



Summary :

The Crimean peninsula, the ancient Tauric Chersonese, is situated between the Black Sea and the Azov Sea. The ethnic composition of the Crimea during the Byzantine period was diversified. In the beginning the presence of Huns and Goths is attested, while Justinian attempts to establish Byzantine power. The Khazars appear in the seventh century and the Byzantines stabilize their presence during the ninth century in the form of the theme of Klimata, with its center at Cherson. Byzantine decline commenced with the Tatar invasion of 1223 and the final Turkish occupation in the fifteenth century.

Other Names

Tauric Chersonese

Geographical Location

Crimean peninsula, the Ukraine

Historical Region

Black Sea

Administrative Dependence

Theme of Cherson (Klimata), (ninth - thirteenth c.)

Geographical Coordinates

1. Crimea in Antiquity

The Crimean peninsula, north of the Black Sea, is divided in the medieval period into three historical and cultural regions: the southern and southeastern mountainous region, the eastern part, representing an island of steppes between the Black and [Azov Seas](#), and the northern and central region, consisting of arid steppes. The region of Crimea is the epicenter of Greek colonization already from the 7th c. BC. The Greek cities are concentrated in two parts of the peninsula, in the eastern, in the region of Cimmerian Bosphorus, around the city of [Panticapaeum/Bosporus](#) (present-day Kerch) and the [Taman peninsula](#) directly across from the eastern part of the Crimea, as well as on the western coast, mainly in the region around the city of [Chersonesos](#) (where modern [Sevastopol](#) is located). From the 1st c. B.C. the Greek cities north of the Black Sea are engulfed within the Roman Empire's sphere of power. Cimmerian Bosphorus remains a formally autonomous kingdom, at least until the end of the 5th c., while Chersonesos and its region form part of the territory of the Roman Empire. The steppes of Crimea in Antiquity are occupied by Iranian nomads, originally by the [Scythians](#), later by the [Sarmatians](#). The sedentarized Scythians create a kingdom centered on Scythian Neapolis (in the vicinity of the modern city of [Simferopol](#)). This kingdom was destroyed by the Sarmatians in the 3rd century. The mountains of the southern coast are originally inhabited by the Tauri and later by a sedentarized population of Iranian stock, sometimes identified with the [Alans](#). Beginning in the third century, groups of Eastern Germanic people settle on the southern coast of the peninsula.

2. Medieval Crimea

2.1. The early period. Hunnic, Gothic and Byzantine presence in the Crimea

Around the end of the 4th c. the eastern part of the Crimea faces the invasion of the [Huns](#). After that the latter occupy the steppes of the peninsula. However, the negative consequences of the Hunnic expansion for Cimmerian Bosphorus are often exaggerated. The kingdom survived this invasion, for which the archaeological trace is rather feeble. The wealth of Bosphorus' aristocratic necropolis bears witness to the strong economic and political position of the local Hellenized elites. The city of Chersonesos still remains under Roman authority and becomes the Empire's principal point of political and military power north of the Black Sea. From the 4th c., proof of the diffusion of Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire, is attested originally in Cimmerian Bosphorus and later in [Cherson](#). The archaeological excavations at Chersonesos bespeak the progressive transformation of the ancient city into an Early Byzantine one, with a [metropolitan see](#), as a key element of the urban landscape. Under [Justinian I](#), the Eastern Empire recaptures



Cimmerian Bosphorus, which previously had been subject to the Huns and Bulgars.

At the same time, Justinian imposes his authority on the mountains of south Crimea. This region, called “the lands of Dory”, was at the time inhabited by the [Goths](#), whose appearance came as a result of fusion between Germanic and Iranian-speaking populations. These Goths were Orthodox Christians in religion and their culture is known from necropoleis and [rock-cut sites](#) on the mountainous region of Crimaea. The extensive works of reconstruction of ramparts and Christian monuments in those sites in the 6th century are proof of Byzantine suzerainty over the barbarians of Crimea. Nevertheless, the Crimean steppe remains under Hunnic control. The steppe people represent a permanent threat for Byzantine Crimea. Thus the [Turkic tribes](#), who appear on the Black Sea steppes in the 570s, temporarily occupy Cimmerian Bosphorus and lay siege on Cherson. However, thanks to the anti-Sassanid military alliance between Byzantium and the Turks, the Empire preserves its possessions in Crimea.

2.2. Crimea during the Middle Byzantine period (Khazars, Byzantines and Russians)

During the 7th-7th c. a [byzantinization](#) of the sedentary barbarians of Crimea is more and more visible. The possibility cannot be excluded, that in the 8th century this process coincides with a Greek immigration, coming from Asia Minor and provoked by religious strife in Byzantium. On the other hand, a progressive sedentarization of the Turko-Bulgar peoples in eastern Crimea results in the appearance of a dense agricultural periphery in the cities of Cimmerian Bosphorus. This is known from the numerous habitations of the steppe culture known as Saltovo-Mayatskaya Culture. From a political point of view, Byzantium must more and more reckon with the kingdom of the Khazars, which appears in the seventh century in the Black Sea steppes, on the ruins of the first Turkic khaganate. During the 8th century the Khazars take into their possession first eastern Crimea, then the mountains of the south coast, where a sort of Khazar-Byzantine condominium appears.

In the 9th-10th c. the waves of steppe nomads, the Magyars and [Pechenegs](#), surge into the Khazar kingdom, which causes its weakening. Thus, Byzantium re-establishes its authority over the mountainous regions of southern Crimea, where the [theme of Klimata](#) appears, centered on Cherson, since eastern Crimea remains under Khazar domination. In the 960s-980s the Khazar kingdom was annihilated by the blows of the Russians and steppe nomads. In the early eleventh c. the Russian principality of Tmutarakan (the Russian name of the Greek, later Khazar, city of [Tamatarcha](#), present-day Taman) is formed in eastern Crimea and the Taman peninsula, opposite Crimea, and continues to exist in that region until the late 11th - early 12th c. The Russian presence is thus attested in the written sources and archaeological data from Cherson, which remains always the center of Byzantine power north of the Black Sea. In the 10th-13th c., Cherson is a typically Byzantine city and the rural population of the Crimean southwest is completely Hellenized from a cultural point of view, even though the written sources speak of “Gothia” and the Gothic language there is still alive. The steppes, as well as eastern Crimea, are occupied by the Qipčak/Kiptchak, a Turkic-speaking people known in medieval slavic Russian chronicles as the Polovtsy/Polovci, ie [Cumans](#).

2.3. The Tatar invasion and Ottoman occupation of Crimea

The [Tatar](#) invasion causes, already from 1223, profound changes in the historical situation of Crimea, which forms part of the great Tatar Empire and later, from the fifteenth c., of the Tatar khanate of Crimea. It is then that the Italian colonies of the republic of [Genoa](#) make their appearance on the south coast of the peninsula and remain there until their destruction by the Turks in the 1470s. At the same time, new Iranian-speaking populations, the Alans and Assi, probably coming from the Northern Caucasus, are attested in the Crimea by the written sources. The city of Cherson is destroyed by the Tatars at the end of the 15th c., an event that also signifies the end of Byzantine presence in Crimea. On the mountains of Crimea, in ancient Gothia, the Greek principality of Theodoro is formed in the 15th c., which was also destroyed by the Turks in the 1470s.



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Quotations

Cherson before the foundation of the theme, according to Constantine VII:

Ἡ δὲ Χερσῶν τὸ παλαιὸν οὐκ ἦν εἰς ὄνομα θέματος, οὐδὲ ἐν μητροπόλεως σχήματι· ἀλλ' οἱ τοῦ Βοσπόρου κρατοῦντες ἐκράτουν καὶ Χερσῶνος αὐτῆς καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν κλιμάτων, ὥστε καὶ βασιλεύειν τοὺς ἐν τῷ Βοσπόρῳ κατοικοῦντας λέγεται.

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