

## Byzantium and the Pechenegs from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century

### ● The topic of the thesis within the context of the history of Byzantium

The Byzantine Empire was enmeshed during its more than a thousand years long history in almost constant struggles with different internal or external enemies. The main reason for these permanent conflicts was the preservation of its territorial unit or otherwise the reconquest of lost territories in former times according to the political-religious ideology of the Empire. The contacts with the neighboring states or foreign nations in Byzantium's border zones had not only a military character, but also different cultural and economic characteristics. Among these many nations (or rather tribes - *ethne*), empires, kingdoms and different kinds of state buildings with which Byzantium dealt politically, militarily and culturally during its existence on the territories of three continents from the 4<sup>th</sup> until the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, there were contacts especially on its northern, and since the 11<sup>th</sup> Century also on its eastern borders, with various nomadic steppe tribes. A particular case of such contacts, which is the topic of the below summarized PhD thesis, is the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the Pechenegs.

### ● Current state of research and the problematic nature of the primary sources

The present study does not represent the first scientific attempt to systematically examine the several different aspects of the relationships between the Pechenegs and the Byzantine Empire. There are two extensive studies which have a focus on this issue and which undoubtedly have contributed much to clarify this important historical issue<sup>1</sup>. Apart from that, there is a series of smaller scientific publications which examine some of the different aspects of these mutual relations. Nevertheless, both the two above-mentioned major works as well as the smaller publications often have significant deficiencies which are on the one hand mostly related to using a narrow amount of archaeological and written sources, and on the other hand are often in connection with the problem of the mutual collision of historical objectivity and national interests of modern politics. Some of the historical problems of this topic which are related with the ethnic composition of the population in the lower Danube region in the 10<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> C. and also with the former administrative division of these territories at that time are very often influenced and affected by ideological and nationalist aspirations in the

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<sup>1</sup> VASIL'EVSKIJ Vasilij G., *Vizantija i pečenegi*, in: *Trudy* vol. 1, St. Petersburg 1908 (Reprint, Hague 1968); DIACONU Petre, *Les pechenègues au Bas-Danube* (= *Bibliotheca Historica Romaniae* 27), Bucarest 1970.

works of Bulgarian, Romanian and even Russian scientists, especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (these appearances are sometimes noticeable even to this day). For this reason one must be very careful when dealing with the results of these scientific works and consider them with a reasonable dose of skepticism.

But as usual, there are many significant problems with the primary sources as well. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on any historical records on the part of the Pechenegs, because in their case we are dealing with an illiterate steppe nomadic tribe. Therefore, the written sources, which are temporally and substantially related to the topic of this work and which give us general information about various aspects of the Byzantine-Pecheneg relations, are mainly Byzantine, i.e. mostly written in Greek. They are sometimes very detailed but the critical examination of their content still entails several difficulties. The designation of the Pechenegs is a frequent problem that occurs in many Byzantine sources of this time and gives rise to some problems with correctly identifying the mentioned north-eastern people as the members of some Pecheneg tribes. In the best case they are mentioned with the Greek form of their common name i.e. *Patzinakoi* or *Patzinakai*. In many other cases, however, the Byzantine authors use some general terms with an anachronistic character such as *Skythai*, *Sauromatoi* or just *Barbarians*. Another problem which is connected with the Byzantine literary tradition and which makes the work of modern historians more difficult is the fact that the sources sometimes represent a mutual contradiction in their narratives and a significant dependence on historiographical and ethnographical *topoi*. Narratives about the Pechenegs and their ethnical presence and political-military activity in Eastern and Southeastern Europe can be found, of course, not only in the Byzantine sources. There is also a number of Arabian, Russian, Latin (mostly Hungarian) et al. literary sources which mention or even report about events connected to the Pechenegs, but they are often considered deficient in the earlier modern historiography. Some of them are particularly helpful in locating the settlements of the Pechenegs, but sometimes they also have a complementary role to some Byzantine narratives.

However, if the written sources are not sufficiently clear to make certain conclusions concerning specific historical problems, we can use scientific material and results from other classical studies in order to eventually supplement the already gained historical picture or at least to confirm it. Therefore, in addition to the reports from the written sources, I will also use in the present work some amounts of information gained by archaeological investigations. Archaeological evidence provides important information about the general presence of the Pechenegs not only in the areas of the lower Danube region which are most relevant to my subject, but also generally in Eastern and Central Europe. The archaeological data (e.g. seal findings and coin caches) provide even more

important source material to explain other issues, such as the military and civil administration division of the Byzantine Empire during this period, the state of the urban settlements and of the defense systems before and after the Pecheneg invasions from the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> C. and also the coexistence between the sedentary Balkan population and the new nomadic invaders.

- **Emphases and main chronological division of the thesis**

The first major phase of the mutual relations: from the 9<sup>th</sup> until the late 10<sup>th</sup> Century

The Byzantine Empire very probably entered into contact with the nomadic tribes of the Pechenegs which roamed at that time in the steppes between the Caspian and the Black Sea already in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. During their migration to the south-west which was actually a displacement caused by the westwards migration of other nomadic tribes, the core group of Pechenegs got more and more into the zone of influence and political interests of the Byzantine Empire. These included in particular the steppe and coastal regions in the North of the Pontic Sea. The mutual contacts then intensified due to this geographical proximity. The upholding of good relations with the Pechenegs was one of the priorities of the Byzantine foreign policy towards their northern neighbors during the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (mainly according to *de administrando imperio*). Because of many different factors there were rarely immediate Pecheneg-Byzantine clashes until the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. But after the final conquest of Bulgaria by Basil II until the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> C. Byzantium and the Pechenegs had all at once a common border, and therefore the likelihood of direct conflicts grew. Nevertheless, it was surely difficult for the Byzantines to anticipate at that moment that the new neighbor to the north, with which they had so far been keeping relatively good political relations, could develop into such a massive threat to the Empire. One contemporary Byzantine general a few decades later even described the Pechenegs as “*the most terrible of all Roman enemies*”.

Main emphases and problems:

-The problem of locating the original homelands (the so-called *Urheimat*) of the Pechenegs and of their probably not absolute ethnic belonging to the Turkic peoples (also some other aspects as e.g. the traditional lifestyle and culture of the Eurasian steppe peoples of that time).

- The Causes for the emigration of the Pechenegs to the West and for their arrival in the northern Black Sea region and also their relationship to the other steppe tribes of these areas (Oghuzes, Khazars, Hungarians etc.).
- The problem of the extent of the territories under the control of the Pechenegs in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and of the coexistence between them and their sedentary subjects.
- The different aspects of the role of the Pechenegs in the Byzantine foreign policy in the north (first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century).
- The period between 971 and 986 and probably the first common land border in the lower Danube region between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs.

#### The second major phase: from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century

After the final subjugation of the Bulgarian Tsardom by the Byzantine Emperor Basil II at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century the Byzantines shared for a long time a common land border with the Pechenegs, whose tribes had penetrated now (or much earlier) to the lower Danube. As a result of systematic crossings of the Danube River by bigger Pecheneg groups since the mid-20s of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, a series of pillages began within large areas of the Byzantine territories on the Balkan Peninsula. Important questions at this point would be the following: What were the triggers for these attacks? How the Byzantine defense was organized on the so-called *Danube limes*? And why did this defense system prove itself as ineffective against the penetration of the new invaders?

Some twenty years after the beginning of the regular Pecheneg attacks on the Empire's territories the first settlement of the Pechenegs south of the Danube was approved by the Byzantine Emperor himself. Soon afterwards, there were new settlements of Pecheneg groups on Byzantine territory, but this time they were forced to settle as subjugated people with the hope that they would soon become peaceful taxpayers. The Byzantines took advantage of a method which they had applied and tested earlier several times in similar circumstances. The settlement of conquered foreign tribes and groups of people had proven to be a successful model of the Byzantine policy of integration. In the following period, however, these settlement and integration policies failed almost entirely. A consequence of that fact was the emergence of a constant, almost autonomous and at the same time extremely hostile presence of large Pecheneg groups on the Byzantine territories south of the lower Danube. What were the reasons for the failure of this imperial policy (also the question of the

probable initial fail of the Byzantine attempts at Christianization among the Pechenegs)? In which regions and under which circumstances did the Pechenegs manage to maintain their independence? Why did their threat after the battle of *Lebunion* in 1091 had to be finally eliminated by adopting such extreme measures such as massacring the Pecheneg captives? These already mentioned questions are very important but their probable answers are still not so precisely examined. There are other important aspects related to the presence of the Pechenegs in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century south of the Danube, e.g. the demographic changes in some Balkan regions as a result of the Pecheneg invasions and settlements, the social relationship between the mounted nomads and the sedentary population in the affected Byzantine territories and also the problem of the general representation of the Pechenegs in the contemporary Byzantine sources.

### ● **Research methods**

The pursued aim of this present work is to represent chronologically the different developments and the changing nature of the relations between Byzantium and the Pechenegs during the period from the 9<sup>th</sup> until the 12<sup>th</sup> C. based on a critical analysis of the existing and available reports of the written sources (no matter in which language) and at the same time to discuss the above-mentioned questions (among many others not mentioned here), which result from that critical analysis. After that, consistent conclusions should be drawn insofar as the extent of the source material allows. In order to carry out more accurate analyses with higher quality and defend them with better argumentation I will rely not only on the reports of the written sources considering some specific issues but I will also use at the same time data from publicized archaeological material. Using this approach, I will compare to what extent the statements of the two different kinds of sources (written and archaeological) agree with one another and in which points they could complement one another. The different opinions and interpretations of the single questions and eventual controversies which are represented in the modern historical literature should be used and closely discussed at the same time.

My preoccupation with the subject of this thesis did not start only after my successful application as a PhD student at the University of Mainz at the beginning of April 2012, but was partially approached in my MA thesis (“Byzantium and the Pechenegs during the 11<sup>th</sup> Century”). That is why some of the aforementioned issues have already been answered with varying degrees of success, which of course need a more precise elaboration which should be made in the subsequent period.