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# The Relations Between the Pechenegs and the Byzantine Empire

Bachelor's thesis in History

Supervisor: Petersen, Leif Inge Ree

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## Introduction

When the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic steppes in the late 800s, the Byzantine Empire already had a long history of contacts and diplomatic relations with nomadic steppe polities. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century the Romans used nomadic steppe polities to create a buffer between themselves and more warlike polities, and this policy continued until the arrival of the Huns.<sup>1</sup> The arrival of the Huns completely changed this order but did by no means signal the end of imperial diplomacy towards the steppe. The Huns themselves became a part of this diplomacy and the Eastern Roman Empire paid huge annual tributes to the Huns to dissuade them from invading Eastern Roman lands.<sup>2</sup> After the collapse of the Hunnic empire, Byzantium continued with frequent diplomacy towards the steppe, playing different polities against each other. Again, the arrival of a new polity, the Avars, did little to change Byzantine diplomacy. They were welcomed by the Byzantines who hoped to use them against their enemies on their northern border. This relationship soon became troubled and ended in a devastating conflict between the two peoples.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Byzantines were allied with the Magyars while they were still on the Pontic steppes, and the Magyars were fighting alongside the Byzantines in their fight against Symeon I of Bulgaria (893-927). The Byzantines allied Khazaria as a counterweight to the Arabs.<sup>4</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive, but it shows the necessity of using diplomacy to manipulate the political conditions on the Pontic steppe. One of the polities living on the Eurasian steppe were the Pechenegs. Like most other steppe polities, they were nomads and towards the very end on the 9<sup>th</sup> century their migrations had brought them into contact with the Byzantine Empire. By 900 the Pontic Steppe were under their control, and it would remain so for almost 150 years.

This thesis will examine the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the Pechenegs. It examines the Steppe Tradition and the Byzantine diplomatic tradition and uses them to demonstrate that the time the Pechenegs spent on the Pontic steppe can be divided into two periods. The first period is characterized by peaceful relations, accompanied by active Byzantine diplomacy to ensure peace and that the Pechenegs were willing to help the Byzantines against other political rivals in the area. At the same time, the Pechenegs were well rewarded for doing tasks for the Byzantines and received annual gifts from them. Thus, the Pechenegs and Byzantines created a relationship that was beneficial for both. The second

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<sup>1</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.58

<sup>2</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp. 47-85

<sup>3</sup> Pohl, 2018, p. 21

<sup>4</sup> Paroń, 2021, p. 80

period is characterized by the deterioration of Byzantine relations with the Pechenegs and in the end open hostility. This was caused by increased external pressure on the Pechenegs forcing the polity further southwestwards towards Byzantine lands. In addition, Byzantine diplomacy no longer favored an alliance with the Pechenegs. Thus, peace between the Pechenegs and Byzantines were no longer possible, as the Pechenegs needed a source of wealth and prestige in order to ensure the cohesion of their polity.

This thesis focuses on the time the Pechenegs spent on the Pontic Steppe. The Pontic Steppe is the steppe and forest steppe region on the northern shores of the Black Sea. It reaches from Wallachia and the Carpathians in the west along the Black Sea to the river Don. This thesis will focus on the period from Pecheneg arrival in this region in the 890s to the final Pecheneg migration into the Byzantine empire in 1047. It will focus on diplomatic relations between the Byzantine Empire and the independent Pecheneg polity. Pecheneg relations to the Byzantine empire and participation in the Byzantine army after their loss of independence will therefore only be covered briefly.

Although there are numerous studies on Byzantine diplomacy and their relationship with their neighbors, their relationship with the Pechenegs have long been a neglected topic, as has the societies of steppe peoples in general. Most previous literature on Eurasian steppe nomads only mention them as a subject of lesser importance, for example a chapter in a book about a greater subject or focuses on a select part of their history. In the influential work by Ostrogorsky *History of the Byzantine State* the Pechenegs are thoroughly neglected, although he does recognize the Pecheneg's role as cornerstone of Byzantine diplomacy in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. He does not elaborate on this role, and in general the Pechenegs are viewed very poorly, especially due to their migration into the Byzantine empire in 1047.<sup>5</sup> This has long been the trend in Byzantine historiography. Recently, Petersen has given Byzantine diplomacy on their northern frontier its due attention, although only for the period 400-800. In *In Search of Equilibrium: Byzantium and the Northern Barbarians* he argues that Byzantine empire maintained active diplomacy in the period, characterized by leveraging their prestige and wealth in order to ensure favorable relations with their northern neighbors.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, an increasing number of studies are being made about the political life and tradition of Eurasian nomadic polities. Among these is *The steppe tradition in International Relations*. In it Neuman and Wigen argue for the existence of a continuous

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<sup>5</sup> Ostrogorsky, 1952

<sup>6</sup> Petersen, 2017

political tradition among all the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe. Similarly increased attention has been given to individual nomadic polities. In 1988 Pohl published his monograph on the Avars, and there have also been made important contributions to the subject of the Pechenegs. In his monograph on the Pechenegs Paroń argues that the Pechenegs had a rather egalitarian political structures, where chiefs ruled their individual tribes, but that they lacked a central ruler above this level. Only in wartime would they choose someone to lead them as king. This would undoubtedly influence their relationship with other peoples and influence how other states viewed them.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Paroń outlines Pecheneg political influence and relations to their neighbors. He argues that before the reign of Constantine VII (945-959) there existed no alliance and that relations between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines were tense. It was only with the ascension of Constantine VII that relations improved. This lasted until the early 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Pechenegs raided Byzantium regularly.<sup>8</sup>

In order to deal with the patchy sources, we will establish a Byzantine *modus operandi* with regards to their relations and diplomacy with steppe polities. This will be based on byzantine ways of conducting relationships with other steppe polities and their northern neighbors in general. It will also take into consideration the political tradition of steppe polities. Lastly, where possible we will use other sources such as *De Administrando Imperio*. We will then examine Byzantine, and other, primary sources in light of this framework in order to understand the relationship between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs. Emphasize will be put on the Byzantine chronicles, as they are often the only narrative sources that tell us of the relevant events. These will be interpreted in the context of our model for Byzantine relations with steppe peoples.

One of the great problems working with steppe peoples is that most of them left no indigenous written sources. This is true for the Pechenegs as well. We must therefore rely on other sources to learn about their relationship with the Byzantine Empire. Most of our sources about these relationships are Byzantine, and most of them come from Byzantine historians. These might sometimes be supplemented with sources from other peoples, for example Russian or Islamic sources.

This poses a series of problems we need to be mindful of. Firstly, these sources are limited in scope. They focus on politics, diplomacy, and warfare, but always from a

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<sup>7</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp. 132-160

<sup>8</sup> Paroń, 2021



Byzantine perspective. Because of this they only talk about other polities when they interact with, or are otherwise important to, the Byzantines. In addition, they are often focused on the emperor or the capital. Thus, day-to-day relations or events limited to the provinces are often ignored. Smaller raids, agreements that doesn't include the emperor or trade relations are therefore seldom covered. This leaves a very patchy source material where the Pechenegs are only mentioned occasionally.

Furthermore, Byzantine authors are often negatively disposed towards the Pechenegs. Few of them understood the Pecheneg culture and they often propagate old, stereotypical motifs from older authors. Similarly, we see that they often use archaic ethnonyms, such as Scythians for nomadic steppe people.<sup>9</sup> Because of this using Byzantine chronicles to understand Pecheneg culture and way of thinking is difficult. Despite these flaws Byzantine chronicles are vital for our understanding of the Pechenegs and their relationship with the Byzantines. They are often our only source for many of the events they cover, and they give valuable insight into the relationship between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines.

Some of the most important sources about the Pechenegs and the Byzantine diplomatic tradition comes not from Byzantine historians, but from emperor Constantine VII. He spent most of his early life as a co-emperor without any real power, and instead devoted himself to learning, observing, and writing about the administration of the empire, its court ceremonies and diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> His work *De Administrando Imperio* is written as a manual in statecraft and is addressed to his son, Romanos II (959-963), whom he hoped would inherit the throne after him. It contains extensive information about the history and culture of the Pechenegs, but most importantly it gives Constantine VII's thoughts on Byzantine diplomacy and attitudes towards their steppe neighbor. He is not without his biases but does show a better understanding of Pecheneg culture than other Byzantine authors. In addition, he refrains from using archaisms and he writes in a matter-of-fact way.<sup>11</sup> He therefore avoids the propagation of older motifs. Thus, *De Administrando Imperio* is invaluable for our understanding of internal Pecheneg structure and culture. Constantine VII also wrote a book on the court ceremonies of the Byzantine empire, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, also addressed to his son Romanos II. Here he, among other things, details the procedure for addressing various states and peoples the Byzantines were in contact with, including the Pechenegs.

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<sup>9</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.3

<sup>10</sup> DAI, pp 7-9

<sup>11</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.4

## The Steppe Tradition and Byzantine diplomacy

For our approach to be useful, we need to establish two things. Firstly, there existed a homogenous political tradition on the Eurasian steppe, which Neuman and Wigen called the Steppe Tradition. This political tradition developed over time from the social and cultural tradition of the Eurasian steppe and emerged as the building block for nomadic steppe polities. It is not an ethnic tradition or a linguistic tradition but is rooted in the way of life of steppe nomads. Thus, it appears wherever steppe nomads appear in our sources, and shaped all steppe polities, regardless of linguistic, ethnic, or religious differences.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that all steppe polities were equal, but they shared some important political principles and ways of thinking or acting.

Because the steppe tradition is so vital for the understanding of steppe polities and their political decision-making, I will briefly present the most important elements of it. It is characterized by transhumant nomadic pastoralism. In other words, the nomads would migrate between summer and winter pastures to ensure the survival of their herd. Politically it was characterized by personal loyalty bonds or oaths between the ruler and his followers. It is therefore patrimonial and reliant on the ruler's charisma. A ruler's charisma was tied to his prestige, military success, and his ability to provide pasture and loot to his followers and was seen as a sign of the ruler having divine grace. Thus, strong rulers could use their personal charisma to tie together strong, multiethnic steppe empires. Another important element was institutionalized gift giving, where the ruler would give gifts to secure the loyalty of his subjects. There was an expectation that these gifts would be reciprocated through loyalty and military service, and if they could not be reciprocated it established a superiority of the giver. Multiple tribal chiefs would compete for influence and power within the polity, vying for the opportunities to get prestige and loot for themselves. Thus, the cohesion of a steppe polity was sustained by regulating the acquisition of prestige in the polity.<sup>13</sup> In this environment gold and prestige goods became vital. It was the proof of your success, a way to show of your achievements. It was also a way to reward your followers. Riches was a way to loyalty and prestige, and loyalty and prestige held the polity together. This gift giving necessitated acquisition of prestige and luxury goods by the ruler, and these would have to come from outside the steppe. This was due to the low differentiation of production caused by the reliance on pastoralism. Rulers were therefore reliant on raiding, trade, or tribute in order to

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<sup>12</sup> Neuman & Wigen, 2018

<sup>13</sup> Pohl, 2018, p 239

acquire the resources necessary for empire-formation and for ensuring the cohesion of the polity. Therefore, acquisition of prestige and luxury and prestige goods was the focus of their foreign policy, while regulating the acquisition of prestige within the polity was the main component of their internal policy.

It is important to remember that not all polities influenced by the steppe tradition were equal, and that policies that were influenced by the steppe tradition could have very different political organization. This becomes clear by comparing the political structure of the Avars and the Magyars. The Avars were led by a single ruler, the Khagan, with despotic power, with other chiefs ruling smaller tribes or clans for him. He did certainly have to consider the opinion of the chiefs, as he was reliant on their loyalty for his power, but in theory he was their superior.<sup>14</sup> The Magyar political organization was slightly different. According to Constantine VII they were eight clans, each with their own chief. The chiefs did not obey a single ruler but had an agreement to fight alongside each other should war break out. Among these chiefs the heir of Arpad's line was considered first chief.<sup>15</sup> Thus the Magyars lacked a single, supreme ruler. Instead, each clan had their own chief, who did not obey the orders of the other chiefs. Despite this they did identify as a single people, and existed as a polity, but no single prince maintained supreme authority in the polity. Thus, the steppe tradition would manifest in different ways in different policies.

We see that the Steppe tradition is important for the Pechenegs as well. They continued to be nomads and relied on nomadic pastoralism throughout their time on the Pontic steppe. They were not self-sufficient and needed to trade, raid, or collect tribute from other polities in order to gain various goods.<sup>16</sup> This included both luxury and prestige goods, but also more mundane goods such as various foodstuffs to diversify their diet. They remained highly militarized, which is evident from their frequent raids on their neighbors. In addition, we see clear signs of some variations of wealth within the polity, although it is hard to say how large, and we see variations in status and prestige.<sup>17</sup> This variation in wealth and prestige is necessary for the system of clientelism that is so important in the Steppe Tradition.

The other important element we need to examine is the diplomatic tradition of the Byzantine Empire. By the time the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic Steppe towards the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Byzantine Empire already had a long tradition of conducting diplomacy

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<sup>14</sup> Pohl, 2018

<sup>15</sup> DAI, ch. 40

<sup>16</sup> Paroń, 2021, Ch. 4

<sup>17</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.145

with the various polities beyond their northern border. In the 500s Heruls and Lombards were used in order to keep the more ambitious Gepids in check. Similarly, in the mid-500s the Utigurs and the Kutrigurs, two different Hunnic polities living on the Pontic steppe, were played against each other in order to keep Byzantine lands secure and to limit the strength of any one group.<sup>18</sup> Later, in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, we see attempts to bring the Avars in as a part of this system. For large periods of time the Byzantines gave the Khagan yearly gifts, and upon their arrival the Avars was given rewards in exchange for promises of military support.<sup>19</sup> At one point, the Byzantines were giving subsidies to almost all of their neighbors.<sup>20</sup> We see similar patterns with the Göktürk Khaganate, who were Byzantine allies against the Persians and used as a counterweight to the Avars after they became hostile to the Byzantines.<sup>21</sup> After the end of the Göktürk Khaganate we hear of Byzantine alliances with multiple polities living on the Pontic steppes. First Great Bulgaria, then the Khazars and later the Magyars.<sup>22</sup> In fact almost every polity that came to dominate the Pontic steppe between the Avars and the Pechenegs did so with Byzantine support.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Byzantine diplomacy was far more than ad-hoc deals. Instead, the Byzantines created a system where the various polities to their north would compete for the riches and glory gladly distributed by the Byzantine Empire.

This system provided multiple advantages for the Byzantines. It created a buffer of friendly states close to Byzantium. In addition, it gave the Byzantine army a large pool of manpower to draw from, and, lastly, it minimized the amount of military resources having to be spent in the north.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that the Byzantines were not seeking equal relationships. The Byzantines were not interested in committing armies in support of their partners on the steppe. Instead, Byzantine diplomacy was centered around making others do as the Byzantines wanted.<sup>25</sup> This would by necessity involve frequent contact. The Byzantines would need the respect of their partners, both for their wealth but also for their prestige, and it was important that nomads understood that acting in service of the emperor would always be a profitable and well rewarded option.

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<sup>18</sup> Petersen, 2017, p.45

<sup>19</sup> Pohl, 2018, pp. 22-57

<sup>20</sup> Pohl, 2018, p.224

<sup>21</sup> Petersen, 2017, pp.53-56

<sup>22</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp. 80-81

<sup>23</sup> Paroń, 2021, p. 76

<sup>24</sup> Petersen, 2017

<sup>25</sup> Petersen, 2017

This was achieved through frequent gifts and conspicuous consumption. Payments of gold, prestige and luxury goods and the use of imperial prestige were essential elements of Byzantine diplomacy. The nature of these payments differed. In general, we see that when threatened by immediate invasion or hostility the Byzantines would rely on payments of gold. On the other hand, we see that, once relations had stabilized the Byzantines increasingly relied on non-monetary objects for their gifts.<sup>26</sup> These objects could be silk, brocades, gold cords or couches or other luxury and prestige goods.<sup>27</sup> These types of gifts rely on cultural and prestige elements. Because of this they also required a different level of respect for Byzantine ways and mentality. For these gifts to be desirable the recipient had to understand the Byzantine mentality requiring closer integration into the Byzantine system. It is also noticeable that few of these prestige and luxury objects would be preserved archaeologically, and we therefore only know of them from written sources.

Prestige elements were also used in other ways. An example of this is the use of gold seals for diplomatic letters.<sup>28</sup> Gold seals were exclusively used by the emperor and carried both authority and prestige. Similarly, we see that the Byzantines granted imperial titles to foreigners as a part of their diplomacy. The Byzantine Empire had a complicated hierarchy of titles. These carried prestige, status and authority and would be given to Byzantine allies or clients. In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century multiple rulers of Old Great Bulgaria were given titles and lead seals attest of Slavic rulers having received Byzantine titles.<sup>29</sup> This was not the case for the Avars and we have no indications that titles were given to Avar leaders.<sup>30</sup> This might indicate that the giving of titles was done as a path to further integration into the Byzantine Empire and was not given out easily. In any case, the giving of Byzantine titles to foreigners had great symbolic value and could indicate Byzantine favor, protection and that you were chosen to rule the polity on behalf of the Byzantines.

We see a large degree of continuity both in the political and social organization of the various steppe polities and in the goals and methods of Byzantine diplomacy in the period. Because of this it is reasonable to expect Byzantine diplomacy with the Pechenegs to be based on the same goals and ideas of their earlier diplomacy. Similarly, since Pecheneg society and political life is built on the same traditions, experiences, and ways of living as

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<sup>26</sup> Petersen, 2017, p.46

<sup>27</sup> Pohl, 2018, p. 22

<sup>28</sup> DAI

<sup>29</sup> Petersen, 2017, pp.55,59, 64

<sup>30</sup> Pohl, 2018, p. 229

other steppe polities, we would expect their foreign relations and diplomacy to take the same patterns as the diplomacy of other steppe polities.

## Arrival of the Pechenegs and their political structure

Now that we have established a framework from which we can better understand our fragmented sources we can turn our attention to the Pechenegs. Little is known about their early history, and what is known will only be covered briefly. We first hear about the Pechenegs in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century in present day Kazakhstan. From there they migrated to the region east of the Volga. Little certain can be said about what path they took, or when they arrived, but it probably happened in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> After briefly living in this region, the Pechenegs were forced to migrate by a neighboring polity called the Uzes, who conquered the Pecheneg lands and continued to live there. The Pechenegs then crossed the Volga and settled on the Pontic steppe between the river Don in the east and the Carpathian Mountains and Danube in the west. It is hard to say anything detailed about the nature of the Pecheneg conquest of the Pontic Steppes. From *De Administrando Imperio* we know that it included at least one, and probably two, conflicts with the Magyars who were already living there. As a result of the Pecheneg conquest, the Magyars were forced to migrate into the Carpathian Basin, where they formed what would become Hungary. In addition, we know that the Pechenegs most likely arrived in the region in the period 893-896. This is established using the final Magyar migration into the Carpathian Basin in 896. In addition, we know that the Samanid ruler defeated a Turkic tribe in 893, forcing it to migrate west. This started a chain reaction where a polity would be forced to migrate westwards, displacing the polities living there. Eventually this chain reaction would reach the Uzes who attacked, and defeated, the Pechenegs, forcing them to migrate.<sup>32</sup> This type of chain reaction was common on the steppe. In fact, we can clearly see it in the way the Pechenegs push the Magyars of the steppe, and we will see it again later, when the Pechenegs themselves are forced of the Pontic steppe by the Uzes.

Before we continue to examine the Pechenegs relationship with the Byzantines we should note some important points about Pecheneg social and political organization as this will have ramifications for their relationship. Although the Pecheneg polity maintained the Steppe tradition there is an important peculiarity with the Pecheneg political organization that needs to be considered. Sources about the political organization of the Pechenegs are quite

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<sup>31</sup> Paroń, 2021, Ch. 3

<sup>32</sup> Paroń, 2021, Ch. 3

limited, and what we have might seem contradictory. In *De Ceremoniis Aulae Byzantinae* Constantine VII writes about the procedure for contacting the different people bordering the Byzantine Empire and about the Pechenegs he writes “to the archons of the Patzinaks...” and “Letters from Constantine and Romanos, the Christ-loving emperors of the Romans, to the archons of the Patzinaks”.<sup>33</sup> Archon is the title the Byzantines would use to refer to foreign rulers and the Patzinaks is the Greek name for the Pechenegs. The important part here is that he refers to archons in plural, implying that there are multiple chiefs of equal status. This is the same manner he addresses the Magyar chiefs, who, as we saw earlier, did not have a single ruler, but instead had one chief for every tribe.<sup>34</sup> He does not refer to every nomadic polity similarly and refers to the archon of Bulgaria and the Khagan of Khazaria in singular form.

Contradicting this we have writings from several different Islamic writers describing the Pechenegs being led by a single king or leader.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, Skylitzes tells us of a power struggle for control of the polity. He tells of Tyrach, the current ruler, and Kegenes, an up-and-coming warrior who got the support of two tribes, fighting against each other.<sup>36</sup> This would imply the existence of a single ruler ruling over the entire polity. It is unlikely that Constantine VII was unaware of the political organization of the Pechenegs. In *De Administrando Imperio* he reveals that he views the Pechenegs as vital in his diplomatic strategy and dedicates the first 8 chapters to the Pechenegs and how to use them against their neighbors, and clearly shows great knowledge of them. Furthermore, the difference between Constantine VII’s and Skylitzes’ accounts can easily be explained by the difference in time between the two writers. Skylitzes was writing about the early 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> This is over 100 years after Constantine VII lived. As we shall see later, during this time the Pechenegs went through a period of crisis, suffering several defeats to both the Rus’ and the Uzes, and it is likely that the political organization of the polity changed as a response to this crisis.

The Islamic sources and Constantine VII’s account are closer together in time, and we need another solution to these contradictions. To solve this contradiction Paron proposes that, initially, the Pechenegs lacked a single ruler that ruled over all the polity in peacetime, but instead had multiple tribes united in an alliance or a confederation, each tribe ruled by their

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<sup>33</sup> CAB, p.691, ch.48

<sup>34</sup> CAB, p.961, ch. 48

<sup>35</sup> Paron, 2021, p. 151-152

<sup>36</sup> Skylitzes, Ch. 21. 16

<sup>37</sup> Skylitzes, p.426, ch.XXI.16

own leader, but that in wartime they would elect a “king” to lead them.<sup>38</sup> He argues that during the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> century, this changed and by the 1040s the Pechenegs was ruled by a single ruler. The exact nature of this change is unknown, but it is possible that the crisis shifted the balance of power sufficiently that one chief managed to subdue the other clans, or that the polity elected a leader in an attempt to strengthen itself against foreign threats.

This solution has multiple advantages. Firstly, it would be consistent with both Constantine VII’s account and the Islamic sources, as our sources only claims that they were led to war by their ruler. In addition, this would also be a logical way of organizing the polity during wartime. Unifying the command would create a stronger more coherent force. Thirdly, this solution would not contradict what we would expect from the Steppe tradition. Although we based the Steppe tradition mostly on steppe empires, with a single ruler having authority over the entire polity, the principles we found can, without further problems, be applied to all political actors in the polity. It will therefore not be a problem to apply them to chiefs of individual tribes. In addition, in polities where no ruler manages to subjugate the other clans and where your surrounding polities are strong and hostile, we would expect clans to work together for their own defense, without abandoning their independence. This would not exclude the possibility that some tribes are dominating others, or that there is one principal tribe, but it means that no tribe managed, or wanted, to get supreme authority over the others. In addition, we already know that organizing the polity in this way is possible, as it is very similar to the way the Magyars were organized. In addition, since Constantine VII refers to the Magyar chiefs and the Pecheneg chiefs in the same manner, it would be reasonable to assume that their political organization is similar, especially considering the influence of the Steppe Tradition on the policies.<sup>39</sup> In conclusion, when the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic steppe they were initially not led by a single ruler but were a confederation of tribes, each tribe led by their own chief. Then, at some point during the late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> century this changed and by the 1040s they had a single ruler with authority over all off the polity.

This would have ramifications for the nature of the relationship between the Pechenegs and the Byzantine empire. Firstly, we see that support from the entire polity could only be achieved through cooperation with all the tribal chiefs in the confederation. If one chief did not want to participate in an alliance or war, he would likely withhold his tribe’s

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<sup>38</sup> Paroń, 2021, p. 152-153

<sup>39</sup> DAI, ch.40



support. This would not necessarily be a large problem as the rest of the polity could still be persuaded to participate, but it made the Pechenegs unreliable, as there were many actors with their own agenda and no central command over them. An alliance with one chief would not necessarily guarantee your safety or your interests. As we have seen earlier, this was hardly a problem for the Byzantines who had long experience playing weaker groups against each other. In fact, it might even be preferable to a polity led by a strong leader with authority over the entire polity. Secondly, this political organization would make long-term planning difficult for the Pechenegs, as the many different chiefs would have different interests and there would be no central authority who could command the polity. Thus, every chief would act in their interest, with no concerted effort from the whole polity. Despite this, we see parts, or all of the polity, cooperating, especially during times of crisis or external threat.

Because of the lack of sources, it is difficult to determine if the Byzantines were involved in influencing this change in the political structure of the Pechenegs. We do know that influencing the political structure of other polities was a part of the Byzantine diplomatic repertoire, as the Byzantines were essential in promoting a political hierarchy in Slavic polities in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Byzantines would almost certainly be capable of influencing this change if they wanted to. By supplying a suitable chief with gold, prestige, and luxury goods the Byzantine could change the balance of power within the polity sufficiently to allow one chief to take control over the entire polity.

Another question is if the Byzantines wanted this change. In the Slavic polities, promoting political hierarchy made the political situation clearer and allowed for easier and more effective use of client management techniques.<sup>41</sup> The problem is that Slavic polities in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries were quite different from the Pechenegs and the Pechenegs already had political stratification within their polity. The Slavic polities lacked permanent leaders and were very amorphous in nature.<sup>42</sup> This is not the case for the Pechenegs, who were divided into clans led by a chief. Thus, the Pechenegs already had permanent leaders and were far less fragmented than the Slavs. Despite this it is likely that some advantage would be gained by supporting a single ruler with authority over the entire polity. He would certainly be indebted to the Byzantines, and he would likely be dependent on them to rule. In addition, it is easier to keep control of one ruler and it would be less actors and interests to consider. In

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<sup>40</sup> Petersen, 2017

<sup>41</sup> Petersen, 2017

<sup>42</sup> Petersen, 2017, p.46

the end the lack of sources makes it impossible to say for sure, but it is possible that Byzantine influence was important in influencing the shift in Pecheneg political organization.

The arrival of the Pechenegs changed the political map of the Pontic steppes dramatically. The Magyars were now forced of the steppes and into the Carpathian Basin. The Khazars, who had dominated the area until the Pechenegs arrived, remained stable and showed a remarkable vitality, yet were contained to the area between the Don and Volga rivers. To the east of them again, on the eastern shores of the Volga lived the Uzes. In the Balkans the Byzantine Empire was locked in conflict with the Bulgars. And in the north Rus' as well as a myriad of Slavic tribes soon had to deal with this new warlike neighbor.<sup>43</sup>

### 896-976: Peaceful relations and active diplomacy

As we have seen, the Pecheneg arrival on the Pontic steppe was not peaceful and it was in direct opposition to Byzantine immediate interests in the area. Despite this, it ensured new opportunities for the Byzantines, who were quick to adapt to the changing situation on the steppe. Thus, this first period of Pecheneg-Byzantine relations is characterized not by war and conflict, but by active diplomacy and peaceful relations.

When the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic Steppe it was in cooperation with the Bulgarians, but also in direct opposition to the Byzantines. Although the Bulgarians had recently been baptized, they continued to be troublesome for the Byzantines. Thus, when conflict erupted between the two, Byzantine diplomats soon negotiated an alliance with the Magyars.<sup>44</sup> Then, the Bulgarian ruler, Symeon I, made an agreement with the Pechenegs, who attacked the Magyars while they were fighting in Bulgaria and defeated them.<sup>45</sup> Skylitzes does not mention the Pechenegs during this war, but he does say that the Bulgarians defeated the Magyars and overran their land.<sup>46</sup> Skylitzes' account fails to give a plausible reason for why the Pechenegs conquer Magyar lands. If Bulgaria defeated the Magyars alone, it would be hard to explain how the Pechenegs ended up ruling the area so soon after. In addition, it is not too surprising that Skylitzes either didn't know or did not see the participation of the Pechenegs as relevant. Neither the diplomatic mission or the following campaign included Byzantines, and it would not necessarily be important for the Byzantines who attacked the Magyars, the important thing was that their ally was defeated, and it forced them to make

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<sup>43</sup> Paroń, 2021, Ch. 5

<sup>44</sup> Skylitzes, ch. 7. 12

<sup>45</sup> DAI, ch. 40

<sup>46</sup> Skylitzes, ch.7. 12

peace. Thus, despite Skylitzes account, Pecheneg involvement in the war is likely. From the sources it is likely that the Pechenegs did not offer any further assistance to the Bulgarians beyond attacking the Magyars. Skylitzes does not mention the Pechenegs during this war and Constantine VII does not elaborate on his story. This would indicate that the Pechenegs did not have any major military encounters with the Byzantines at this point. At the same time there is little reason to believe that there was a long-standing alliance between the Pechenegs and the Bulgarians. Constantine VII tells us that the Bulgarians feared the Pechenegs and tried to maintain peace with them, and that the Pechenegs frequently raided and defeated the Bulgarians.<sup>47</sup> In addition, as we shall soon see, during the late 910s the Pechenegs found themselves allied with the Byzantines against the Bulgarians. Thus, the alliance between the Pechenegs and the Bulgarians should be viewed as an opportunistic agreement between the two parts that was not rooted in kinship or anti-byzantine sentiments, and the Pechenegs main enemies was the Magyars.

It is also clear that the Byzantines viewed the Pecheneg arrival with some hostility. In an anecdote, Constantine VII says that the Byzantines had demanded that the Magyars retake their old homeland from the Pechenegs so that "...you may be near my imperial majesty, and when I wish, I may send and find you speedily". The Magyars, fearing the strength of the Pechenegs, refused to attack them.<sup>48</sup> Paroń dates this incident to the latter part of the reign of Leo VI (886-912). That is before the Byzantine-Pecheneg alliance against the Bulgarians in 917 that we will cover shortly.<sup>49</sup> Here we can clearly see that the Byzantines continues to practice their system of diplomacy on their northern frontier. They behave as if the Magyars are their subordinates and command them to do their will. In addition, we can see that there was initial hostility from the Byzantine side, but it is important to remember that at this point the Pechenegs had just damaged the Byzantine order on the Pontic steppe by expelling one of Byzantium's allies. In light of earlier byzantine systems of diplomacy it is therefore likely that, after the Magyars refused to attack the Pechenegs, the Byzantines would quickly adapt to the situation and adopt a less hostile attitude to the Pechenegs. Based on events in the years following the death of Leo VI, this was the case.

Although Leo VI signed a peace with the Bulgarians, his successor, Alexander (912-913), was not willing to pay the tribute promised by Leo VI and war soon erupted again. Alexander soon died and the regency council for Constantine VII, still just a child, was left to

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<sup>47</sup> DAI, ch. 5

<sup>48</sup> DAI, ch.8

<sup>49</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp.257-258

fight the war. The Byzantines proceeded to ally the Pechenegs, who, after defeating the Magyars, now bordered the Bulgarians. The alliance was short lived, and in the end it failed. Paroń dates this alliance to 917.<sup>50</sup> The commander of the fleet, the later emperor Romanos Lekapenos, is blamed for the failure of the alliance, although it is unclear if he is at fault. In any case, neither Skylitzes nor Logothete blames the Pechenegs, suggesting that there did not exist any hostility between the two either during or after the alliance.<sup>51</sup>

The series of events leading to the alliance is particularly interesting. According to letters from Nicholas I, the patriarch of Constantinople, the Byzantines were aware that the Bulgarians had sent diplomatic missions to the Pechenegs trying to ally them. They knew this as the Pechenegs had informed John Bogas, the *Strategos*, or military governor, of the Cherson *thema*(province), of these diplomatic missions. As a response to these diplomatic missions the Byzantines sent John Bogas to the Pechenegs in order to establish an alliance between them.<sup>52</sup> Both Symeon the Logothete and Skylitzes tells us of the same alliance and adds some information on Bogas' diplomatic mission. They tell us that Bogas went to the Pechenegs with many gifts, received hostages and made an agreement with them that they would attack the Bulgarians.<sup>53</sup>

This gives us some valuable information about the relationship between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines at this time. Firstly, the embassy of Bogas seems to have a sense of procedure to it. The Byzantines knew how to do diplomacy with the Pecheneg. They bring gifts, obviously the correct gifts as the mission was successful, and take hostages as insurance. This is probably partly due to their earlier experience dealing with steppe polities, but it does also indicate earlier contacts between the two polities. Information found in the letter from Nicholas I would lead us to believe that the Byzantines maintained some sort of diplomatic arrangement with the Pechenegs leading up to this alliance. While the Byzantine diplomatic mission was a response to a series of earlier diplomatic missions by Bulgaria, this does not mean that the Byzantines and Pechenegs did not have an earlier arrangement. In addition, the fact that the Pechenegs informed the Byzantines of the Bulgarian diplomats would indicate that the Pechenegs had at least somewhat friendly relations with the Byzantines as you would not send diplomats to your enemy warning him of your possible new alliance. It is possible that the Pechenegs were playing the two sides against each other

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<sup>50</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp.257-261

<sup>51</sup> Skylitzes, ch.9.6, Symeon Logothete, ch.135.14

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas I, Ep. 9

<sup>53</sup> Skylitzes, ch.9.5, Symeon Logothete, ch.135.14

seeing who would give the best deal, but this would be advantageous for the wealthy Byzantines. In addition, this would mean that the Pechenegs were aware of the possible advantages from doing diplomacy with the Byzantines indicating earlier contacts between the two. It is possible that these contacts were early stages of attempts to transform the Pecheneg polity into long-term diplomatic allies. In any case, the Byzantine relations with the Pechenegs had successfully guarded them from a Bulgar-Pecheneg alliance. All of this leads us to believe that the Byzantines had already established contacts with the Pechenegs before their alliance against Bulgaria. Furthermore, we see indications that the Byzantines have already started a process of influencing the Pechenegs into becoming a long-term Byzantine ally.

In addition, it is quite clear that there existed some sort of alliance between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines during the sole reign of Constantine VII. This we gather from Constantine VII's support of the idea in *De Administrando Imperio*. He uses the first 6 chapters explaining the benefits of an alliance with the Pechenegs.<sup>54</sup> In addition he states that "I conceive, then, that it is always greatly to the advantage of the emperor of the Romans[Byzantine Emperor] to be minded to keep peace with the nation of the Pechenegs...".<sup>55</sup> In addition, we hear of no hostile relations between the Pechenegs and Byzantines in this period, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that there existed some sort of alliance between the two.

Good relations continued to exist at least through the reign of John I Tzimiskes (969-976). We gather this from the events surrounding the 968-971 Rus' invasions of Bulgaria. The chain of events started in 965 with renewal of conflict between Byzantium and Bulgaria. The Byzantine emperor was busy with a campaign in the east, and thus invited Rus' to invade Bulgaria. In 967 Rus' invaded and conquered Bulgaria, but instead of handing the land over to the Byzantines, as the emperor clearly had planned, the Rus' decided to use Bulgaria as a base for further incursions into Byzantium. The Rus' invaded Byzantium but this first invasion had to be abandoned in order to defend Kyiv from invading Pechenegs.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that the Pecheneg attack on Kyiv was instigated by Byzantine diplomacy, but we cannot be certain, as no sources tells us of external political influence. In any case, the Rus' defeated the Pechenegs and returned in a second expedition, bringing the Pechenegs as their allies. By 971 it was clear that the campaign was a failure for Rus', who were forced to seek

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<sup>54</sup> DAI, pp.48-55, ch.1-6

<sup>55</sup> DAI, p.49, ch.1

<sup>56</sup> Primary Chronicle, pp. 85-86, AM 6476(968)

peace. The Rus' vowed not to attack Byzantine territory in the future and returned home. On their way they were ambushed by Pechenegs while crossing the Dnieper rapids and Sviatoslav I (945-972), the ruler of Rus' was killed. In addition, a new alliance was soon concluded between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs.<sup>57</sup> Based on the number of participating Pechenegs it is likely that the Pecheneg contingent served as hostages to prevent further hostile actions towards the Rus'.<sup>58</sup> This would also explain why the Pechenegs turned on their former ally on his way home, as it is likely that the contingent of Pechenegs had suffered severely in the fighting. This would probably have enraged the Pechenegs and left Sviatoslav I without hostages. Lastly, it would explain both Byzantine and Pecheneg eagerness to renew their alliance after the defeat of Sviatoslav I. Thus, the Pecheneg participation in the invasion was not voluntary, and by 971 the Byzantines had again established an alliance with the Pechenegs.

Despite these good relations it is known from Islamic sources that the Pechenegs participated in the attack on the Byzantine fortress of Walandar. It is likely that Walandar is the fortress of Debeltos, on the border between Byzantium and Bulgaria. Here the Pechenegs, in alliance with the Magyars, attacked and defeated the Byzantines. The attack is traditionally dated to 934 and was certainly during the reign of Romanos I (920-944).<sup>59</sup> It is hard to interpret these events with any certainty due to the lack of further information. The attack was probably a part of a looting raid, as there is no indication that it was a retaliatory attack or that foreign diplomats was involved.<sup>60</sup> It is uncertain if this was sanctioned by the whole polity or if only some tribes participated. Despite this it shows that at least some tribes saw advantages in moving against the Byzantine Empire. At the same time, it is important to remember that, for nomadic polities, raids were often a part of diplomacy aimed at showing strength and thus aiming to extract larger tribute. It is therefore important to remember that, as we have seen earlier, these types of raids did not necessarily mean long-term hostility between the two polities.

The Pechenegs is also mentioned in *The Primary Chronicle*, where we hear of Pecheneg participation in a Rus' attack on Byzantium in 944.<sup>61</sup> This attack followed an earlier defeat in 941, but the Pechenegs were only mentioned during the latter. This account has several problems. Firstly, the second attack is not mentioned in Greek sources, which we

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<sup>57</sup> Skylitzes, p.275, ch.XV.5

<sup>58</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.287-288

<sup>59</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp. 267-276

<sup>60</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp.273-274

<sup>61</sup> Primary Chronicle, pp.72-74, AM 6452(944)

would expect due to the scale and its importance in forcing a treaty between the Byzantines and the Rus'. In addition, there is no indication of preceding conflict in the 945 treaty between the two. The names of the Byzantine emperors, Romanos I, Stephen, and Constantine, also indicates that the negotiations for the treaty took place before Romanos was deposed by Constantine VII in December 944. Thus we would expect a mention of the hostilities in the treaty if they existed. This has made most modern investigators consider the 944-expedition as unhistorical and invented to cover for the defeat of 941.<sup>62</sup> Because of this, Pecheneg involvement in the conflict between Rus' and Byzantium is unlikely, as they are only mentioned in the 944-expedition.

This first period of Byzantine relations with the Pechenegs, from Pecheneg arrival on the Pontic steppe approximately 895 to the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is above all characterized by peace. After the initial hostility related to the Pecheneg arrival and their alliance with Bulgaria relations quickly improved, as seen by the alliance against Bulgaria in 917.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, except for the attack on Walandar and the participation in the Rus' attack in 971, where their participation was forced by the Rus', until the reign of Constantine VIII (1025-1028) we hear of no hostilities between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines. This is remarkable, especially considering the warlike culture of the Pechenegs. We know that raids were important for nomadic polities as it gave its members a way to gain wealth and prestige. In addition, the Pechenegs frequently raided their other neighbors, but we hear of very few raids on the Byzantines.<sup>64</sup> Despite this, it is likely that minor raids did take place. Constantine VII says that if the Pechenegs were not friendly with the Byzantines they could raid Cherson, and it is likely that this was based on experience.<sup>65</sup> The fact that no raids were mentioned in the chronicles means that these raids must have been quite small and not enough to cause alarm among the Byzantine elites. There is therefore little reason to view the arrival of the Pechenegs as problematic for the Byzantines.

This peace was likely accompanied by frequent diplomatic contact and a concerted effort by the Byzantines to maintain peace and to ensure that, if needed, the Pechenegs were willing to follow Byzantine orders for reward. As we discussed earlier, this was an important part of Byzantine diplomacy, but we also see this in the sources. We see signs of Byzantine efforts of this as early as the 917-alliance against Bulgaria and this continues throughout the

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<sup>62</sup> Primary Chronicle, p.237 [50]

<sup>63</sup> Skylitzes, p.196, ch.IX.5

<sup>64</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp.251-254

<sup>65</sup> DAI, p.49, ch.1

period. During the reign of Romanos I we see that Nicholas I threatens the Bulgarians, claiming that the Byzantines will gather an alliance consisting of Rus, Pechenegs, Alans and Magyars.<sup>66</sup> The idea that Pechenegs will follow Byzantine orders is clearly likely enough that the Byzantines can threaten the Bulgarians with it.

Furthermore, we see a clear reliance on prestige objects for trade, payment, and diplomacy. Byzantine diplomatic agents to the Pechenegs gave them a Byzantine gold seal.<sup>67</sup> Gold seals were exclusively used by the emperor and carried both authority and prestige. Similarly, we see that when doing tasks for the Byzantines living in Cherson the Pechenegs were paid in luxury and prestige goods, such as silk, cloth, gold brocade and pepper.<sup>68</sup> This is a sign of a deeper integration into the Byzantine mentality, system of prestige and diplomatic system. We also know that during the reign of Constantine VII yearly gifts were an important part of the relationship between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs.<sup>69</sup> It is not clear if this was unique during his reign or if other emperors had similar policies. Based on the history of Byzantine diplomacy this is likely, but as no other sources tell us of it, we cannot be certain. Lastly, the taking of hostages was an important part of Byzantine diplomacy. These hostages were treated as guests of the emperor and given gifts by the Byzantines.<sup>70</sup> This serves two purposes. Firstly, it guarantees that the Pechenegs would not betray the Byzantines. Secondly, the hostages would be brought to Constantinople and exposed to Byzantine culture and grandeur. Thus, the hostages would get a taste of Byzantine wealth and be introduced to Byzantine culture. Upon the hostages return ideas of Byzantine prestige, grandeur and wealth would be spread to the Pecheneg people.

Integration into a Byzantine diplomatic system is in many ways the goal of Byzantine diplomacy. It involved the gradual influencing of the polity to be more accepting of future Byzantine diplomacy and orders. This process, consisting of conspicuous consumption of wealth and prestige and promises of future rewards, is what characterizes the diplomacy between the two polities in this period. Even the alliance Constantine VII calls for is nothing more than an extension of this policy. Constantine VII explains the many advantages to being friendly with the Pechenegs, it deters other polities from attacking the Byzantines, as they are vulnerable to Pecheneg attacks, and it dissuades Pecheneg attacks on Byzantium.<sup>71</sup> But he

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<sup>66</sup> Nicholas I, 1973, ep.23

<sup>67</sup> CAB, p.691. ch.48

<sup>68</sup> DAI, ch.6

<sup>69</sup> DAI, p. 49, ch.1

<sup>70</sup> DAI, p. 49, ch.1

<sup>71</sup> DAI, ch.1-6



also explains that the Pechenegs are to be won over through yearly gifts, letters and agreements. Nowhere in *De Administrando Imperio* does Constantine VII show any desire to create a mutual alliance or help the Pechenegs.<sup>72</sup> Instead his priority is buying Pecheneg loyalty, submission, and peace. This attitude, as well as the long-term influencing of the Pecheneg polity is the main components of Byzantine diplomacy towards the Pechenegs.

This does not mean that the Pechenegs were just the subjects of Byzantium, incapable or unwilling to take action against the Byzantine empire. The participation in the attack on Wallandar clearly shows that the Pechenegs were capable of harming the empire, if they desired. Constantine VII even says that the Pechenegs are free people and never do tasks without remuneration.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, it is clear from our sources that the Pechenegs had much to gain from friendly relations with the Byzantines. We see that the Pechenegs frequently did tasks for the Byzantines in exchange for goods.<sup>74</sup> In addition, they received yearly gifts from the Byzantines, and they were lavishly rewarded for their diplomacy with the Byzantines. Constantine VII even describes them as incredibly greedy.<sup>75</sup> This is probably in large parts due to xenophobia and a perceived Byzantine superiority, but it is likely that it reflects Byzantine perceptions of the Pechenegs and that it is a result of the large amounts of gifts demanded by the Pechenegs. Diplomacy with the Byzantines became a way for the Pecheneg elites to secure the prestige and luxury goods they needed in order to keep control of the polity. In addition, peaceful relations with the Byzantines did not mean the end of the raiding. Small scale raids were likely tolerated and if not, there was always the possibility of raiding another neighbor. Thus, it is likely that peace with the Byzantines was to the Pechenegs advantage as well as the Byzantines.

It is also likely that the Pecheneg political structure in the 10<sup>th</sup> century diminished their ability to make concentrated efforts against the Byzantine empire. The lack of centralized leadership in the Pecheneg polity meant that any offensives by the whole polity would depend on support from many different chiefs, all with their own interest. Thus, all that the Byzantines needed to do to prevent attacks was to convince some chiefs that it was not in their interest to attack Byzantium and the attack would be severely weakened. In addition, Byzantium support would probably be sought over in any internal rivalry, further

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<sup>72</sup> DAI

<sup>73</sup> DAI, p. 53, ch.6

<sup>74</sup> DAI, p.53, ch.6

<sup>75</sup> DAI, ch.1, 4, 7-8

dissuading attacks on Byzantium. The political structure of the Pechenegs therefore contributed to limiting Pecheneg aggression.

The 80 years following Pecheneg arrival on the Pontic Steppe is therefore characterized by peaceful relations with the Byzantines. There are examples of hostility between the two, but not large or frequent enough to disrupt their relationship. Instead, the period is distinguished by peace and cooperation. This was achieved through active Byzantine diplomacy, ensuring that the Pechenegs always had more to gain from friendly relations than from large scale raiding.

### 976-1047: Raids, hostility, and failure of diplomacy

The reign of John I Tzimiskes contains the last mention of an alliance of any kind between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines. From here relations worsened, and soon the Pechenegs launched large scale raids into Byzantine territories. The second period of Pecheneg-Byzantine relations is therefore characterized by worsening relations, increased hostility and, in the end, large scale raiding.

After the reign of John I Tzimiskes we hear nothing of Pecheneg relations with the Byzantines until 1017 when Skylitzes tells us that the Bulgarian was trying to enlist the Pechenegs as allies against the Byzantines, but that this failed.<sup>76</sup> No sources mention that Byzantine diplomacy was involved in persuading the Pechenegs to avoid the attack. In addition, it is clear from the account that the Byzantines saw the attack as a legitimate threat as Emperor Basil II (976-1025) rerouted his army to defend against the attack. Thus, we conclude that Byzantine diplomacy was not involved in the decision. During the reign of Basil II, the relationship Pechenegs and Byzantines remained peaceful, but did not contain the same air of cooperation that characterized it during the reign of previous rulers.

Relations quickly deteriorated further over the next two decades. In 1027 we hear of the first large scale Pecheneg raid on Bulgaria, now a Byzantine *thema*.<sup>77</sup> This is followed by another raid in 1034, one more in 1035 and three in 1036. After this Pecheneg raids on Byzantium are almost annual.<sup>78</sup> Evidence indicates that the attacks were only looting raids

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<sup>76</sup> Skylitzes, p.337 ch.XVI.40

<sup>77</sup> Skylitzes, p.351, ch. XVII.2

<sup>78</sup> Skylitzes, ch. XVIII.10, XIX.6, XIX .9-10

and that pillaging was their main objective.<sup>79</sup> Thus, by the 1030s Byzantine diplomacy was no longer able to defend the northern borders of the empire.

There are multiple reasons for the collapse of Byzantine relations with the Pechenegs. Firstly, we see that the Pechenegs are being put under increasing pressure by their northern and eastern neighbors, pushing a larger amount of their polity closer to the Byzantine empire's borders. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, in 965 Rus', probably cooperating with the Uzes, invaded and defeated Khazar Khaganate, resulting in its collapse.<sup>80</sup> As mentioned earlier the Khaganate's influence had been limited to the area between the Don and the Volga since the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic steppe. Despite this, they were able to defend their borders against attacks from the Uzes, who now inhabited the land east of the Volga. The collapse of Khazaria allowed the Uzes to cross over the Volga and conquer the area between the Don and the Volga. Thus, the Uzes soon bordered the Pechenegs. The Uzes continued westwards and by the early 11<sup>th</sup> century they were increasingly encroaching on Pecheneg territory. The conflict intensified rapidly and by the 1030s the Pechenegs had been forced to the western banks of the Dniro.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the Pechenegs were put under increasing pressure from the east, gradually losing more and more grazing land.

The second series of events that forced the Pechenegs further southwestwards began with the Rus' construction of a series of fortresses to the south and southeast of Kyiv. The first of these were constructed in 988 with the objective of defending Kyiv against Pecheneg raids. This would push the Rus' border 100km to the south and was a serious encroachment on Pecheneg lands.<sup>82</sup> As a response to the construction of these fortresses we see a series of Pechenegs attacks on Rus' lands. Firstly in 990, then again in 992, 996 and in 1004. The first two of these invasions were stopped rather easily, but the 996-invasion proved troublesome. In the end the Pechenegs returned home without major gains. The attack in 1004 was also unable to reverse the situation.

After this we hear of no further attacks, but the relationship between the Pechenegs and the Rus' remained tense until 1008.<sup>83</sup> This was followed by the defeats to the Uzes. These developments deprived the Pechenegs of large amounts of grazing land forcing larger parts of the polity to relocate towards the southwest. This must have been followed by more intensive use of the grazing land and decrease in wealth in the polity. It would also lead to more intense

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<sup>79</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.320

<sup>80</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.282

<sup>81</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.302

<sup>82</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.298

<sup>83</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp.295-296

contacts with the Byzantines bordering the area. In addition, the failure to inflict defeat on Rus' and the weakening caused by the defeats to the Uzes left the Pecheneg with few viable ways of earning wealth and prestige that the elites needed to maintain a cohesive polity. Otherwise, they risked losing the loyalty of their followers, leading to defections or civil unrest. Thus, it seems that the Pechenegs' only option was to intensify looting raids against their other neighbors.

The other reason for the decline of Byzantine-Pecheneg relations is the improvement of Byzantine relations with its other neighbors, particularly the Rus'. Final Byzantine victory over Bulgaria in 1018 and peaceful relations with the Magyars (now the Kingdom of Hungary) during the reign of Stephen I (997-1038) ensured that no other hostile states existed on the Byzantine northern border. In addition, we see a clear improvement of relations with Rus' from the late 980s.<sup>84</sup> Attempts to befriend the Rus' was nothing new, after all they had been Byzantine allies in both 941 and 967, but these attempts were mostly short lived. This changed when Rus' supported Basil II against the rebellion of Bardas Skleros, followed by a marriage between Vladimir I (980-1015), the prince of Rus', and Basil II's sister Anna. Lastly, the same year Rus' was baptized, ensuring lasting peace between the two states.<sup>85</sup> Because of this the reasons for a strong Byzantine alliance with the Pechenegs disappeared. Rus' was no longer a threat and the Pechenegs were no longer needed as a counterweight to the Bulgarians. In addition, the annexation of Bulgaria into the Byzantine Empire removed a buffer state for the Byzantines. Raids that would previously be launched into Bulgaria would now target the new Byzantine *thema*. Contact was certainly maintained and there is no indication that the two polities were hostile during the reign of Basil II, but it is likely that the Byzantines were no longer willing to spend the resources necessary to pacify the Pechenegs.

Thus, the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century signaled a change in Byzantine-Pecheneg relations. The Pechenegs were put under increased pressure from the Uzes and Rus' and were forced further southwestwards, towards the Byzantine empire. At the same time, a shift occurred in Byzantine diplomacy, who now maintained good and stable relations with the Rus' and their other sedentary neighbors. In addition, the annexation of Bulgaria into the Byzantine Empire removed both a motivation for an alliance with the Byzantine and a buffer state between the two polities. Thus, in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century relations became increasingly hostile, leading to the full scale raiding off Byzantine territories in the 1020s and 1030s.

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<sup>84</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.318

<sup>85</sup> Paroń, 2021, p.318

## The Pechenegs after 1047

The increased pressure put on the Pechenegs in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century soon proved to be too much for the polity to handle. By now, the Pechenegs was united under one ruler, Tyrach, but he was facing increased opposition from parts of the polity due to his passive response to the threat from the Uzes. Because of this another chief, Kegens, attempted to seize power over the Pecheneg polity, but he was eventually defeated. Kegens, along with his followers, sought refuge in the Byzantine Empire and swore allegiance to the emperor. He was baptized, given titles, and integrated into the Byzantine imperial system. Thus, parts of the polity were settled on Byzantine lands and tasked with defending it against raids from the rest of the polity. They were also raiding the Pechenegs still living outside the Empire, likely as an extension of the previous power struggle. In addition, the parts of the polity still living on the Pontic Steppe was still under pressure from the Uzes, who conquered more and more land. During the winter of 1047, in order to stop further raids, but also to escape the Uzes, the rest of the polity decided to cross into Byzantium and after a short conflict they were defeated and settled alongside the rest of the Pechenegs already living inside the empire.<sup>86</sup> The polity was settled as colonists, and their leaders were welcomed in Constantinople, given titles and important positions and baptized.<sup>87</sup> The Pechenegs thus stopped existing as an independent polity.

From here on they were nominal subjects of the Byzantine emperor, but their relationship would remain troubled until their final defeat to Alexios I (1081-1119) in 1091. In 1048 an army was recruited from the Pechenegs to fight against the Seljuks who were invading the eastern provinces of the empire, but the army mutinied. This developed into a full rebellion, and after multiple failed attempts to defeat the Pechenegs a truce was signed in 1053. This truce did not do more than guarantee a peace while accepting a *fait accompli*.<sup>88</sup> In 1059 the Byzantines broke the truce and attacked the Pechenegs, but after this the truce was respected until 1087. In 1087 the Pechenegs, fearing that Alexios I would move against them, attacked the Byzantines. It would take four years and several Byzantine defeats before Alexios I finally managed to defeat the Pechenegs at Mount Levounion in 1091. The

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<sup>86</sup> Paroń, 2021, pp. 321-327

<sup>87</sup> Angold, 1997, p.38

<sup>88</sup> Angold, 1997, pp.38-39

remaining Pechenegs were settled in Byzantine lands and were unable to offer any more resistance to the Byzantines.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

In the years preceding 896 the Pecheneg had migrated from the east of the Volga and acquired full control of the Pontic Steppe. Here they came into contact with the Byzantine Empire and soon established diplomatic relations with them. As most nomads living on the Eurasian steppe, the Pechenegs were heavily influenced by the Steppe Tradition. This was a political tradition that characterized all nomadic steppe polities. It developed as a result of the nomad's reliance on nomadic pastoralism and is centered around a ruler and his ability to secure the loyalty of his followers. This was done through institutionalized gift giving. Due to the low amount of economic differentiation in nomadic polities the gold and the goods used for these gifts had to originate outside the steppe. Steppe polities were therefore reliant on raiding, trading with or collecting tribute from polities outside the steppe.

When the Pechenegs arrived on the Pontic Steppe the Byzantine Empire had a long tradition of doing diplomacy with steppe polities. This diplomatic tradition aimed at creating a system of peaceful states on the Byzantine northern borders who would act as buffer states and were ready to follow Byzantine orders if needed. This was achieved through active, long-term diplomacy that rewarded polities for being friendly, ensured that every polity knew that doing tasks for the Byzantines was well rewarded and gradually integrating these polities into a Byzantine system of thinking. Thus, gifts of gold and prestige and luxury goods, as well as relying on prestige elements were important parts of Byzantine diplomacy. The Byzantines had a domineering attitude towards these polities, and they were expected to do as they were told. They did not create mutual alliances and the Byzantines were not interested in committing troops to fight wars on the steppe.

This approach to diplomacy continued to be practiced and shaped the Byzantine relationship with the Pechenegs. The period after Pecheneg arrival on the Pontic Steppe is characterized by peaceful relations and active diplomacy. The Pechenegs were used as a counterweight to the various polities bordering the steppe, ensuring that none of them could attack the Byzantines. In addition, the Byzantines employed active diplomacy to ensure that the Pechenegs were willing to follow orders. At the same time, it is clear that the Byzantines

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<sup>89</sup> Angold, 1997, pp.132-134

did not desire an equal alliance. Instead, they used gifts of gold and prestige and luxury goods in order to secure peace with their northern neighbors.

By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century this situation was gradually changing. Relations were getting more hostile, and the Byzantines were no longer able, or willing to ensure peace with the Pechenegs. Thus, during the 1030s and 1040s the Pechenegs were engaging in full scale raiding of Byzantine territories. This was a result of the increased pressure put on the Pechenegs by their northern and eastern neighbors forcing the Pechenegs further southwestwards, towards the Byzantine Empire. In addition, Byzantine diplomacy shifted from using Pecheneg as a counterbalance to other sedentary polities in the north towards peaceful relations with the other polities in the north. Lastly, the Byzantine annexation of Bulgaria removed Bulgaria as a buffer state.

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