

Medieval Nomadic conference in the shadow of the Egyptian revolution

Fourth International Conference on Medieval History
of the Eurasian Steppe. January 25–30, 2011.
Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo
13, Gawad Hosni St. 2nd. Floor Abdin, Cairo

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The Department of Medieval History at the University of Szeged and the Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor organized the Fourth International Conference on Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe in Cairo in January 25–30, 2011. The Medieval Nomads evolved from the conferences on the history of the Eurasian steppe in the Middle Ages held in 1997, 2000 and 2002 at the University of Szeged. These early conferences were the forum for the Hungarian historians and orientalists and their proceedings were published in Hungarian.

In 2004 it was decided to convene an International Conference on Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe. The first conference of this kind was held in Szeged in 2004, the second in Jászberény in 2007 and the third in Miskolc in 2009 (Hungary). The proceedings have been published in *Acta Orientalia* (58: 2005) and *Chronica* (7–8: 2007–8).

As I worked as the director of the Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo from 2007 until 2011 and I organized the former conferences with my colleagues, I decided to prepare a conference in Cairo.

The cooperation based on the idea that the nomadic people played an important role in the medieval history of Egypt and the Hungarian Kingdom. The formation of the Hungarian tribal confederation and its history until the conversion to Christianity was an integral part of the medieval nomadic history. Pecheneg and Ghuzz groups moved to the Carpathian Basin in the eleventh century. Cumans and Alans joined the Hungarian Kingdom in thirteenth century after the Mongol invasion and integrated into the kingdom. The medieval nomads of Eurasian steppe also played a major role in Islamic history of Egypt. The first independent Muslim dynasty of Egypt, the Tulunids were of Turkish origin in the ninth century (868–905). The Cumans known as Kun among Hungarians and Kipchaks in the Muslim sources had a strong impact on Egypt. The Kipchaks founded the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt, Syria and they brought prosperity for

Egypt and they could stop the attack of the Mongol Empire in Syria. The Bahri Mamluk dynasty (1260–1382) was of Kipchak origin.

The preliminary program of the conference included 45 lectures and the participants came from France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Japan, Russia, Turkey besides the Egyptian and Hungarian historians.

On 25 January 2011 the majority of conference participants was received at Cairo airport. The first working day started at 10 o'clock on 26 January, as the cultural counsellor I welcomed the participants and opened the conference. Professor András Róna-Tas made preliminary remarks on the study of present stage of nomadic peoples of Eurasian steppe and tributed commemoration to the late Professor Denis Sinor, the pioneer of this field of research. Mihály Dobrovits informed the participants about the process of publication of the proceedings of the former conference. Then the lectures were read till 6 pm in the Great Hall of the Cultural Office. On the way to the hotel in the evening we realized the unusual present of riot police around Tahrir-square. As the news of protests and demonstrations came continuously I decided to organize two sessions on 27 January to finish the professional work. 37 lectures were delivered from 15 countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy, Spain, Egypt, Russia, Ukraine, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Tuva, Japan, Armenia, Turkey), historians, archaeologists and orientalist were involved. The majority of presentations followed by lively debate.

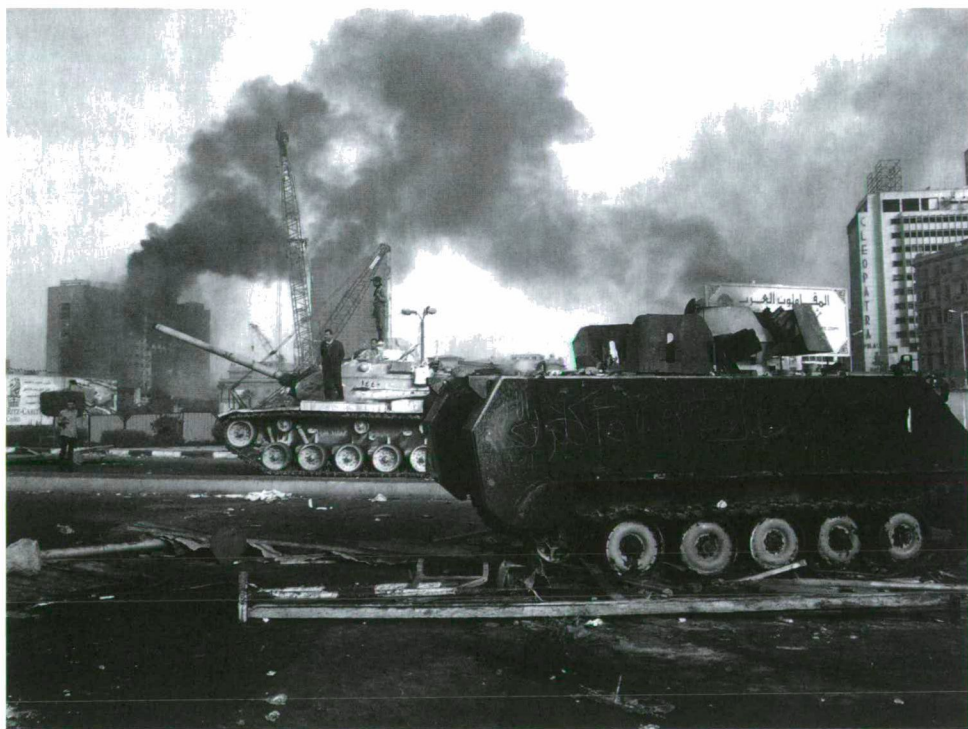


Photo by Heinrich Härke, 29 January 2011 Cairo, Tahrir

By 6:30 we finished the lectures and a reception was held in a fish restaurant in the evening. As the next day was Friday, the Muslim week-end and a huge demonstration was announced in Downtown, we organized an excursion to the pyramids of Dakhshur, Sakkara and Giza. At Giza we saw people in the streets after the *khutba* 'Friday preach'. On the way back to the hotels our buses ran into a mass protest on the July 26 bridge next to Zamalek. The protesters were attacked by the riot police with tear gas. We had to retreat and the bus drivers could find a roundabout way to the other bridge to approach Zamalek, so we could reach one of the hotels for the participants, but the other hotel was in Downtown in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, the centre of demonstrations and the bus driver could not risk to go there. Thus, the participants of the conference living in Zamalek shared their rooms with those who could not leave for their hotel. The internet and mobile services were shut down by the government, the participants could use the landline of the hotel to inform their relatives at home. From 6 p.m. the government introduced curfew. Next morning the colleagues living in the hotel of the Downtown could go home. Originally we planned to visit the Egyptian Museum and the Museum of Islamic Arts, but the situation was quite dangerous as the police left the streets uncontrolled and the prisons were opened. I advised the participants to leave Cairo as soon as possible. Most of them safely left Cairo on 30 January, Saturday.

I express special thank to my colleagues from the University of Szeged, Szilvia Kovács, Balázs Sinkovics and Katalin Nagy and my colleagues at the Office of the Cultural Counsellor Tímea Ficsor, Aisha Ibrahim, Abdallah Abdel-Aty, Shawky Sayed Mohamed, Abdel Mokhsen and Mohammad Allam for their work during the conference. As for the publication, I thank to Zsolt Hunyadi who made extraordinary efforts for editing the proceedings of the conference.

As a historian it was an extraordinary experience, the historians usually study the important events of the past from their present point of view, but it is another case when you feel the breeze of history on your skin.

Szeged, March 2011