

UNWANTED REFUGEES: NEWCOMERS FROM THE STEPPES IN THE BYZANTINE BALKANS (11TH – 12TH CENTURY)

BY
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Abstract:

After a period of safe isolation from the Great Steppe area and its restless inhabitants in the history of Byzantium came a difficult 11th century, when the empire had to face the migration of nomadic peoples (Pechenegs, Uzes). Their stay in the Paristrion theme was one of the most difficult problems that the imperial court had to deal with in the second half of the 11th century. This study is an attempt to answer two questions: how Byzantium coped with steppe refugees and how the experience of their presence influenced the later (until the end of the 12th century) relations of the empire with the inhabitants of the Black Sea steppes.

Keywords: *Byzantine Balkans in the 11th–12th centuries; Byzantine policy towards nomads: Pechenegs, Uzes, Cumans.*

The arrival of the newcomers from the Great Steppe into the Balkans is by no means a novel topic, and neither did it lack scholarly attention in the past. Nomadic migrations to the south of the Danube have been studied since at least mid-19th century. One of the widely known analyses was presented by Vasily Vasilevskii, who focused on the relations between Byzantium and the Pechenegs between 1048 and 1094, and compared migration of the steppe dwellers to the invasion of the Goths in the 370s A.D.¹ In the last century, the issue of nomadic presence in the Balkans was studied mainly, though not exclusively, by Romanian and Bulgarian scholars. The topic was usually treated as part of the wider considerations on the history of both of these nations, the beginnings of their statehoods and national versions of the history of Dobruđja.² Studies focusing on the history and culture of the nomadic ethnic groups that arrived in the Lower Danube are, however, more scarce.³ So far, Byzantine perspective has been rarely explored in academic research, especially insofar as the question of political strategies adopted by Constantinople vis-à-vis nomads of the Great Steppe is concerned, the issue which has failed to generate much interest among scholars.⁴ This seems quite bizarre, given the significance of the problem of new arrivals from the steppes in the 11th c. This paper seeks to present a synthetic and relatively brief answer to the question delineated above.

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¹ VASILEVSKII 1872: 116-165, 243-332; reprinted in: VASILEVSKII 1908: 1-175.

² ZLATARSKI 1918: 85-87, 88-90, 94, 97-98, 99; ZLATARSKI 1927: 312-313, 383-388; ZLATARSKI 1934: 36-39, 88-119, 139-140, 155, 157, 159-162, 165, 180-219, 228, 230, 366-371, 384-385, 394-396, 453-460, 463; ZLATARSKI 1940: 48-49, 59-62, 66-67, 74, 76-78, 97-101, 105-110; BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971: 120-162; TUPKOVA-ZAIMOVA 1976; BOZHILOV, GIUZELEV 1999: 385-387, 405-407, 421-443; BOZHILOV, GIUZELEV 2004: 141-162, 168-170; THEODORESCU 1999: 60-77; SPINEI 2009; DIMITROV 2011 (here bibliography of the major studies).

³ DIACONU 1970; DIACONU 1978; SPINEI 2003: 93-159 (on the Pechenegs), 161-215 (on the Uzes), 217-340 (on the Cumans); PAROŃ 2015: 385-430.

⁴ There are practically no major studies presenting a broader analysis of the policy adopted by Byzantium towards the nomads of the Great Steppe from the 10th to the end of the 12th c. The work by I.O. Knyaz'kii (KNYAZ'KII 2003), though useful, includes the most basic information and overlooks non-Russian literature on the subject. Byzantine policy towards nomads is usually addressed only marginally, e.g. while discussing Byzantine borders in the Balkans. Cf. STEPHENSON 1999: 43-66; STEPHENSON 1999A: 80-104; STEPHENSON 2000: 29-31, 38-46, 84-110, 288-294; MADGEARU 2013: 115-166. See also DUDEK 2005: 327-343; DUDEK 2007: 103-125; DUDEK 2007A: 87-92, 100-115.

PEACEFUL 10TH CENTURY

Scholars studying the relationship between Byzantium and the nomads of the Black Sea steppes might notice that the turbulent 11th century, especially its eventful second half, was preceded by an unusually peaceful 10th century. The peacefulness was due, to a large extent, to the relative isolation of the Empire from the Great Steppe. For the most part of that century, the Lower Danube area had been sheltered by the buffer zone created by the Bulgarian state, which meant that the only Byzantine land potentially under threat of nomad invasions was the theme of Cherson. Indeed, the specific location of its capital – in the south-western tip of Crimea, but not separated by the mountains – made it an easy target for Pecheneg raids.⁵ However, the location also made it easier for the city to communicate with the steppe dwellers, the fact which Chersonites used for trade and intelligence gathering. There is much more evidence of such activities in available sources than of the alleged attacks by the nomads.⁶ It is also worth noting, that one of the probable reasons Cherson lost its significance was the invasion (988-989) of the Rus' ruler Vladimir, and not the attacks by the Pechenegs from the Black Sea steppes.⁷

Isolation and collaboration with the nomads, which were part of the experience of the imperial periphery, facilitated the emergence of specific political ideas in Constantinople, according to which the belligerent inhabitants of the Black Sea steppes were to stabilize the political situation in the northern parts of the European continent. According to the Byzantine version of the “containment” policy devised by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959), the Pechenegs were to deter: the Rus, the Hungarians and the Danubian Bulgars.⁸ This concept may have brought forward in time the events of the years 934-943, when raids by the Rus' and the Hungarians, with Bulgars staying completely neutral, finally reached the gates of Constantinople.⁹ Byzantine diplomacy was then forced to look for an effective tool to keep in check the “northerners” who were becoming too aggressive – a tool that would replace the Bulgarian buffer zone, which was proving less and less reliable or, in fact, loyal to Byzantium.¹⁰ Therefore, in the 10th century, the perils faced by the Empire did not originate in the area of the Great Steppe. On the contrary, part of the Constantinople's elites perceived the Pechenegs – its inhabitants, as at least a potential, valuable partner in pursuing Byzantine interests to the north of the Black Sea and in the Lower Danube area.

From the last third of the 10th century, however, the arrangement providing safe isolation was gradually coming to an end. According to Rus' chronicles, in 965 the prince Sviatoslav Igorevitch put an end to the Khazar Khagnate¹¹. The sudden demise of their polity meant the destruction of a vast political system (*Pax Chazarica*), which had so far prevented nomadic migrations within the western expanses of the Great Steppe. The new ethnic shifts posed a direct threat to Byzantium, which at the beginning of the 11th century once again had its border on the Lower Danube.¹² Pushed by their long-term enemies the Uzes, the Pechenegs became a serious problem for the Empire. In 1027, they invaded the Balkans for the first time, initiating a long series of subsequent raids.¹³ The period of *splendid isolation* passed, and the time of new, difficult cohabitation with the culturally distinct steppe people was just beginning.

⁵ DAI, I 25-28, p. 48. Cf. SHEPARD 2009: 429.

⁶ DAI, VI 4-6, p. 52; VII-VIII, p. 54, 56; LIII 531-532, p. 286. Cf. PAROŃ 2015: 213-216.

⁷ TALIS 1958: 114 (note 54); IAKOBSON 1959: 65-66, 283; POPPE 1976: 239; BARTOLI, KAZANSKI 2002: 663. The invasion by Vladimir as the reason for Cherson's demise was challenged by: ROMANCHUK 1989: 182-188. She put forward an idea that the destruction and subsequent decline of the city were caused by an earthquake.

⁸ DAI, II-V, p. 48-52. Cf. SHEPARD 1999: 264-283.

⁹ PAROŃ 2015: 321-326.

¹⁰ Here, we do not refer or make a contribution to the debate on whether during Tsar Peter's rule the Bulgars did not wish to, or could not – due to a growing unrest in their own country – effectively stop the raids against Byzantium. The situation must have irritated authorities in Constantinople, and that irritation reached its climax during the rule of Nikephoros Phokas (963-969). According to John Skylitzes, the Emperor reproached Tsar Peter for inadequate response to the Hungarian raids. *Io.Scyl.*, p. 276-277. John Zonaras quoted the angry answer by Tsar Peter: *Io.Zon.*, p. 512-513. On the reasons for Bulgar inaction see: ZLATARSKI 1927: 541-544; DIMITROV 1998: 72-77; LESZKA, MARINOW 2015: 167-171; LESZKA, MARINOW 2018: 119-129, 132-135; LESZKA, MARINOW 2018A: 139-148.

¹¹ PVL 1: AM 6473 (965), p. 47.

¹² STEPHENSON 1999A: 88-89; STEPHENSON 2000: 62-79.

¹³ *Io.Scyl.*, p. 373.

THE TRAUMA OF THE 11TH CENTURY

During the excursions of the 1030s (1032, 1034-1036), the Pechenegs took apart the defense system of the Lower Danube area and caused heavy losses to the frontier Byzantine troops.¹⁴ 1036 was to be an especially difficult year for the people of the imperial Balkan peripheries. The nomads raided Dobrudja three times, killing many of its inhabitants and defeating Byzantine troops that tried to stop them, taking five of their commanders as captives.¹⁵ Setting aside the humiliating ease with which the Pechenegs were able to defeat the imperial forces, it should be noted that the nomads not only looted the frontier zone, but in 1034-35 they managed to go as far as the southern parts of Stara Planina and reach the themes of Thessalonica and Thrace.¹⁶ During the raids of the 1030s, the Pechenegs gathered not only spoils, but also knowledge of the natural environment of the theme of Paristrion. That was when the steppe dwellers realized that the north-eastern part of the theme resembled the Black Sea steppes they knew so well, which made it an excellent *refugium* in case they had to leave their homeland. With constant pressure from the Uzes, such a situation only seemed to be a matter of time.

The above circumstances brought about a serious challenge for the political elite of Constantinople. While the intrusion of any barbaric ethnic group into the territory of the Empire would mean great trouble, Pecheneg invasion would be a disaster. Their sheer numbers posed a serious risk but let us leave that aside for the moment. More importantly, as a people that followed radically different cultural patterns, with a vaguely defined political centre, the steppe nomads were a very troublesome political partner and a community whose cultural assimilation proved to be difficult.

The internal conflicts, which in the 11th century weakened the unity of the Pechenegs, were not equivocally positive from the Byzantine point of view. On the one hand, it was difficult to overlook the fact that they served as catalyst for the nomads' decision to venture into the Byzantine Balkans. On the other hand, there seem to have been tangible benefits for Constantinople stemming from the secession of the part of the Pechenegs which crossed the Danube first and which accepted the Empire's authority. The abovementioned tensions were brought by the violent conflict between Tyrach as the leader of the whole ethnic group, and Kegenes, an ambitious leader born to a less noble family. We know the details of their rivalry through the scriptures of John Skylitzes, who emphasized the military talents of the pretender. Kegenes was to win over Uzes several times, which, paradoxically, made him into a threat in the eyes of the idle and cowardly Tyrach. The rivalry led to a military conflict, during which the majority of the Pechenegs (11 out of 13 tribes) sided with Tyrach, which probably decided the outcome. Following his defeat, Kegenes and his supporters managed to escape and find shelter in Byzantium, where he was baptized, granted the title of a patrician, three strongholds and a substantial area of land in Danube area.¹⁷

The solutions adopted by the administration of Constantine IX Monomachos vis-à-vis the renegade Pechenegs deserve praise. The Danube border, devastated by the 1030s raids, thus gained defenders who – as arrivals from the steppes themselves – could be much more effective in fending off their fellow steppe dwellers than the frontier troops of the Empire. It is difficult to establish how many people served under Kegenes. According to John Skylitzes, their numbers reached twenty thousand, which is only plausible if we assume that this included men that could wield arms, as well as their families. Therefore, Kegenes must have had not more than 4-5 thousand warriors. This was still a significant force, which could greatly improve the effectiveness of imperial troops in fighting against the nomadic invaders, if only the two armies could collaborate.

Kegenes, however, was a problem. His history can be understood as an example of a failed political and cultural identity transformation that ended up in a grim drama.¹⁸ Eventually, around 1051, Kegen was murdered,

¹⁴ Archeologists tend to assume that the raids caused great damage, and if their theories are true, in 1032-1036 the northern Balkans were struck by a real disaster. Out of 121 settlements that have been discovered in the district of Dobrich only 11 survived the incursions from the steppes. In the district of Silistra (medieval Dristra), out of 72 settlements and 8 fortified settlements there were only 3 left (*sic*). As a result, the Lower Danube was turned into a *vacuum*, where settlements remained scarce until 16th century. ATANASOV 1999: 111-122; BORISOV 2007: 74-75; ATANASOV, IOTOV, MIHAJLOV 2011: 220-239; MADGEARU 2013: 117-118.

¹⁵ Io.Scyl., p. 399 (v. 7-13).

¹⁶ Io.Scyl., p. 397 (v. 43-44), 399 (v. 3-5); Io.Zon., p. 589.

¹⁷ Io.Scyl., p. 455-457; Io.Zon., p. 641-642. Cf. PAROŃ 2015: 371-373.

¹⁸ I followed this interpretation in my previous work, and even though it cannot be excluded, I now think that it cannot fully explain Kegenes' motives. Cf. PAROŃ 2009: 47-48; PAROŃ 2009A: 472-473. For another, extended interpretation, see: PAROŃ 2015: 373-375.

literally slashed to death, by his compatriots. Before that happened, however, he used the resources that he had gained by serving the Empire to recommence his rivalry with Tyrach, probably striving for power over the whole ethnic group. The “renegade” started raiding his compatriots to the north of the Lower Danube.¹⁹ Those raids and kidnappings prompted Tyrach’s decision, at the moment when Uzes were also attacking, to enter the lands of the Empire. A major Pecheneg force crossed the Lower Danube in winter 1046/1047.

In the beginning, this migration was not causing the Empire much trouble. Before he ventured into the imperial lands, Tyrach attempted to solve the crisis that had been stirred by Kegenes, by using diplomacy. He sent messengers to Constantinople, claiming he had an alliance with Byzantium and demanded that Constantine IX should control the aggressive “renegade”. He threatened to start a war in case his demands were not met.²⁰ Byzantine administration firmly rejected Tyrach’s claims and started preparations for the incoming attack. The imperial frontier forces, reinforced by Kegenes’ warriors, readied themselves. The Pechenegs managed to cross the Danube, but soon were easily defeated and left at the mercy of their Byzantine opponents. The reason for such surprising weakness of the mighty nomads was raging dysentery, which made them unable to fight.²¹ Constantine IX and his administration seemed to have the situation under control. In reality, they were facing a very difficult task of deciding what to do with the defeated, but very numerous Pechenegs that stayed in Byzantium.

Here, we touch upon the problem, already mentioned above, of the size of the migration that took place in the winter of 1046/47. The only number provided by the sources is the information given by John Skylitzes, according to which Tyrach entered the imperial lands with 800 thousand (*sic*) steppe dwellers. This was clearly implausible, even though we may assume that the migration included the core part of their ethnic group.²² Contemporary attempts to correct numbers provided by Skylitzes are intuitive and arbitrary. Olivier Schmitt seems to be too reductionist assuming that the number of nomadic migrants did not exceed twenty thousand.²³ On the other hand, the approach of Omeljan Pritsak is overly naïve and uncritical, as the distinguished scholar believed that Skylitzes’ numbers were plausible.²⁴ Rather, the total number of refugees, including both warriors and their families, could reach c. 100 thousand. If we assume that it was true that Kegen’s people, i.e. two Pechenegs tribes, consisted of 20 thousand people, then Tyrach’s group, i.e. eleven tribes, should be at least 5 times bigger.²⁵ Even if we assume they were eighty thousand, following John Wortley,²⁶ who included such a correction in his translation of the text by Skylitzes, we still need to admit that in the mid-11th century, the Byzantine Balkans hosted an enormous amount of newcomers coming from the culture that was decidedly distinct from that of their new environment.²⁷ This constituted a serious challenge for the Empire and its assimilatory and integratory capacities.

¹⁹ Io.Scyl., p. 457 (v. 15-20); Io.Zon., p. 642 (v. 3-5).

²⁰ Io.Scyl., p. 457 (v. 20-27); Io.Zon., p. 642 (v. 5-8).

²¹ Io.Scyl., p. 457-459; Io.Zon., p. 642-643.

²² Many scholars believe that the Pechenegs migrated in several waves until mid-12th c. The last substantial group would have reached the Byzantine Balkans in 1122. Cf. MEŠKO 2013: 179-205; KOZLOV 2011: 7-22; KOZLOV 2014: 83-99. Undoubtedly, the Pechenegs must have suffered some, probably substantial demographic losses. Some may have decided to stay in the Black Sea steppes or to migrate somewhere else than the Balkans (Rus’, Hungary, perhaps Poland). However, such choices entailed loss of political independence. It is doubtful, then, that any powerful and independent Pechenegs groups remained in the Black Sea steppes following Tyrach’s migration. Cf. SPINEI 2003: 150-151; PAROŃ 2015: 379-380, 410-412, 418-423, 426-429.

²³ SCHMITT 2006: 479 (note 53).

²⁴ PRITSAK 1975: 227.

²⁵ DIACONU 1970: 62 (about 100,000); FERLUGA 1979: 54 (more than 100,000); PAROŃ 2015: 376-377; DUDEK 2007A: 113 (in total, the number of Pechenegs who crossed into the Balkans in the 1040s reached 50-80 thousand); DUDEK 2007: 120 (80-100 thousand including families).

²⁶ WORTLEY 2010: 429.

²⁷ Whether the Pechenegs led a nomadic lifestyle, especially during their stay in the Balkans, has recently been challenged, especially due to the works of Florin Curta. Cf. CURTA 2013: 143-202; CURTA 2019: 165-169. The debate on this important issue is hampered by the scarcity of archeological data. Apart from the cemetery in *Odurci* (north-east Bulgaria), whose ethnic origins are uncertain, scholars only have data from individual findings (mostly openwork pendants fashioned following the steppe traditions) of unclear chronological and cultural context. Very rarely, archeologists discovered burials including horses, typical of the steppes, to the south of the Danube. Cf. FIEDLER 2013: 249-285. The conclusions drawn by the American scholar from these data raise some doubts. We can agree that the Pechenegs, just like other ethnic groups of the steppe who reached the Balkans, underwent a significant cultural change, forced mainly by ecological factors. Curta is also right when he points out to the possibility of a reciprocal cultural influence between the new arrivals from the steppes and other populations inhabiting Paristrion area. Relationships with local inhabitants were, by no means, only

The solution adopted towards the defeated Pechenegs carried the hidden seed of subsequent trouble. The idea strongly supported by Kegenes, of the “final solution” of the Pecheneg issue, was rejected as “barbaric and not up to the standards of the Roman civilization”. Kegenes postulated, and even insisted, that the outstanding steppe-dwellers’ forces should simply be murdered.²⁸ It is unclear whether the suggestion concerned only the Pechenegs’ elites, all adult men, or the entire group. Kegenes’ motivation is understandable – spurred by revenge, but perhaps also the attempt to take over the leadership of the group. The last goal would prompt him to eliminate the elites and perhaps some of the warriors, but certainly not exterminate all the Pechenegs. Kegenes’ plan had never been implemented. Instead of a brutal pragmatic thinking characteristic of the steppe dwelling people, which would recommend killing off the enemy, the Byzantine elites preferred humanitarian and merciful solutions, aimed – as we can imagine – at turning the wild barbarians into loyal and useful subjects of the Empire. The Pecheneg leaders, including Tyrach, were brought to Constantinople, where they were baptized, showered with gifts and granted the status of patricians. As there were many of them – John Skylitzes mentioned 140 such leaders – we may assume that the Byzantine administration wished to separate the Pecheneg elites from their people. The nomadic leaders, as should be inferred from their *en masse* conversion to Christianity, and the titles they were granted, were supposed to become part of the imperial elites, leading to the relaxation of the clan and tribal ties that bound them to the ordinary members of their ethnic group. The latter were settled in the region of Nish and Serdica, as well as the area which the sources refer to as “Eutzoplon”,²⁹ usually identified as the plain of Ovče Pole, to the east of the Vardar, between the lower Pcinja and Bregalnica rivers. The Pechenegs were to farm the land and, if such a need should arise, to provide warrior troops for Byzantium. It is difficult to establish what convinced Constantine IX and his advisors to settle the nomads in the high plains and the mountainous part of the Balkans, which the new settlers certainly could not perceive as the proverbial promised land.³⁰ The solution thus carried the seeds of the crisis that finally exploded in 1048.

In spring 1047, the Byzantine ruling class assumed that the „Pecheneg issue” was finally resolved. The elites of the Empire seemed to believe that the concessions made to the refugees from the steppe paved the way for their transformation into loyal, peaceful imperial subjects. It is, indeed, hard to believe that part of the well-educated Byzantines, who usually perceived the nomads as the barbaric “Scythians”, not far removed from the steppe fauna, suddenly thought it possible to effect a profound change of their character. There are, however, some indications that part of the imperial elites were really convinced this was the case. In spring 1047, John Mauropous, the metropolitan of Euchaita in Asia Minor, wrote a speech, in which he commented on the current events, including the Pecheneg migration.³¹ He presented the new arrivals from the steppes following the standards adopted by Byzantine authors when characterizing the “Scythians” – as a wild horde, unaccustomed neither to the law nor to religion, solely capable of wrongdoing, murder and looting. They even “stole” their passage into the Empire by crossing the Danube on ice, disregarding the Romans’ interdiction. Through Divine Providence, however, this anomic collective was defeated and forced into servitude. The baptism made them into a “holy people” (ἅγιος ἄγιον)

based on violence and dependence. There are, however, no grounds to assume, as Curta does that *in the 1050s and 1060s the cultural differences between the local population in Paradounavon [...] and the Pechenegs rapidly disappeared*. It might be safer to assume that, based on the available archeological data, we cannot possibly conclude to what degree the Pechenegs underwent acculturation. For sure, their acculturation was not complete. Written sources, especially the excerpts to which the scholar referred, do not corroborate the claim that they practiced farming as their main source of subsistence (see footnote 36). I assume, therefore, that even though the new existential conditions forced a change in the Pecheneg culture, the whole process must have been slow, as confirmed by comparative data. The newcomers from the steppe usually tried to continue their former lifestyle and customs, which may also explain their resistance to Byzantine influences. Cf. PAROŃ 2009A: 443-474.

²⁸ Io.Scyl., p. 459 (v. 67-70).

²⁹ Io.Scyl., p. 459 (v. 70-85); Io.Zon., p. 643.

³⁰ Oliver Schmitt, mentioned above, tried to rationalize the motives of the imperial administration (SCHMITT 2006: 480). He suggested that by settling former steppe dwellers in the mountains and high plains, the Byzantines believed that shifting from horizontal nomadism (moving between the steppe and the forest steppe) to vertical nomadism (transhumance – moving between highlands and lowlands) would make it easier for the nomads to adapt to the new life conditions. This kind of thinking, though, might be too sophisticated. The location where the nomads were to settle was probably dictated by the wish to farm areas where settlements were scarce.

³¹ Io.Maur., 182.195¹-198², p. 133-146. Cf. MALAMUT 1995: 121-123.

and „new people of the God” (λαός θεοῦρνέος).³² The metropolitan of Euchaita also added that, just like a river delivering its waves onto the sea, the Pechenegs were delivered onto the fold of the Roman nation.

This edifying image of taming and assimilation of a dangerous enemy, despite its obvious ideological and rhetorical motives, cannot be completely disavowed.³³ Even if we accuse Mauropous of unreasonable official optimism, his statement is a testimony of a representative of the Byzantine court intellectual elite. It is irrelevant whether Archbishop of Euchaita’s speech was written just for the sake of writing or whether it was publicly delivered or otherwise made widely known, also because we have another testimony that reveals the way the elite of the empire perceived the “Pecheneg issue”. We find it in John Skylitzes’ account of the unsuccessful expedition of the four Pecheneg leaders: Sultzun, Selte, Karaman and Kataleim, sent along Pecheneg cavalry corps to Asia Minor to reinforce the Byzantine forces during the expected invasion of the Seljuk Sultan (1048). It seems significant that the Pechenegs set off to the east under their own command, and the only Byzantine who accompanied them was the patrician Constantine Hardobalanos, acting as a guide.³⁴ The migrants from the steppe must have seemed trustworthy to Constantine Monomachos, which confirms that the court in Constantinople believed the solutions adopted towards the Pechenegs in spring 1047 were fully satisfying and effective.

However, the hopes of the monarch and his acolytes received a severe blow. The Pechenegs’ forces reached Damartys in Bithynia, where the nomads decided to stop the march eastwards, come back to Europe, reunite with most of their compatriots and start a rebellion against the Empire.³⁵ This plan was fully implemented, as once the news of Kataleim and his companions starting the fight reached the Balkans, the Pechenegs settled there decided to join in, armed with agricultural tools, abandoning their allocated lands.³⁶ The rebels finally stopped in the area called the “Hundred Hills”,³⁷ probably located at the borderland of the present-day Dobrudja and the north-eastern Bulgaria.³⁸ The natural environment of the area closely resembled the steppes, the natural habitat of the nomads.

The rebellion of the Pecheneg leaders triggered a series of fatal events, which practically destroyed the hopes of the Byzantine elite to win the political loyalty of the nomads and achieve their rapid assimilation. Constantine IX and his administration had to pay a high price for their excessive faith in the integrative potential of their own civilization. It is hard to resist the impression that this faith was, to a significant degree, due to ignorance and lack of understanding of who the Pechenegs really were in terms of their cultural patterns. The ignorance and incompetence of the Byzantine elite were also the source of their failures in the war with the nomads, raging from 1049-1053. Detailed description of its course goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it needs to be stated that Constantine IX’s disastrous policy made him lose all the advantages he had when the war had begun. As a result of his mistakes, the Pechenegs’ unity was restored when the core part of the ethnic group was joined by the now leaderless Kegenes’ group, and following the release from Constantinople of a group of leaders led by Tyrach. It is hard to say what led the Emperor to release them, especially considering the fact that the eminent Pechenegs residing in the capital could at least have been held as hostages. Did Constantine Monomachos believe in their pledge that, upon returning to their people, they would try to persuade them to be more peaceful and loyal to Constantinople? Even if such promises were made, the leaders immediately forgot about them when they rejoined their troops. Tyrach regained power over the entire ethnic group, and soon demonstrated that he was not completely devoid of military skills. The Emperor had to forego the chance to integrate the nomadic elites. Finally, the way of dealing with the unfortunate Kegenes – who along with his Pecheneg group should have been treated as a valuable ally of the Emperor, and was instead arrested on absurd charges – led his followers to abandon the

³² Io.Maur., 182.198², p. 145.

³³ The trustworthiness of Mauropous’s writings as a historical source has been challenged by Anthony Kaldellis (KALDELLIS 2013: 120-126).

³⁴ Io.Scyl., p. 460 (v. 87-97).

³⁵ Io.Scyl., p. 460-461.

³⁶ Io.Scyl., p. 461 (v. 18-42); Io.Zon., p. 644. The fact that the rebel Pecheneg settlers used farming tools as weapons is no evidence that farming was their main and natural source of subsistence. To the contrary, we should rather assume, that they loathed farming and that the first call to rebellion made them shrug off their new duties. They used farming tools as weapons because they had been disarmed, which does not mean, of course, that the nomads never farmed land, but that farming was for them an auxiliary and complementary form of activity. Cf. PAROŃ 2015: 197-202.

³⁷ Io.Scyl., p. 465 (v. 29-34).

³⁸ BROMBERG 1938: 9; DIACONU 1970: 66-69; SPINEI 2003: 135, DUDEK 2007: 118.

imperial service and join the majority of the Pechenegs. Kegenes was later released, probably charged with the task of winning back at least part of the nomad forces and was then brutally murdered by his compatriots.³⁹

The indolence of politicians was matched by that of the military. Between 1049 and 1053, the imperial army suffered a series of disgraceful defeats, some of which may have resulted from disregard for the enemy, while others, especially the shameful defeat of the rector Basil in 1053, seem to indicate a deep crisis in the Byzantine armed forces. The defeats suffered during the fight against the nomads were well remembered by the imperial military elite. Katakalon, the author of the famous *Strategikon*, written in the second half of the 11th century, formulated his instructions and advice referring, among others, to the failure of Constantine IX's military leaders to fight the Pechenegs. He also suggested that foreign peoples should be allowed to settle within the Empire only in case of utmost necessity and if so, treated with great caution. As the Byzantine strategist concluded: "The Pechenegs have entered Rome and I know, as everyone knows, how many pathetic and lamentable things have resulted from this."⁴⁰ The defeats of 1049-1053 also permanently convinced the military elites of the Empire that a victory over the Pechenegs within Paristrion was a very difficult, if not impossible, task. This belief was still vivid during the times of Alexios Komnenos, especially among his senior officers⁴¹.

Towards the end of the reign of Constantine Monomachos, the Empire faced a series of unresolved problems. One of them was the "Pecheneg issue". In 1053, when political and military measures proved futile, the Emperor, at the request of the nomads themselves, agreed to a 30-year-long peace agreement.⁴² We don't know the details of this arrangement. We can guess that it sanctioned the *status quo* won by the Pechenegs, according to which they became residents of the northeastern part of the theme of Paristrion. Indeed, Constantinople had to come to terms with the fact that this area, poorly integrated with the rest of the Empire, and yet important, became inhabited by a practically independent ethnic group.

Under the new conditions, there was little hope for effective introduction of Byzantine cultural patterns, especially at the time when the Empire was falling prey to a spiraling crisis. After a period of disappointed faith and optimism, the imperial elite probably considered attempts to assimilate the steppe dwellers to be hopeless. Michael Attaleiates, who wrote in the second half of the 11th century, considered it to be as futile as an attempt to 'paint the Ethiopian white'.⁴³ This blunt statement essentially reflected Constantinople's helplessness towards the nomadic newcomers - they could not be turned into Romans, either politically or culturally, but neither could they be defeated and chased away or destroyed. All that remained was to patiently endure their oppressive presence and to react only to the most extreme outbursts of aggression. This seemed to be the Byzantine policy - if such an attitude can be called a policy at all - towards the refugees from the steppe for the next two decades following the Monomachos' peace deal.

Already in 1059, the Emperor Isaac Komnenos (1057-1059) had to pacify another armed revolt of the Pechenegs. At the same time, Byzantium was also attacked by the Hungarians. It is difficult to say whether this was a coincidence, or whether the aggressors agreed to act jointly. Eventually, it all boiled down to military display of power. When the Emperor crossed Stara Planina and reached Sofia, the Hungarians sent a mission to ask for peace. The Pechenegs did the same, with the exception of one of their leaders named Selte, who was then easily defeated.⁴⁴ Isaac temporarily managed to pacify the nomads and confirm their formal dependence on the Empire, but five years later (1064), the Pechenegs once again stirred some unrest. After the first military setbacks, the nomads asked for a renewal of the peace treaty. Attaleiates stated bitterly that the enemy was not ultimately defeated, and that the

³⁹ For a detailed analysis of the war of 1049-1053 see: PAROŃ 2015: 384-389.

⁴⁰ Kekaumenos, p. 166.

⁴¹ One of them, Nikephoros Bryennios, on learning that the young Emperor intended to cross Balkan Mountains and attack the "Scythians" was to say that Alexios would then have the opportunity to assess whose horses were faster, which turned out to be a true prediction of the defeat and chaotic withdrawal of their troops following the battle of Dristra (1087). An.Komn., VII 2.5, p. 206.

⁴² Io.Scyl., p. 476 (v. 37-43); Mich.Att., VII 17, p. 74-76.

⁴³ Mich.Att., VII 3, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Mich.Att., XII 13, p. 120-122; Scyl.Cont., p. 106-107; Mich.Psell., VII 70, p. 242; Io.Zon., p. 671.

agreement only temporarily prevented further attacks.⁴⁵ It would be difficult to disagree, as around 1066 the new Pecheneg revolts had to be successfully pacified by Romanos Diogenes, the strategist of the theme of Bulgaria.⁴⁶

These troubles were, however, nothing when compared with the events of the turn of 1064/65, when another wave of nomadic refugees, this time the Uzes, broke into the Byzantine Balkans. The Empire, ruled by Constantine X Doukas (1059-1068), was completely unprepared for their arrival. The Uzes managed to cross the Danube without difficulty, defeat the Byzantine border troops, take captive their commanders – Basil Apocapes and Nikephoros Botaneiates, and spread across the western provinces of the Balkans, mercilessly looting these lands.⁴⁷ The sheer scale of this wave of migration – according to Michael Attaleiates, six hundred thousand Uzes crossed the Danube, though the number sounds implausible – completely paralyzed the Emperor and his court. The monarch, after the first attempts at unsuccessful diplomatic mediation, simply looked on passively at the unrolling disaster.⁴⁸ Fortunately for the Byzantium, the Uzes retreated as quickly as they appeared.⁴⁹ The reasons for this withdrawal are unclear. It is possible that the nomads simply failed to find lands that were suitable for them to settle. It is significant that some of them, despite great spoils, fell victim to disease and hunger.

For us, however, the most important puzzle here is the attitude of the ruler and his advisors, who remained helpless and inert. There is no mention of mobilizing additional military contingents to fight the Uzes, nor attempts to use the Pechenegs, their eternal enemies, to deter them. The Pechenegs and the Bulgarians, moreover, reacted on their own initiative and killed a large part of the invaders.⁵⁰ The paralysis of Constantine X and his court was probably due not only to the size of the Uzes migration, but also to the fact that it reminded them of the disastrous experiences associated with the arrival of the Pechenegs. The significance of these experiences, as we have seen above, proved highly demobilizing for the Byzantine elites of the 11th century, as no constructive lessons had been drawn from those past events, nothing that could be of help in case a new migration wave from the steppes. The ethnic groups coming from there seemed to be unmanageable, akin to a natural disaster, an elemental force whose arrival could not be prevented or controlled, but only survived. The unexpected course of events at the turn of 1064/65 seemed to justify such a “strategy”.

There were reasons to cooperate with “their own” nomads, as indicated by the attitude of the Pechenegs during the Uzes invasion, however, the imperial administration did not benefit from them. Supposedly, their passivity had more far-reaching effects. The people of Paristrion knew that in case of danger they could not really count on Constantinople but should rather turn to the barbarian Pechenegs who were ready to fight the aggressor. This paved the way for the formation of local connections between the former steppe dwellers and the Byzantine population of the theme. Initially, following the Pechenegs arrival, the population of these areas, who constituted an ethnic mix, probably perceived them as a dangerous and aggressive addition, which naturally led them to seek support of the imperial administration, which at least theoretically vouched for the relative order and security. Abdication from this role in the period of the “Uzes crisis” probably undermined the foundations of Byzantine power over the theme, at the same time providing evidence that the Pechenegs were a potential ally in perilous times. A separate question, of course, is whether the newcomers from the steppe were able to take advantage of this state of affairs and advance their own interests. Their multi-headed, segmented political structure made it difficult to develop a far-reaching strategy of action, beyond the instinctive defense of their independence and cultural distinctiveness.

The last observation seems to confirm the fatal events of the 1070s, which proved disastrous for the Empire. The decision, attributed to the eunuch Nikephortizes, to withhold annual subsidies to Lower Danube towns strengthened their emancipatory tendencies, which led to a *de facto* loss of control by Constantinople not only over

⁴⁵ Mich.Att., XIV 5, p. 150. Attaleiates’ account is not clear. However, on the basis of the sequence of events (earlier, the author mentioned that the Seljuk troops took over a fortress) we should assume that the skirmishes between the Pechenegs and the imperial frontier troops took place in the summer of 1064, and therefore preceded the Uzes’ invasion and were not related to it.

⁴⁶ Scyl.Cont., p. 121; Io.Zon., p. 684.

⁴⁷ Mich.Att., XIV 5-7, p. 150-152; Scyl.Cont., p. 113-114; Io.Zon., p. 678. The aggressors were especially brutal in the area of *Illiricum*, destroying everything on their way to Thessalonica, reaching as far as the theme of Hellas.

⁴⁸ Mich.Att., XIV 8, p. 154.

⁴⁹ Mich.Att., XIV 9, p. 154-156.

⁵⁰ Mich.Att., XIV 9, p. 156.

the unruly “Scythians” but also over Paristrion.⁵¹ At that time, the Pechenegs became one of the factors that intensified the chaos, both in the Danube and in the whole Empire. For the sake of spoils, they were ready to make an alliance with anyone. They first supported the rebellion of the cities of the Lower Danube, led quite unexpectedly by the vestarches Nestor (1074-1075).⁵² At the end of 1077, they were among the supporters of Nikephoros Bryennios', a pretender to the imperial throne. However, they turned out to be extremely expensive and disloyal allies.⁵³ Eventually, in the decisive battle of Galabrye (May 1078), they attacked the rearguards of their ally and plundered his camp.⁵⁴ In the summer of the same year, they raided Adrianople alongside the Cumans, but when they learned about the approaching Byzantine troops, the steppe dwellers withdrew.⁵⁵ In 1079, they still managed to plunder the area between Sofia and Nish and ally themselves with the Paulician Lekas against the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates.⁵⁶ However, when the latter made peace with the new ruler, the Pechenegs also decided that they were, once again, Byzantine allies (1080).⁵⁷

The events described here not only indicate a complete lack of loyalty showed by the nomads to Byzantium – they had never been loyal – but also the great threat to the Empire posed by the lack of control over the Pechenegs and the Danube border. This situation, as the dangerous precedent of Cumans' raids in the Balkans demonstrated, meant that the area between the river and the strip of Stara Planina had in fact become a convenient transit zone for invasions coming from the Great Steppe. As the events of the first half of the 1080s show, such expeditions were supported and inspired by the communities living in the theme along the Danube, who remained antagonistic towards the Empire.⁵⁸ The perpetuation of this situation posed a permanent threat to the Balkan provinces of Byzantium, whose security and prosperity – especially after the losses suffered in Asia Minor from the Seljuk forces – were of great importance for the existence of the Empire. Control over Paristrion needed to be restored, and this could only be achieved if the independence of the Pechenegs was brought to an end, which indeed was accomplished by the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118). His success, which was then considered as one of the ruler's greatest achievements, had been quite unexpected. In the summer of 1087, Alexios I attacked the nomads in Paristrion. However, the expedition ended with the defeat of the imperial army near Dristra.⁵⁹ Only after 3 years of desperate struggle, mainly in the Thracian foreground of Constantinople, Alexios Komnenos, supported by the Cumans, managed to finally defeat the Pechenegs on the 29th of April 1091 at Leunion Hill, situated at the mouth of the Eurotas River joining the Aegean Sea.⁶⁰ A crippling defeat and the slaughter of captives done during the night following the battle spelled an end of the Pechenegs as an independent ethnic group. Their destruction made it possible for Byzantium to reinstate its power over the Lower Danube and ended the traumatic experience of the 11th century.

KOMNENOS RULE AND ISOLATION DOCTRINE

Let us put aside the evaluation the Byzantine policy towards nomadic refugees. Despite the critical assessment of the events presented above, it would be better to refrain from proffering judgements until we see their

⁵¹ Mich.Att., XXVI 1, p. 372-374. Cf. STEPHENSON 2000: 98-100.

⁵² Mich.Att., XXVI 2, p. 374-376; XXVI 5-6, p. 378-382; Scyl.Cont., p. 166; Io.Zon., p. 713-714. The attitude adopted by the Pechenegs towards Nestor was highly ambiguous. For a detailed analysis of the role played by the Pechenegs during Nestor's revolt see: PAROŇ 2015: 401-404.

⁵³ Before the decisive battle over the throne, the Pechenegs allegedly surrounded Adrianople, the seat of the Bryennios family, and forced Nikephoros to pay substantial spoils, including 100 pounds of gold. Mich.Att., XXXII 6, p. 476-478.

⁵⁴ Mich.Att., XXXIV 5, p. 528; Nic.Bryenn., IV 6-7, 9-13, p. 269-279; An.Komn., I 5-6, p. 20-27.

⁵⁵ Mich.Att., XXXV 9, p. 348; Scyl.Cont., p. 184 (v. 1-5); Io.Zon., p. 723.

⁵⁶ Mich.Att., XXXV 11, p. 550; Scyl.Cont., p. 184 (v. 13-21); Nic.Bryenn., IV 30 (p. 299).

⁵⁷ Mich.Att., XXXV 12, p. 550-552; Scyl.Cont., p. 185 (v. 21-23).

⁵⁸ Around 1084, an alliance was formed between the rebellious leader of the Paulicians sect Traulos, the Pechenegs and independent leaders who controlled the Danube fortresses. The most powerful of them was Tatous, whose seat was Dristra. An.Komn., VI 4.4 (p. 174). Here we leave out the problem of their ethnic provenance, as it is irrelevant for the present discussion. Cf. SPINEI 2009: 119; PAROŇ 2015: 402-403, 409-410.

⁵⁹ An.Komn., VII 2-3, p. 204-214.

⁶⁰ An.Komn., VIII 4-6, p. 243-250. For more details on the war events of 1087-1091 see: MEŠKO 2012: 123-223; PAROŇ 2015: 412-418.

wider context, using comparative material. First, however, I wish to reflect on how the Byzantine political elite had been influenced by the nomadic migrations of the second half of the 11th century. I believe that the memory of the past events was the source of a specific kind of isolation doctrine adopted in the following century, during the Komnenian rule.

It is clear that the events of the 11th century were perceived as having a negative impact. Over its history, Byzantium had often been invaded by various “infidel and dishonourable tribes of the north”.⁶¹ However, in the collective imagination of the Romans of the 11th and 12th centuries, the Pechenegs were a special kind of enemy. Defeating them, as we noted above for Alexios I, was seen as an extraordinary feat.⁶² The success of the founder of the new dynasty was treated as the common heritage of all the Komnenian rulers, as evidenced by the Pecheneg-defeat festival established in 1123 by John Komnenos following his victory at Beroe.⁶³ The successor of Alexios in fact destroyed a kind of ethnic conglomerate of which the majority were the Cumans,⁶⁴ but the name of the festival referred to the enemy that was previously also defeated by other Komnenian rulers: Isaac and Alexios.

It is possible that such associations were also facilitated by the nature of the 1122-1123 invasions, which was not an ordinary raid but an attempt to establish the group within the territory of the Empire. It is much more important, however, that for Byzantine elites, the Pechenegs represented a fundamental enemy of the “Roman civilization”. To what did the nomads owe this particular distinction? Educated Greek-speaking Romans did by no means nurture high expectations of the northern barbarians, the “Scythians”, as they were called in line with an ancient tradition. In favorable circumstances, the inhabitants of the steppes may have been useful, but their lifestyle and customs made them a classical example of primitive wildlings, closer to the animal world than to humans.⁶⁵ In their descriptions, especially those of the 11th century, we can easily find descriptive motifs that correspond to the standard vision of a nomad in Byzantine literature. However, the Pechenegs differed from the other steppe dwellers in that they left their lair and tried to practise their impure and ungodly customs within the limits of the Empire, thus rejecting the offer to become civilized through baptism and service for the benefit of the Empire. According to Michael Attaleiates, in return for many concessions and special treatment of the defeated nomads, they shed the “blood of the Ausones”.⁶⁶ They could become “the people of God and God's warriors”, but instead they chose evil and wickedness, which they then spread within the Byzantine *politeia*, threatening its existence.

Here we focus on the perspective of the Empire's elites, disregarding the obvious mistakes resulting from lack of understanding of the character of nomadic refugees. Within this perspective, there was no room to actually see and reappraise these mistakes. Such kind of intellectual effort required recognition that the nomadic way of life was not a product of primordial wildness, but a response to the specific existential conditions. The community that practiced it considered nomadism to be the only possible and natural way of life. Any attempt to change it abruptly must have resulted in resistance or rebellion. Such a conclusion may have occurred to Herodotus, but certainly not to his medieval readers, heirs of the era of “confidence and classicism”,⁶⁷ for whom rejection of an offer to become Romans constituted extreme iniquity. The community that consciously and by choice, and not by chance, decided to remain barbaric and “Scythian”, deserved to be rejected and isolated. The mistake, therefore, lied not in the way the Pechenegs were civilized, but in the very attempt to civilize them, along with the permission for the steppe dwellers to settle within the confines of Byzantium. The experience of the 11th century seemed to clearly indicate that they did not fit into the Roman ecumene, for which they were like a dangerous disease ravaging a healthy organism. Emergency measures had to be taken against the Pechenegs, who posed a particular peril during the crisis of the Empire. The night-time epilogue of the battle of Lebunion, however, was in fact symptomatic of the fear and helplessness felt by the Byzantine elite. The murder of captives, including women and children, was a clear violation

⁶¹ Quoted after Constantine Porphyrogenitus: DAI, XIII 106-107, p. 70-71.

⁶² In his *Chronike* Theodore Skoutariotes, writing in the second half of the 13th century, describes Alexios Komnenos as a ruler who defeated many people hateful to the God, especially the Pechenegs. Th.Scut., p. 181.

⁶³ Nic.Chon., p. 16 (v. 11-14).

⁶⁴ PAROŃ 2015: 418-423. Cf. above note 22.

⁶⁵ Even Constantine I Porphyrogenitus had no high hopes as to the character of the steppe dwellers, but he considered them to be a tool that could be a useful part of imperial policy. Cf. PAROŃ 2007: 97-112; PAROŃ 2018: 228-229.

⁶⁶ Mich.Att., VII 3, p. 54.

⁶⁷ Quoted from Robert Browning: BROWNING 1992: 123.

of the standards of the “Roman civilization”. It also proved, in a way, that Kegenes was right. Synesius and Alexios’s other military commanders seemed to believe that “Scythians” deserved to be treated in a “Scythian” way.

The above attempt to outline the way in which the Byzantine elites reappraised the difficult experience of relations with nomads in the 11th century may explain the policy of isolation applied by the Komnenian rulers in the following century. We should note that its implementation was facilitated by the political stability of the Great Steppe. Its vast expanse, from the Volga to the Lower Danube, was dominated by the Cumans, which stopped any significant migrations for over 100 years. Apart from destroying the Pechenegs independence, this was the second factors that made it possible for Byzantium to reinstate its power on the Danube. The Empire’s control over the border river was not strict enough to completely stop the Cuman incursions, and over time the fortifications on the Lower Danube began to fall into oblivion and ruin,⁶⁸ however, raids by the nomads were relatively scarce and usually only involved looting. Since the end of the 11th century until the ascension of the Asen dynasty (1185), i.e. over the next ninety years, sources recorded just six major incursions,⁶⁹ of which only two were something more than looting raids. In 1095, the Byzantine Balkans were invaded by Togortak Khan, who lent his support to the usurper claiming to be Leo, the son of Romanos Diogenes.⁷⁰ In 1122-1123, the Empire was invaded by the ethnic conglomerate consisting of a majority of Cumans, and the remaining groups of the Uzes, the Pechenegs and the Berendei.⁷¹ Representatives of these three groups were refugees from Rus’, expelled by Vladimir Monomakh. This circumstance seems to indicate that their incursion was aimed at finding new land to settle. In the vast majority of cases the invaders were effectively deterred, the only exception being the invasion of 1154, when the Cumans managed to defeat the imperial forces and safely withdraw with the spoils.⁷² In the absence of major ethnic shifts, the Empire was able to successfully defend its border on the Danube, but it is hard to resist the impression that it treated it as the external, furthest removed edge of the Byzantine ecumene. The land between the river and Stara Planina, also known as Zygos by the Byzantines, was treated as a buffer zone, separating Macedonia and Thrace from the dangerous steppes.⁷³ The situation seemed to resemble that of the 10th century, i.e. the time of safe isolation. There was, however, an important difference, which I suggest was the result of traumatic experiences of the 11th century. During the Komnenian rule there seemed to be no attempts at political cooperation with the Cumans, who ruled over the steppes of the Black and Caspian seas, even though some of them served as mercenaries in the Byzantine army.⁷⁴ There were also isolated cases of renegades who abandoned their own people and joined the imperial troops to fight against their countrymen.⁷⁵ The Cumans had trade connections with the peripheral trading posts of Byzantium. They exchanged goods in the Crimean Cherson,⁷⁶ and – probably – in the cities of the Lower Danube. Ruling over vast stretches of the steppes, providing a bridge for long-distance trade between the North and the South, as well as the East and the West, the Cumans were able to act as intermediaries between Byzantine cities and the countries situated on the edge of the steppes. This had been also the role of the Pechenegs in the mid-10th century as we know from the information recorded by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. However, the analogies between the two peoples stop here. Despite the fact that the Cumans occupied at least as important place on the geopolitical map of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the Byzantine elites of the Komnenian rule devised no plans analogous to that explained in *De administrando imperio*, where steppe dwellers were to be used as part of Constantinople’s foreign policy. The Cumans could potentially have become a tool to stop the Arpads, competing with Byzantium for influence in the Balkans in the 12th century. No attempts to use steppe dwellers to halt the expansion of Hungary are

⁶⁸ MADGEARU 2013: 151.

⁶⁹ The incursions were dated: 1095, 1114, 1122-1123, 1148, 1154, 1161.

⁷⁰ An.Komn., X 2-4, p. 287-299.

⁷¹ Io.Cinn., I 3, p. 7-8; Nic.Chon., p. 13-16; IP.Let., AM 6629 (1121), col. 286.

⁷² Nic.Chon., p. 93-94.

⁷³ Cf. STEPHENSON 2000: 104-105.

⁷⁴ Io.Cinn., II 15, p. 77 (1147: „Scythians” in the army of Manuel Komnenos); IV 4, p. 143 (1155-1156: “Scythians” fight in Apulia side by side with the Byzantine troops); V 12, p. 236 (1165: “Scythians” in Byzantine army); VI 6, p. 268-269 (1167: an attempt to involve “Scythian” mercenaries in a plot); Nic.Chon., p. 178 (1176: Manuel Komnenos recruits “Scythians” to fight the Seljuk forces). The use of an archaic ethnic name prompts us to be cautious, but it seems likely that in the 12th c. the name designated the Cumans. Cf. also SPINEI 2003: 262-266.

⁷⁵ Io.Cinn., III 3, p. 94 (1148 – the “Scythian” Giphardos helps the imperial army to chase the retreating Cumans).

⁷⁶ An.Komn., X 2.3, p. 285.

mentioned in the sources, but the reverse arrangements are clear, with Cuman invasions into the Byzantine Balkans appearing to be precisely synchronized with Arpad attacks.⁷⁷ There is an impression that the Komnenian rulers did not recognize the nomads as valuable and predictable political partners. One of the reasons that dictated the policy of isolation from the steppes and lack of cooperation with their inhabitants must have been the painful experiences of the 11th century.

PARISTRION: A BUFFER ZONE OR A MIDDLE GROUND ?

The alternative highlighted by the title of this subsection is, in fact, false. The Danube theme was indeed a frontier buffer zone, but it also provided a middle ground,⁷⁸ i.e. a place of encounter for ethnic groups following radically different cultural patterns.

However, this alternative has been formulated because it reflects the conflict between the Byzantine desire to turn Paristrion into a shield protecting the Byzantine Balkans and the area's natural predisposition, dictated by geographical reasons, to act as a middle ground. In fact, Zygos separated it from the rest of the Balkans as effectively (or perhaps even more effectively) as the Danube separated it from the Great Steppe. Every river can become a "natural boundary" – however, it can also serve the purposes of communication. The Danube is no exception, and crossing it presented no major difficulty, even for nomad "wildings". Migrations of different scale, not only nomadic, were therefore inscribed in the history of Paristrion. If they were intense, as we have seen on the example of Pecheneg and Uzes' incursions, the Byzantine control at the Danube border was practically nonexistent. There was also the possibility of constant contacts between communities on both sides of the river, resulting not only from occasional ethnic shifts. The example of the Vlachs, who were active on both sides of the Danube and had close contacts with both Bulgarians and nomadic Cumans, is a case in point.⁷⁹ Such links were very dangerous for Byzantine rule over Paristrion, which was peripheral from Constantinople's point of view, especially during the period of political breakthroughs, when the Empire's influence, not only military and political, but also economic and cultural, was clearly waning. At that time, the local elite, deprived of Byzantine support, may have begun to apply individual survival strategies, often involving a break with the Empire and acting to its detriment, or even trying to resurrect the traditions of the First Bulgarian State buried in the early 11th century. These scenarios are not purely theoretical. Let us recall the 1070s and 1080s, when the Danube cities selected their leaders, who pursued their own independent policies, maintained contacts with nomadic ethnic groups on both sides of the Danube, and sometimes even brokered alliances against Byzantium.⁸⁰ The most spectacular example of reinstating and successful application of old Bulgarian political traditions was, obviously, the revolt of the brothers Theodore-Peter and John-Asen (1185),⁸¹ who – strikingly – called nomads for help against the Empire.⁸²

Therefore, Byzantium of the 11th and 12th centuries faced a difficult task to control and effectively integrate its remote territory. Detailed description of how this task was carried out by the Constantinople's administration goes beyond the scope of this text. We are only interested in one quite important aspect, namely: the integration of nomadic refugees, who could easily have become a centrifugal force. It is therefore time to assess Byzantine policy towards steppe dwellers. The task faced by the imperial administration was certainly not easy. Integration, not to mention assimilation and acculturation, of a large population having its own elites and a separate, even radically different cultural universe, posed a very serious challenge.

⁷⁷ MADGEARU 2013: 155. The author suggests that the Cuman invasion of 1154 was coordinated with the attack by Geza II on Byzantium.

⁷⁸ This category comes from a study by the American historian Richard White (WHITE 1991), who applied it when analyzing the relations of Native Americans and European arrivals in the Great Lakes region. This area was a meeting place where communities of radically different cultures came together to reach a compromise. It seems that Paristrion might have been a similar middle ground, which persuades me to apply this analytical category. Another proposal: GOLEV 2018: 89-117.

⁷⁹ VÁSÁRY 2005: 19-21; DALL'AGLIO 2013: 304-306.

⁸⁰ Cf. BONAREK 2007: 193-200.

⁸¹ MADGEARU 2017: 35-113.

⁸² SPINEI 2003: 272-280; DALL'AGLIO 2013: 308-310; DALL'AGLIO 2008/2009: 29-54; STOIANOV 2005: 16-20; NIKOLOV 2005: 223-229. PENTEK 2007: 125-133.

To mitigate the over-critical assessment of the way in which the Empire faced it, let us use comparative material. Less than two centuries after the arrival of the Pechenegs in the Balkans, Eastern Europe once again experienced ethnic migration, this time caused by the pressure from the Mongols. This time, it was the Cumans who played the role of refugees coming from the Great Steppe. A large group of them, though certainly not the whole ethnic group, turned to Bela IV (1235-1270), the ruler of Hungary, with a request to shelter them in his kingdom. In return, the leader of the refugees, Khan Köten, together with his people undertook to be baptized. Bela welcomed the envoys sent by the Cumans and, in the spring of 1239, the nomads crossed the border of the Arpad kingdom.⁸³

It is difficult to estimate the number of these refugees, with Roger, the Canon of Nagyvárád (present Oradea), noting that they were *praeter ipsorum familias circa quadraginta millia*.⁸⁴ This phrase is unclear, as we do not know whether it should be understood as 40,000 families, or 40,000 people, i.e. warriors with families. The notion of family is also questionable, because some researchers are inclined to understand it not as biological family, but servants.⁸⁵ Aside from the information of the Canon Roger, András Pálóczi-Horváth proposed to estimate the migration of the Cuman population based on the size of the territory the newcomers occupied in Hungary. The researcher finally determined that the area could host 70-80 thousand people.⁸⁶ His conclusions, however, are based on a number of arbitrary, non-verifiable premises.⁸⁷ We can only assume, using more intuition than calculation, that the Cuman migration wave arriving in 1239 was comparable to the incursion of the Pechenegs in the winter of 1046-1047.

However, the enthusiasm of the ruler and his entourage for gaining new subjects and followers of Christ was not shared by a large part of the elite and ordinary inhabitants of the kingdom. The Cumans soon became the target of general hatred. In particular, their lifestyle and practices aroused resentment. It was claimed, among other things, that while wandering from the border to the interior of the country, the Cumans who travelled with their herds, caused enormous destruction in Hungarian fields, pastures, gardens and vineyards.⁸⁸ Bela tried to reduce the tensions by dispersing the nomads,⁸⁹ however, such solutions failed to improve the relationship between his new and old subjects. In addition, the king was accused of favoring the Cumans at the expense of the Hungarians.⁹⁰ The mistrust towards the newcomers from the steppe reached its peak just before the Mongolian invasion. According to the rumors, the Cumans were not refugees, but in fact a Mongolian secret army, cleverly located all over Hungary to help the aggressors destroy the kingdom.⁹¹ Köten's murder, a result of this public spiral of fear,⁹² prompted other Cumans to rebel out of fear of being exterminated.⁹³ They ravaged the southern part of Hungary (the comitatus of Valkó), avenging the death of their Khan. They then left for Bulgaria.⁹⁴

However, this is not the end of the Cuman history within the Arpad monarchy. In 1246, in an attempt to strengthen their kingdom military power after the Mongolian cataclysm of 1241-1242, Bela IV appealed to the Cumans to come back from Bulgaria.⁹⁵ The unclear political situation that emerged in the Asen country in the middle of the 13th century led the Cumans to return. Their elite were granted high status, as evidenced by the marriage of the Khan's daughter, who after her baptism took the Christian name Elizabeth, to Bela's oldest son, Stefan.⁹⁶ Most of the re-migrating Cumans were settled in the center of the Arpad state, between the Danube and

⁸³ Rogerius, p. 553-554.

⁸⁴ Rogerius, p. 554.

⁸⁵ Cf. BEREND 2001: 105.

⁸⁶ PÁLÓCZI-HORVÁTH 1989: 60-61.

⁸⁷ Cf. BEREND 2001: 105.

⁸⁸ Rogerius, III 18-21, p. 554.

⁸⁹ Rogerius, VIII, p. 559. Individual Cuman leaders along with their entourage were to be settled separately in different provinces of the kingdom.

⁹⁰ Rogerius, III 21-30, p. 554; VII, p. 556.

⁹¹ Rogerius, XIV, p. 560-561.

⁹² Rogerius, XXIV, p. 566-567.

⁹³ Rogerius, XXV 18-26, p. 567.

⁹⁴ Rogerius, XXVI 3-15, p. 568.

⁹⁵ BEREND 2001: 104-105; PÁLÓCZI-HORVÁTH 1989: 52.

⁹⁶ BEREND 2001: 107; PÁLÓCZI-HORVÁTH 1989: 53. The Christian name of the Cuman princess brings to mind Saint Elisabeth of Hungary (canonized in 1235), the daughter of king Andrew II (1205-1235) and Gertrude of Andechs-Meranian.

the Tisza.⁹⁷ This time, the integration of the Cumans was successful, although for a long time the Hungarian sources kept complaining about them still practicing paganism and residual elements of a nomadic lifestyle – until at least the first half of the 14th century.⁹⁸

This additional information makes us aware of the difficult task of integrating large nomadic communities. The troubles of Byzantium are therefore not exceptional. Bela IV, like the Emperor Constantine IX, had to face the reluctance of the steppe dwellers to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and values associated with it. The Hungarian ruler proved to be more pragmatic, by placing the Cumans in the Hungarian Alföld, which resembled the Great Steppe, which probably made it easier for the newcomers to adapt to the new living conditions. The pressure imposing a sedentary lifestyle, however, occurred in both countries, although in Byzantium it took on a more radical form, which quickly leads to a disaster. The *sine qua non* condition for accepting the presence of refugees was also their baptism. The experiences of both rulers led from triumph to bitterness. The Pechenegs and the Cumans easily accepted baptism, which initially changed little in their pagan worldview. In Hungary, however, the conversion of nomads, despite the monarch's frustration, was not interrupted. A major role was played by the Dominican Order, which treated its mission among the Hungarian Cumans as a continuation of the Christianization efforts within the steppes of Cumania.⁹⁹ However, we know nothing about an analogous process in the case of nomadic newcomers to the Byzantine Balkans, as we have no conclusive data about any missionary actions targeting the Pechenegs, although the theme of Paristrion had an archbishopric in Dristra along with its five suffragan dioceses.¹⁰⁰ Insufficient archaeological data provide no conclusive evidence about the progress of Christianization among the steppe dwellers,¹⁰¹ and written sources tend to emphasize their Godless, pagan character.¹⁰² It is thus possible that the Empire, after the first setbacks, abandoned further evangelization of the Pechenegs.

Bela IV was also to experience political disloyalty of the nomads, who in 1264, during the then civil war, sided with his son Stefan V (1270-1272).¹⁰³ However, their political choice was made within the dynasty, as they took the side of the pretender, who shared the Cuman blood. The Pechenegs, on the other hand, had no inhibitions as to choosing political partners, demonstrating a very low degree of loyalty to the Empire, which ultimately decided their fate. Here we discover yet another difference, which seems to explain why the integration of nomadic refugees in Hungary proved successful. The nomads there finally became part of the kingdom's elite, in spite of their cultural differences, which persisted over a long time. The political choice they made in 1264 was, in fact, a testimony of their loyalty to the Arpads. The loyalty of the former nomadic elites also entailed the loyalty of their people.

Despite applying measures similar to those of the Arpad kingdom (Christianization, the incorporation of the Pecheneg leaders into the elite of the Empire, pressure to settle), Byzantium did not manage to effectively integrate refugees arriving from the steppe. The reason for the failure might be the short-term and inconsistent implementation of these measures. The whole venture had the characteristics of an experiment which, when it failed, was altogether abandoned. The Empire, however, had a more difficult task, as the newcomers settled in a remote area, poorly connected to its centre. This does not mean, of course, that we can completely absolve the Empire's elite. The idea that they had a deep and constantly updated knowledge of the Turkish nomads, stemming from centuries of coexistence, should be considered a myth. The testimonies of the 11th century authors indicate that their

⁹⁷ PÁLÓCZI-HORVÁTH 1989: 54, 57. Steppes and lowlands, devastated by the Mongol invasion.

⁹⁸ PÁLÓCZI-HORVÁTH 1989: 110; BEREND 2001: 106-107.

⁹⁹ BEREND 2001: 106-107. In 1261, Bela IV announced that the process of evangelization of the Cumans was completed. Three years later, he asked the Holy See for help, stating not only that the nomads were Christianized superficially, but also that they posed a threat to Christianity in Hungary.

¹⁰⁰ STEPHENSON 2000: 96-97. The mass baptism performed by the monk Euthymios, mentioned by the British researcher, concerned Kegenes' people. There is no more information on the activities of the said monk in later years. The leaders of the Pechenegs, that is, Tyrach and his 140 companions, were also recognized as worthy of baptism. John Skylitzes, who described the events connected with the mass migration of steppe dwellers in the most extensive way, does not mention the conversion of the ordinary Pechenegs. The attempt to fully Christianize them is inferred from the speech by John Mauropous. Cf. PAROŃ 2015: 264-265.

¹⁰¹ The only archeological fact indicating any progress in the Christianization of the Pechenegs, consists in objects found in the cemetery of *Odurci*, but the relationship between the site and the Pechenegs has been challenged. DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2005; DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2007: 643-660. The critique of the findings by the Bulgarian scholar: CURTA 2013: 170-178, 180-181. Cf. also FIEDLER 2013: 270-271.

¹⁰² Particularly Mich.Psell., VII 69, p. 241-242.

¹⁰³ BEREND 2001: 107.

idea of the “Scythians” served the purposes of self-representation of educated Byzantines, for whom the image of the nomad constituted a negative of their own identity. Such descriptions constitute, in fact, a collection of several stereotypes, often underpinned by old Greek texts rather than by the personal experience of contact with the nomads.¹⁰⁴ They might not have been completely at odds with the real qualities of the steppe dwellers, but they did present their distorted image. The Byzantine characterizations of the nomads, let us state it once again, were not about understanding their world, but rather aimed to emphasize its strangeness and wildness. Thus, the Byzantine policy towards the nomads did not emerge out of a deep knowledge of these people, which must have led to serious mistakes. The experiences of 1047-1091 were, as I have tried to demonstrate above, reevaluated in a peculiar way. They seem to have led to the conclusion that there was no possible effective and civilized policy towards the “Scythians”, as they could only be made obedient through violence and as they rejected order. If one did not wish to be cruel like the “Scythians”, one should avoid contact with them: keep them out of the Byzantine ecumene and keep away from making deals with them. However, it was permissible to accept units or small groups of nomads into the service in the imperial army. During the Komnenian rule, the sources often spoke of “Scythes”, i.e. Pechenegs, Uzes and Cumans, who were serving as part of the Byzantine military. Thus, integrating small groups of newcomers from the steppe proved to be a far less daunting task.

The effectiveness of the policy of isolation had limitations. It worked well at the time of political equilibrium within the Great Steppe, when its neighboring countries were not threatened by migration waves that could emerge out of it. The policy also prevented control and did not pose obstacles to cooperation between the local communities of Paristrion and the steppe dwellers. Since the Empire had nothing to offer to the latter, it was easier for them to form alliances with the disaffected inhabitants of the Byzantine theme. It is, indeed, hard to deny that the alliance of the Cumans with the Asen dynasty was one of the main sources of success reaped by the founders of the Second Bulgarian State.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. STEPHENSON 2000A: 245-257; PARON 2018: 226-235.

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