Khan, who had designs on the 'throne' of the Qipchaq Khanate, followed by the movements of considerable numbers of displaced people from the Pontic steppe and the lands west of the Black Sea might well have been connected with the sudden appearance of a small but militarily ambitious tribe in western Anatolia. Vásáry plots the events following, firstly, the appearance of Tuda-Mengü, the new ruler of the Qipchaq Khanate, in 1280, secondly, the enthronement of the puppet king George Terter I (1280–92) in Bulgaria and thirdly, the accession of the Byzantine king Andronicus II (1282–1328), and duly notes Nogai's role as king-maker and as a prime 'mover and shaker' behind the scenes. He recognizes the establishment of an independent khanate by Nogai, legitimized by the khan's status as a Chinggisid prince and emphasized by the minting in Saqçī of copper and silver coins struck in Nogai and his son Çeke's names. Vásáry manages to pick through the details of Nogai's complex family ties and the internecine blood bath in the 1290s which saw the clan effaced not only from the courts of the Qipchaq Khanate but eventually also from those of Bulgaria. In the author's words 'The Balkanic lands, especially Bulgaria ... was liberated from direct Tatar menace.' [sic.] (p. 96)

A *horror Tatarorum* stalks much of the research of this confused period of Pontic and west Anatolian history and Vásáry does not investigate the leads which Heywood has so enticingly sown into the historical web of the region. Instead he echoes the weary discredited myths of the Ottomans as *gāhizis*, and Osman as the valiant Muslim warrior.

This failing aside however, Vásáry's work has much to commend it and it will doubtless become the standard textbook for the study of the eastern Balkans in the pre-Ottoman period. Though it will stoke controversy for its depiction of the crucial role of the Turks in the affairs of Bulgaria and Romania, it is convincing in its analysis and its evidence is compelling. It is unfortunate that better maps were not provided to illustrate the topography and physical geography. Such maps could have re-enforced the physical relationships between nomads and the settled communities. But taken as a whole

such failings are dwarfed by the book's achievements. Vásáry has produced an essential historical textbook, one unlikely to be superseded in the near future.

GEORGE LANE

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SOUTH ASIA

ROBERT ELGOOD:

*Hindu Arms and Ritual, Arms and Armour from India 1400–1865.*

312 pp. 342 figures. Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2004. £55.

This splendidly produced, generously illustrated and somewhat eccentrically organized volume is a landmark publication. Readers will be grateful to the author for gathering together all possible information pertaining to a vast array of little studied, but splendidly decorated weapons from Vijayanagara and the successor states of south India now widely dispersed in Indian, European and American collections. They should also appreciate his attempt to locate these objects within a specifically defined cultural and religious context. While other scholars specializing in arms and armour have tended to focus on north India under the Mughals and Rajputs, Elgood concentrates on the Deccan and south India, a region that has been unduly neglected in spite of the large numbers of surviving weapons and the miscellany of historical sources, including accounts of the European travellers.

The astonishing technical virtuosity of chiselled steel implements from the late Vijayanagara period is immediately apparent from the elephant goad (*ākuṣa*) illustrated on the cover of the book and the dagger (*kaṭār*) shown in Figure 1.3. Among the most artistic metallic objects ever produced in south India, they are surely to be ranked with the finest bronze figurines of the region. Yet the aesthetic assurance of these and other such examples of the south Indian metalworker places them far beyond the realm of mere artefacts of warfare. Indeed, as the author takes pains to demonstrate in the various chapters, goads, daggers, swords, spears and axes of this type were all charged with magical powers so as to safeguard those who used them. As a means of ensuring cosmic protection these weapons came to be beautifully fashioned and richly embellished with a whole host of auspicious motifs. These included lions, serpents, peacocks, parrots and fantastic beasts (*yalis*), which were often combined into intricate and imaginative compositions.

The core of the book is a detailed description of no fewer than 600 individual specimens of arms and armour, which the author groups according to type and function. Thus we find separate chapters on the goad, sword, dagger, axe and mace, several categories of which are further subdivided according to their royal or religious context. Elgood presents photographs with extended captions giving technical details of manufacture, use and decoration—data that has almost never been made available before. At the same time the author is concerned with underlying purpose and meaning. As a result, catalogue-like chapters focusing on specific groups of weapons, especially those from the Tanjore Armoury (mostly divided between the Government Museum in Chennai and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), alternate with short essays. Here the author offers discussions on subjects as diverse as an overview of warfare in Vijayanagara times, the role of weapons in the rituals of south Indian courts, the sacrificial axes employed in the worship of Hindu