SOME NOTES ON THE COMITATUS IN MEDIEVAL EURASIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KHAZARS

The role of the military household in the West Asian-Islamic world of the later Middle Ages (Ayyubid-Mamlük and Ottoman) has recently been the subject of a number of illuminating studies. In particular the role of military slavery, closely associated with the military or warrior household, an institution often misunderstood by European observers, remains the subject of ongoing debate. As Michael Chamberlain notes, however, the primary difference between the Latin Christian West and the Islamic Middle East "lay rather in the relatively greater preponderance in the Middle East of garrisoned commands of ethnic outsiders who were recruited with cash." Slavery, with its wrenching "social death" of people torn away from hearth and home, kith and kin and forced to recreate some semblance of family in an alien environment, was merely one of a number of modalities to create bonds of loyalty. In some instances, they were "adopted" into the household/family of their masters. The use of salaried, ethnically alien elements as the military retinue or comitatus (I shall use the two terms interchangeably) was not unique to the West Asian Islamic world. A variant of this system had developed many cen-


turies earlier in Steppe Eurasia and in steppe societies transplanted into or grafted onto sedentary states over which they had gained control.

One of the more curious solutions to the need for politically and militarily reliable forces by a central government can be seen in the state of the “Later T’ang” (923–36) founded by the Sha-t’o Turks (perhaps to be identified with the later Öngüd) who gained control of parts of Northern China during the “Five Dynasties era” (907–60). The Sha-t’o engaged in massive adoptions by their ruling clan, taking in local Chinese as well as individuals of Mongolic (Qitan) and Turkic ethnicity. These adoptees were brought into the government and perhaps more crucially served in an “army of adopted children.” The employment of tribally or ethnically alien elements is a common, but not universal feature of this system.

Of particular interest to us is the Khazar Qaghanate (ca. 650–ca.965), the successor and heir of the Türk state in the western steppe zone and the largest state in that region until the Mongol conquest. Before turning to the Khazars, we should briefly discuss the institution of the military retinue/comitatus and its importance in Eurasia. This is a very large theme which I plan to address more fully elsewhere. This institution appears under a variety of names across Eurasia. Basically, it consisted of a grouping of warriors under the leadership of and eventually attached by bonds of personal loyalty to a warlord, prince or king. These were mostly young men, often of diverse origins, who for a variety of reasons (largely having to do with the prospect of war booty and fame) were attracted to charismatic war leaders. These war-bands were, in their early stages, of a temporary nature deriving from Männernbunde, but as these warlords became more successful, the bands took on a more stable character, becoming the now permanent military retinue of the warlord who himself had gained (with their help) or was now aiming for supreme political power in the tribal polity. The military retinue itself gained wealth through its raids and through its close personal contact with the now increasingly powerful warlord/king. Indeed, to maintain his following, the warlord/ruler had to expand his military activities. These could take the form


7. The redistributive aspects of these endeavors were particularly important; see A. Ia. Gurevich, Kategorii srednevekovoi kul’tury (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972), 196–99, 201.