



## PECHENEG CHIEFTAINS IN THE BYZANTINE ADMINISTRATION IN THE THEME OF PARISTRION IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

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### **Introduction**

The aim of this contribution is to shed light on the situation on the Lower Danube at the time of the mass arrival of the Pechenegs in the eleventh century. This article will not follow all the changes the group or groups of Pechenegs underwent upon their settlement in the theme of Paristrion,<sup>1</sup> since this is a part of a larger work.<sup>2</sup> It will, however, attempt to follow those transformations that led to a shift or change in their identity and the way these changes were reflected in the political participation of Pechenegs in the Byzantine theme of Paristrion. The shift in identity will be discussed in the context of a frontier situation: Was it integration, assimilation or transformation? The approach towards these questions will be based on archaeological evidence backed by written sources.

In order to build an objective picture of the situation on the Lower Danube, the article will try to find answers to two sets of questions. First, how did these people perceive themselves? How did they act in regard to their own people and in regard to other ethnic groups? Second, how did the Byzantine administration perceive these people and their chieftains? Or, in other words, was the prevailing concept “we among the Others” or “the Others among us?”

### **Background Information**

At the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century, political changes in the Balkans led to a serious re-making of the political map. The

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<sup>1</sup> A debate in the scholarship was initiated in the 1970s concerning both the time and place of establishing the new theme. For more information see: Vassilka Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav – granichna zona na vizantijskia zapad* (The lower Danube: A frontier zone of the Byzantine west) (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Balgarskata Akademiana Naukite (hereafter: BAN), 1976), 34–70 (hereafter Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav*).

<sup>2</sup> My doctoral dissertation project on “The Migration of the Pechenegs and Distribution of Stylistic Elements in their Fine Metalwork” (to be defended at Central European University, Budapest).



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changes were marked by the end of the independent Bulgarian state under the power of the Byzantine Empire and numerous raids by different nomadic tribes. Consequently, at the end of the tenth century the Byzantine administrative system was established and developed in the former Bulgarian lands. The theme of Paristrion was established between the Balkan Mountains, the Black Sea and the Danube (*Fig. 1*). Because Paristrion was a frontier zone for the Byzantine Empire, it soon turned into a territory with weak administrative power left to the mercy of the nomadic newcomers. This also led to serious demographic changes: the inner parts of Dobruzha were depopulated and abandoned. The local population that survived the invasions preferred to emigrate to better-defended territories such as the Balkan Mountains and the fortresses along the Danube and the sea coast.

The Pecheneg raids in Misia (Paristrion) started in the 1020s. Scylitzes-Cedrenus and Zonaras describe a Pecheneg mass invasion in 1026 (or 1027), directed towards the western Bulgarian lands, which largely depopulated these parts of the new Byzantine provinces. In 1034 the Pechenegs reached Thessalonica; the next year they devastated the theme of Macedonia. Three more raids were registered in the following year (1036) alone, when probably one of the victims was the island of Păcuil lui Soare.<sup>3</sup>

One can imagine the dimensions of the Pecheneg invasion based on coincided fires in Capidava, Dinogetia, Skala, Odartzi, Drastar, and so on.<sup>4</sup> This was the time when all the fortified settlements in the inner parts of Dobruzha and northeastern Bulgaria were abandoned. Some of the fortresses along the Danube had a similar fate, the dating also supported by coin distribution. The latest coins found in those territories are anonymous Byzantine follises class A-2 (978–1030/35) and class B (1030/35–1042),<sup>5</sup> which means that life in these

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<sup>3</sup> Тăпкова-Займова, *Dolen Dunav*; Georgii Cedrini Compendium Historiarum, 2 vols., *Patrologia Graeca* 121 (1864), 498<sub>13</sub>–488<sub>10</sub>, II, 512<sub>2-4</sub>, II, 514<sub>17</sub>–515<sub>5</sub>, in *Gratzki izvori za balgarskata istoria* (hereafter GIBI) (Greek sources for Bulgarian history) 7 (Sofia: BAN, 1965), 299–300; Th. Buttner-Wobst, *Joannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum libri XIII – XVIII*, Corp. Bonn, 1897, 571<sub>9</sub>–572<sub>2</sub>, 589<sub>11</sub>–590<sub>8</sub>, GIBI 6, 190–191.

<sup>4</sup> Georgi Atanasov, “Etnodemografski promeni v Dobruzha (X–XIV v.)” (Ethno-demographic changes in Dobruzha from the tenth to the fourteenth century), *Istoricheski pregled* 2 (1991): 79–80 (hereafter Atanasov, “Etnodemografski promeni”).

<sup>5</sup> The appearance of the anonymous Byzantine follises is connected with the reign of John I Zimisce, when the first coins of this type were minted. The major characteristics of the type are that neither the depiction nor the name of the sovereign are given. Instead, they are replaced by the bust of Christ giving a blessing (in later versions the Mother of God replaces Christ). Alexius I Comnenus is the last emperor who cast anonymous follises in the period before monetary reform (1092). In the theme of

fortresses ceased at the very beginning of distribution of follises class B, in the early 1040s.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the fortified settlements along the Danube and the Black Sea coast did not share the same fate and continued to exist.<sup>7</sup>

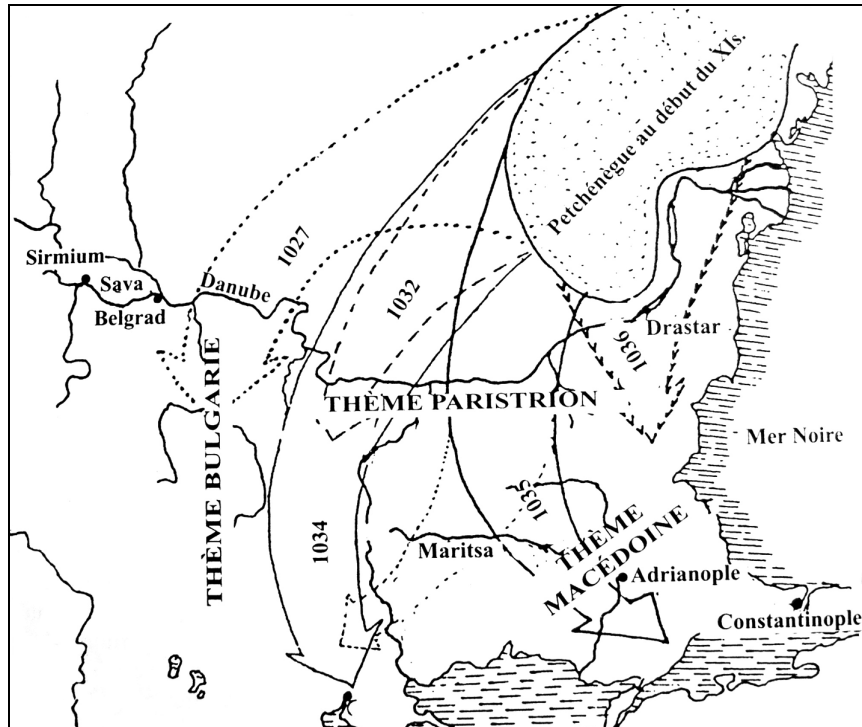


Fig. 1. Map of the Byzantine theme of Paristrion in the eleventh century (after Atanasov, “De nouveau pour la date initiale”, map 2).

Paristrion the nomadic invasions are usually connected with the distribution of follises from classes A (976–1028), B (1030/1035–1042), and C (1042–1050). For additional information on the distribution of follises see Georgi Atanasov, “De nouveau pour la date initiale de folles Byzantins anonymes classe ‘B’,” in *Numismatique et sphragistique: contributions to the history of the Western Black Sea coast* Acta Musei Varnaensis 2 (2004), 289–298.

<sup>6</sup> Georgi Atanasov, “Nov pogled kam demografskite y etnokulturnite promeni v Dobrudzha prez srednovekovieto” (A new look at the demographic and ethnocultural changes in Dobrudzha during the Middle Ages), *Izsledvania v chest na chl.-korespondent professor Strashimir Dimitrov* (Studies in honour of Professor Strashimir Dimitrov), (Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo “Prof. Marin Drinov,” 2001), 185–214.

<sup>7</sup> Atanasov, “Etnodemografski promeni,” 80.

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### Kegen, the “Archon” of the Pechenegs in Paristrion

The nomadic raids were accompanied by the steady settlement of nomadic groups. This is the case of Kegen, one of the Pecheneg chieftains. Kegen and his 20,000 people (according to Cedrenus) appeared under the walls of Drastar asking for Byzantine citizenship.<sup>8</sup> He insisted on becoming a Byzantine “foederatus.” As a result, following the traditional Byzantine policy towards barbarian newcomers, Kegen was baptized and awarded the title of *patrikios* (εις πατριωτικότητα τε ἀνήχθη). In addition, he received three fortresses along the Danube (φρούρια τρία).<sup>9</sup> In this case the written sources are supported by archaeological data: a lead seal of Kegen (*Fig. 2*) found a decade ago shows the assignment of his new position.<sup>10</sup> The seal was found in Silistra and its reading and interpretation have been facilitated by a similar find from a private collection in Germany. On the front side one can see a depiction of John the Baptist holding a cross in his left hand and giving a blessing with his right. The inscription on the reverse side says:

+ Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)[θ(ε)ι] Ἰω(άννη) μαγιστρο(ω) (και) ἄρχ(ο)ντ(ι)  
Πατρ(ι)νακ(ι)α(ς) τω Κ(ε)γέν(η).

“God, help John Kegen, Magistros and Archon of Pechenegia”



*Fig. 2. The seal of Kegen, “Magistros and Archon of Pechenegia”  
(after Yordanov, “Pechati na Yoan Kegen”)*

<sup>8</sup> Georgii Cedrini Compendium Historiarum, 581<sub>20</sub> – 590<sub>6</sub>, –GIBI 6, 312–313.

<sup>9</sup> Georgii Cedrini Compendium Historiarum, 581<sub>20</sub> – 590<sub>6</sub>, –GIBI 6, 313.

<sup>10</sup> Plamen Pavlov, *Buntari i avantyuristi v Srednovekovna Bulgaria* (Rebels and adventurers in medieval Bulgaria) (Veliko Turnovo: IPK “Sv. Patriarh Evtimij Patriarh Turnovski,” 2000), 138–139; Ivan Yordanov, “Pechati na Yoan Kegen, magistar i arhont na Pechenegia (1050–1051)” (Seals of John Kegen, Magistros and the Archon of Pechenegia (1050–1051),” *Numizmatika i sfragistika* 1 (1998): 96–101.



## Pecheneg Chieftains in the Byzantine Administration

One has to bear in mind a discrepancy in the title of the Pecheneg chieftain in the written sources and on the seal. While in Scylitzes-Cedrenus he is called *patrikios*, the seal clearly states that he is *magistros* and *archon*. If he was really assigned the latter title, it means that he was provided with autonomous power over his fellows settled in the territory of the empire.<sup>11</sup>

What was his place, however, within the Byzantine administrative system? Did he turn into a loyal imperial citizen or was assigning the aristocratic title only a temporary solution to a pending problem? At the same time other questions can be posed: What was the attitude of the surrounding population? What was the attitude of his fellows? Answers to these questions are presented below, after a brief survey of the characteristics of the population that inhabited the region where Kegen settled.

Regarding the events of that time, one must also consider the role of another person, Kegen's rival, Tirah. Tirah was the supreme chieftain (ἄρχων)<sup>12</sup> (whatever that meant at that time) of the eleven Pecheneg clans that were left in the steppes of "Pechenegia." In the winter of 1048–1049 (or 1046–1047),<sup>13</sup> Tirah followed Kegen in quest of new lands for his people. The former took advantage of the frozen Danube, crossed the river and tried to settle to the south of it, fighting Kegen. The behaviour of the Byzantine authorities in this case shows that in spite of the situation in the frontier zone, Kegen was accepted as an imperial subject and received support as such. Byzantine troops from eastern Thrace were sent to help him. As a result, Tirah was defeated and his people<sup>14</sup> resettled in the area of Sofia, Nish, and Ovche Polje.

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<sup>11</sup> Yordanov, "Pechati na Yoan Kegen," 100.

<sup>12</sup> *Joannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum libri...*, 641<sub>4</sub> – 644<sub>12</sub>, GIBI 7, 197.

<sup>13</sup> The dating of the invasion of Tirah's Pechenegs is based on the letter written by Michael Psellus in the name of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus addressed to Kegen (Κ. Σάθας, *Ἱστορικοὶ λόγοι, ἐπιστολαὶ καὶ ἄλλα ἀνέκδοτα, Μεσαιωνικὴ βιβλιοθήκη*, V, ἐν Βενετία, 1876). Vassilka Tâpkova-Zaimova, Ivan Dujchev and other Bulgarian scholars date it to 1048 (see translation and comments in GIBI 6, 122–123). At the same time, Kazhdan refers to the year 1047 and dates Tirah's invasion to 1046 (see A. Kazhdan, "Ioan Mavropod, pechenegi i russkie v seredine 11 veka" (John Mauropod, Pechenegs and Rus in the middle of the eleventh century) *Zbornik radova Srpske akademije nauke, Vizantoloshki institute* 8, no.1 (1963), 181. I will not go into details in this discussion since it is not relevant for the content of the article.

<sup>14</sup> According to Scylitzes, Tirah's Pechenegs numbered 800,000 people. This, however, is probably an overestimate, as is the case later with the Ghuzz. They numbered 600,000 according to Attaleiata (*Michaelis Attalioetae Historia*, ed. Bonn, 83<sub>2</sub> – 90<sub>3</sub>, in GIBI 6, 175–176, but this was corrected to 60,000 by the twelfth-century historian Zonaras (*Joannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum libri...*, 713<sub>1</sub> – 714<sub>2</sub>, GIBI 7, 200). In any case, the territory of



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The Byzantine power had no other choice to cope with the new Pecheneg threat but to make it part of the system; thus, the empire's tried and true "ethnic" strategy was applied again. 140 Pecheneg chieftains, led by Tirah himself, were taken to Constantinople and baptized there. They received aristocratic titles and a place in the administrative system of Paristrion. If one can rely on the reading of a lead seal found in Vetren, in the Silistra region, Tirah received the high military dignity of *protospatharios*.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up the situation, a system similar to the former *stratiotes* system was established in the frontier zone of Paristrion.<sup>16</sup> The Pecheneg chieftains received places within the administration of the theme, preserving their independence to a great extent. In addition, their autonomy within the tribal groups was preserved. These people were defenders of the borders, but only to the point when this coincided with their own interests. This can be clearly observed in several events from the history of the eleventh century and shows the weakness of Byzantine power in the region. Moreover, non-Byzantine elements (including nomads) managed to penetrate even the higher ranks of the military hierarchy. The names of Kegen, Tirah, Selte, and so on are often mentioned in the sources when problems arose in the theme of Paristrion. Yet, at the first sign of trouble the support of the Pecheneg chieftains was sought against their fellows. This creates the impression that Byzantine power alone was unable to deal with the situation in its Danubian borderland. At the same time, the position of the same Pecheneg chieftains was never consistent; from Byzantine allies at the beginning of an event they often ended as the emperor's major enemy. This is another sign of the regression of Byzantine power in the region, as was the "turkization" of the eastern *acrites* regions where Byzantine power also gradually weakened.<sup>17</sup>

At the time of the arrival, movement, and settling of the nomads, dynamic interactions took place between the local people and the newcomers. This resulted in the appearance of a new group of people defined in Byzantine

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the northeastern Bulgarian lands was threatened by a serious demographic blow that could have changed not only the character of the local population but the political situation as well.

<sup>15</sup> Georgi Atanasov, I. Yordanov, *Srednovekovniyat Vetren na Dunav* (Medieval Vetren on the Danube) (Shumen: Izdatelska Kasta "Slavcho Nikolov i sie," 1994), 41, 63, table XIII-118. The seal is only partially preserved and only the last two letters of the name can be read: AX or HX. The reading of the inscription provided by the authors is: [+K(ύρι)ε β(οή)θ(ει) Τυ]ρ[άχ] Τουτ[άχ] (πρωτο)σπαθ(αριω) κ(αί) επ[άρχω].

<sup>16</sup> Petar Mutafchiev, "Etnografski promeni po Dolni Dunav prez XI vek" (Ethnographic changes on the Lower Danube in the eleventh century), in *Silistra and Dobruđzha*, (Sofia, 1947), 103–105; Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav*, 89



## Pecheneg Chieftains in the Byzantine Administration

sources as the *μιξοβάρβαροι*, (*mixobarbarians*, semi-barbarians). The written sources do not provide information about the demographic situation in the theme of Paristrion at the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century and the way the mixobarbarians appeared because there was no strong administrative power in this region to register these processes. Archaeological evidence from the eleventh century, however, allows us to draw some conclusions about the development of this group of people and the changes the Pechenegs underwent after settling on the Lower Danube, including their interaction with the local population and their contribution to the local political power. The gradual mixing of the local and new populations resulted in the creation of new administrative structures, which is registered by a number of seals and the appearance of new numismatic types: the anonymous follises class A and B.

### The Mixobarbarians

In the eleventh century (usually dated around the time of the riot of Nestor in 1074), Byzantine authors already speak of the population in the theme of Paristrion as a group of people not belonging completely to the “civilized Byzantine population.” They use the term *mixobarbarian* as a *terminus technicus*.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, they mention the mixobarbarians in the towns as people possessing the characteristics of a settled population. The ethnic characteristics of this mixed population have already been discussed extensively in the literature by E. Stănescu, Vassilka Tâpkova-Zaimova and others.<sup>19</sup> However, some observations can be added to the existing picture. Although nominally the territory belonged to the Byzantine Empire, situated on its fringe, the Byzantine administration and authors never referred to these people as integral parts of the empire’s population. The term *βάρβαροι* indicates that they persisted in being different from the core of the Byzantine population: different in language and *modus vivendi*, conveying cultural dissimilarities. In his *Historia* Michael Attaleiata points out that “the Scythians brought the Scythian way of life” (Σκύθαι τὸ

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<sup>18</sup> *Michaelis Attaliothae...*, 204, GIBI 6, 183.

<sup>19</sup> Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav*, 71–96, E. Stănescu, “Les ‘mixobarbares’ du Bas-Danube au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Nouvelles Etudes d’Histoire publiées à l’occasion du XI<sup>e</sup> Congrès des Sciences Historiques*, (Bucharest, 1965), 45–53; Hélène Ahrweiler, “Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner: The Case of the Nomads,” in *Studies of Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. Hélène Ahrweiler and Angeliki E. Laiou Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998 (hereafter Ahrweiler, “Byzantine Concepts”).



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πρότερον τὸν Σκυθικὸν ἑπιφέρουσι βίον).<sup>20</sup> The consistent use of the term *μυχοβάβαροι* for the population of Paristrion shows that the Byzantine administration admitted its failure to cope with the existence and penetration of new (different) political ideas and institutions. A clue to this conclusion is the fact that Byzantine authors did not use *foederati* for the Pechenegs although they came and were resettled as such. Instead, the nomads were soon “melted” into the general term *μυχοβάβαροι*. The Pechenegs were only called *foederati* at the beginning, when they were assigned this position within the military and administrative system of the empire, but they soon became only the *μυχοβάβαροι* since they failed to become true *socii populi Romani*. Moreover, Obolensky points that “this term applied equally to Byzantine citizens who were forgetting their civilized habits and becoming contaminated by contact with true ‘barbarians,’ and to foreigners who had gone some way towards absorbing Greek civilization.”<sup>21</sup>

Doubtless, the “mixed” part of *μυχοβάβαροι* was former nomads who had settled and already changed their way of life. Pecheneg traces can be detected in this mixed population in the archaeological evidence. This is seen not just in the so-called “nomadic” pottery (clay cauldrons which can hardly be regarded as simply Pecheneg), but also other objects found in settlements and cemeteries, slight changes in burial rites and grave goods, types of weapons, the distribution of coins, and so forth.

Several examples may serve to illustrate the material culture of the mixobarbarians. Charcoal was found covering the skeletons in graves No. 121, 123, and 278 in the cemetery of Odartzi (northeast Bulgaria). Placing charcoal or lime in the graves was a typical feature of nomadic (Pecheneg) burial rites in the south Russian steppe regions. Two other graves from the same cemetery (No. 1 and 495) were marked by small stones. The burial rite of the cemetery bears Christian characteristics,<sup>22</sup> but with numerous deviations: trephinated skulls, bodies under stone slabs, stones framing the grave pit, charcoal all over some skeletons, and so on.<sup>23</sup> The excavator, Doncheva-Petkova, defines the popu-

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<sup>20</sup> *Michaelis Attaliothae Historia*, 201<sub>1</sub> – 210<sub>23</sub>, GIBI 6, 183.

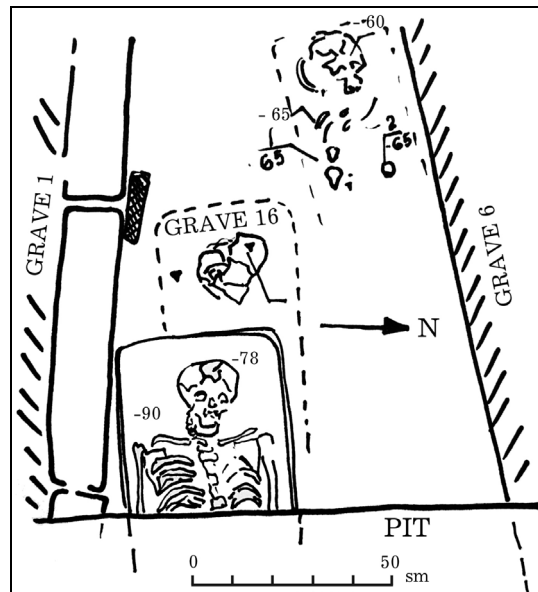
<sup>21</sup> D. Obolensky, “The Byzantine Frontier Zone and Cultural Exchanges,” in D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe*. Variorum Reprints (London: Ashgate, 1982), Vol. 1, 310.

<sup>22</sup> This is also the opinion of the excavators.

<sup>23</sup> L. Doncheva-Petkova, “Srednovekoven nekropol pri s. Odartzi” (A medieval necropolis near the village of Odartsi), *Dobrudzha* 10 (1993), 134–144; L. Doncheva-Petkova, “Adornments from an Eleventh-Century Pechenegs’ Necropolis by Odartsi Village, Dobrich District (North-Eastern Bulgaria),” *Archeologia Bulgarica* 2, no. 3 (1998): 126–138, as well as personal communication from the excavator.



lation of the cemetery as one “converted to Christianity not long before their burials ... still keeping the old burial practices tenaciously,” and infers its Pecheneg ethnic identification.<sup>24</sup>



*Fig. 3. Pliska, the cemetery in front of the Eastern Gate*  
(figure provided by the excavator Yanko Dimitrov)

The situations in the cemetery in front of the Eastern Gate of Pliska and around the church of Mostich (Preslav) are similar. In Pliska the graves are situated around a church from the end of the tenth to the eleventh century. Some of them were contemporaneous with the church, but a great number of them were made after it was destroyed, using its building material for the grave constructions. Remnants of pagan behavior can be suggested in the basic Christian rite of the people buried in this cemetery: the contracted or semi-contracted positions of the skeletons, brick or stone chambers, deliberately damaged skeletons, and so on (*Fig 3*). Although the excavator, Yanko Dimitrov, does not state any firm ethnic interpretation of the cemetery, he points out analogies for these deviations in the necropolis of Odartzi.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the data

<sup>24</sup> Doncheva-Petkova, “Adornments,” 136.

<sup>25</sup> Yanko Dimitrov, “Tsarkva i nekropol vav Vanshnia grad na Pliska (kraia na 10–11 vek)” (A church and a cemetery in the External City of Pliska), *Pliska – Preslav*, vol. 7 (Shumen: Arheologicheski Institut s Muzej, Filial Shumen, 1995), 45.

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from coins show that the church ceased to be used between 1030/35 and 1040/42, during the first wave of a Pecheneg mass invasion.<sup>26</sup> The forty graves of the cemetery were dug into a layer formed by the destroyed city wall. The necropolis is dated to the eleventh century, when Pliska was devastated by the Pechenegs.<sup>27</sup>

The necropolis in Preslav consists of twenty graves,<sup>28</sup> fifteen of them found east of the church. Stones, bricks, and spolia from the church surrounded some of the grave pits. The graves destroyed three buildings from the eleventh century. The burial rite is similar to Christian rites, although bridle bosses (originally used on horse harness)<sup>29</sup> were found around the skull of a child in grave No. 7 (Fig. 4).

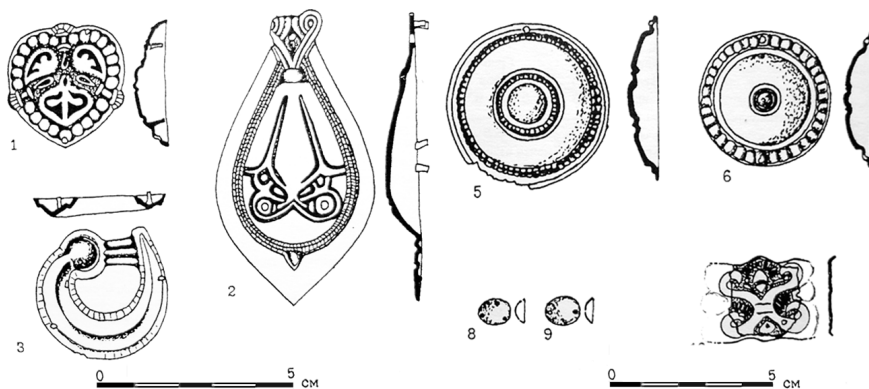


Fig. 4. Objects from the cemetery in front of the Eastern Gate of Pliska (after Dimitrov, “Tsarkva i nekropol vav”)

The picture from the settlements and the fortresses of Paristrion is similar. A new population inhabited the fortress of Skala in the last stage of its existence. This last stage is marked by traces of fire and changes in the material culture

<sup>26</sup> Dimitrov, “Tsarkva i nekropol,” 51.

<sup>27</sup> Vera Antonova and Stoyan Vitlianov, “Pliska. Zapadna krepostna stena – sektor Sever (Arheologicheski razkopki 1973–1975)” (Pliska. The western fortification wall – north sector: Archaeological excavations from 1973 to 1975), *Pliska – Preslav*, vol. 4 (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1983), 65–67.

<sup>28</sup> I thank Prof. Kazimir Popkonstantinov (SS Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo) for providing me with information about this necropolis.

<sup>29</sup> For additional information on the usage of bridle bosses see Teodora Krumova, “Secondary Usage of Pecheneg Bridle-Bosses as Dress Decoration,” *Archaeologia Bulgarica* 3 (2001): 65–70.



Fig. 5. The strap-end  
from Stan

previously typical for the settlement.<sup>30</sup> Doncheva-Petkova infers that the settlement of Odartzi was devastated by the Pechenegs between 1032 and 1036, and supports this with the data from the excavations: traces of a great fire, coins, and fatal trauma on some of the buried skeletons. In addition, she states that the Pechenegs were next to inhabit the settlement.<sup>31</sup> This statement is supported by data from another site: the village of Stan (Novi Pazar region, northeastern Bulgaria). This is approximately the place where a strap-end (a stray find) (Fig. 5) was found that can be related to the Pechenegs. The composition on the surface of the strap-end, organized in rhombic figures connected to each other, is dominated by the longitudinal axis. A typical feature of the decoration of the object that relates it to Pecheneg material culture is the combination of an interlaced design and a ribbed background. The same feature can also be seen on objects from bridle sets from Sarayly Kiyat, Novo Kamenka, and Kalanchak. Preliminary research in the

area registered a cultural layer from the tenth and eleventh century with contexts similar to those at Skala. Several pits with traces of fire were found, which points to the existence of a settlement there, destroyed at the beginning of the eleventh century.<sup>32</sup>

If, in the middle and the second half of the eleventh century, these former nomads were already settled and on such good terms with the local population that they could form an integral part of it, this means that they belonged to the

<sup>30</sup> Georgi Atanasov and Ivan Yordanov, *Srednovekovnia Vetren na Dunav* (Medieval Vetren on the Danube) (Shumen: Slavcho Nikolov i sie, 1994); Valery Yotov and Georgi Atanasov, *Skala, krepost ot 10 – 11 vek do selo Kladentsi* (Skala, a fortress from the tenth and eleventh centuries near the village of Kladentsi) (Sofia: Pensoft, 1998), 37–45, 54.

<sup>31</sup> L. Doncheva-Petkova, Lazar Ninov, and Veselin Parushev, *Odartsi: Seliste ot Parvoto balgarsko tsarstvo* (Odartsi: A settlement from the First Bulgarian Kingdom), Vol. 1 (Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo “Prof. Marin Drinov”, 1999), 139–140.

<sup>32</sup> The preliminary field research was carried out in 1986 by Todor Balabanov (National Archaeological and Historical Reserve, Preslav) and Georgi Atanasov (Regional Museum of History, Shumen). Besides the traces of pits they registered material that can be related to the Late Nomads and dated to the beginning of the eleventh century. Probably the strap end from Stan is also connected to this settlement in some way. The excavations have not been published to date.



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first waves of the Pecheneg invasions or to the sporadic raids to the south of the Danube in the tenth century. Of course, it is likely that other nomadic tribes also contributed to the mixed character of the semi-barbarians, but it is beyond doubt that the Pechenegs were the prevailing group and the facts mentioned above support this statement.

### **Tatush and the Mixobarbarians' Political Power in the Theme of Paristrion**

In 1072, when the Danubian frontier (*acrite*) population rose against the official Byzantine power, the Byzantine chronicler Michael Attaleiata mentions that “the local people paid little or no attention to the Roman Basileus and surrendered the power over the fortress (Drastar) into the hands of their chieftain Tatush.”<sup>33</sup>

Tatush (Tatos) or Hallis is rather a curious personality. He appeared on the political scene in connection with the riot of Nestor in Drastar. The written sources do not point out an explicit connection of Tatush with the Pechenegs. He is described merely as belonging to the local mixobarbarians. Moreover, he is distinguished from the rest of the Pechenegs who resettled in the 1050s. Barthold has noted that in Central Asia the term “tat” was used to define “people of settled culture.” Moreover, he is called also by the name of Hallis, which coincides with the ethnonym *ballisi*, used for the inhabitants of Choresm who were of Iranian origin and allies of the Pechenegs. In the sources he appears as a unifying figure of the residents of Drastar, one of the most important Paristrionian cities at that time. He was legitimized (at least by the local population) as a representative of the local (not Byzantine) authorities. As such, he appeared a real menace to Byzantine sovereignty in the region, which required decisive actions on behalf of Emperor Michael VIII, and this led to the riot of Nestor. Later he appears in the sources connected with another riot, that of Travel the Paulician.<sup>34</sup> In both events he was supported by a number of Pecheneg chieftains, but at the same time there was a clear distinction between the settled “civilized” Tatush and his fellows who were camping in the fields of northeastern Bulgaria.

Bulgarian scholarly literature connects Tatush with the Pechenegs coming from the region of Choresm. Furthermore, he may have belonged to the first wave of nomadic invasions, since in the second half of the eleventh century he was part of the “urban element” in the Pecheneg community, which had already

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<sup>33</sup> *Michaelis Attalioatae Historia*, 205, GIBI 6, 183.

<sup>34</sup> *Annae Comnenae Porphyrogenitae Alexias*, rec. A. Reifferscheid, 2 vol., Lipsiae, 1884, VI, 14, GIBI 8, 54.



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found its place in the ruling local mixobarbarian structure.<sup>35</sup> The still-nomadic or semi-nomadic Pechenegs, although acting independently, recognized Tatush as a leader (or representative of official power) when a wider organization was needed, and at the same time accepted him as “one of us.”

The development that took place in the theme of Paristrion in the eleventh century exemplifies the processes in a frontier zone. After migrating to the Balkans, the Pechenegs kept up a connection with their heritage, but adapted and applied their traditions to their new environment. In the tenth and eleventh century the political situation in the Balkans was not stable; thus, the local population was more open to the innovations of the newcomers. The local group had more deeply rooted historical traditions and culture than a nomadic people, which helped the easier adaptation of the Pecheneg groups while at the same time introducing new elements into the mixed Balkan culture.<sup>36</sup> For the Pechenegs, the periphery of the Byzantine empire was a new territory; they were already aware of it, but it was new to them as a place where they could (and did) settle down. At the same time, for Byzantium this was not a new territory, but one outside its law (therefore, Byzantines continued to call its inhabitants *βάρβαροι*, a keyword to describe “a quintessential cultural otherness”<sup>37</sup>). The situation becomes more complicated when we introduce the third point of view, that of the Balkan population (non-Byzantines), for whom the periphery was also already an established “core.”

Two factors facilitated the interaction between the newcomers and the local population. The first factor was the participation of the former nomads among the local authorities, whom the Pechenegs recognized as their own representatives no matter how much their material culture and way of life had changed. Tatush is just one example; the sources also mention Seslav, Sacha, Chelgu, and so on. The second important factor was the common need for defense that unified the local and new populations. Both perceived Byzantium as the “common enemy.” When the new waves of nomads arrived, the Pechenegs, who had already settled some time earlier, played the role of

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<sup>35</sup> Plamen Pavlov, “Belezhki za niakoi lichnosti ot balgarskoto srednovekovie s ogled istoriyata na Dobrudzha prez XI–XIII vek” (Remarks on some individuals from the Bulgarian Middle Ages with reference to the history of Dobrudzha from the eleventh to the thirteenth Century), *Dobrudzha* 9 (1992): 169–177.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the historical situation in the Balkans see Tâpkova-Zaimova, *Dolen Dunav*; Atanasov, “Etnografski promeni,” and also Georgi Atanasov, “Pogled kam Dobrudzhanska Dunavski briag ot 11–15 vek” (A look at the Danubian shore in Dobrudzha during the period between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries), *Istoriicheski pregled* 8 (1992): 13.

<sup>37</sup> Ahrweiler, “Byzantine concepts,” 11.



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facilitators for the infiltration of the newcomers. The former were already integrated and even occupied significant administrative positions but they were not yet assimilated, preserving elements of their former material culture and some connections with their fellows.

On the other hand, discussing the relationships between the different nomadic groups, especially those who settled at different times, one should not rely too much on the “interethnic ties” among them. One should treat these relations cautiously, bearing in mind the theory of Jonathan Skaff on political allegiance in a frontier zone, referring to another border zone—that of western Inner Mongolia:

For ethnically Chinese and Turk commoners, loyalty depended upon a political leader’s capacity to ensure stable economic and social conditions. ... For the social elite, loyalty was contingent upon a ruler’s ability to provide political patronage. In neither case does it appear that ethnic affinity was a primary determinant of political allegiance.<sup>38</sup>

Several examples allow us to apply this theory to the territory of Paristrion. Not just Kegen and Tirah acted against each other, but a number of Pecheneg groups fighting for or against the Byzantine army, depending on the situation.

### **The Attitude of the Byzantine Empire**

Like the local situation in Paristrion, neither can the attitude of the Byzantine central administration towards the population of the theme and the coming nomads be seen as homogeneous. One can register a different attitude to the resettled Pechenegs from one side and the mixobarbarians from another. If one observes the formulas used in the written sources regarding the position of Kegen and Tirah, one sees that they had not been allowed to enter the Byzantine family of peoples, although in the beginning Kegen is treated as independent. He is called archon and a letter sent to him and Michael, the governor of Paristrion, is mentioned by Scylitzes with the term *γράμματα* (“letter to an equal”).<sup>39</sup> In addition, according to Jasmine Moysidou, before

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Skaff, “Survival in the Frontier Zone: Comparative Perspectives on Identity and Political Allegiance in China’s Inner Asian Borderlands during the Sui-Tang Dynastic Transition (617–630),” *Journal of World History* (June 2004), <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/skaff.html>> (last accessed: 5 February 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Georgii Cedrini *Compendium Historiarum*, 581<sub>20</sub> – 590<sub>6</sub>, GIBI 6, 314.



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entering the borders of the empire the Pecheneg leaders were referred to as *οι ἀνεξάρτητοι ἄρχοντες των παζινακίων* (“the independent chieftains of the Pechenegs”).<sup>40</sup> No matter that the sources are clear that both Kegen and Tirah were baptized, they are never assigned the title of a “spiritual son (πνευματικῶν υἱῶν) of the Emperor” as the Bulgarian *tzar* was called, for instance.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the Byzantine authors continued to call the Pechenegs *Scythians*, *barbarians* or just *Pechenegs*. Nevertheless, the Byzantine authorities were forced to accept the authority of strong figures such as Tatush, since he was the strong one in a territory where the Byzantines were the weaker party.

### Conclusions

The situation in the Byzantine theme of Paristrion emerged as the result of complicated relations between the different groups that inhabited it. From one side there was the local population, which had to accept and survive the new-coming nomadic groups. Since Byzantine political and administrative power was weak in the borderlands, the local population had to cope alone with the nomads. The strategy they chose was to form an alliance with them against the common enemy: the Byzantines. The co-existence of the different ethnic groups soon left room for the penetration of new elements in the local administrative structure. This further resulted in changing the characteristics of the population itself and acquiring new elements from the nomadic material culture. Thus a new category of population appeared: the *μυχοβάραροι*. For the central Byzantine administration, however, they remained as alien as they had been in the first years of Byzantine rule in the new territories. Regarding the threat of the arriving nomadic mass of Pechenegs, the empire tried to apply the old traditional Byzantine practice of making the newcomers *foederati*, and thus subjects of the empire. In this case, they did not succeed; therefore, the Byzantine officials decided to make a compromise. They preferred to perceive the leaders of the newcomers rather as their own officials (as a bridge between the local population and the official Byzantine power) than to admit that these were the chieftains of their enemies which the empire could not cope with.

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<sup>40</sup> Jasmine Moysidou, *Το Βυζάντιο και οι βόρειοι γείτονές του τον 10<sup>ο</sup> αιώνα* (Byzantium and its neighbours during the tenth century) (Athens: Historikes Ekdoseis St. D. Vasipoulou, 1995), 227 and following.

<sup>41</sup> Moysidou, *Το Βυζάντιο*, 247.