

Byzantine Relations with Northern Peoples in the Tenth Century

INTRODUCTION

Byzantine relations with Bulgaria were complicated in the early years of the tenth century: more complicated than many historians have allowed. The Bulgarian Tsar Symeon (c. 894-927) has been portrayed by both Byzantine and modern authors as an aggressor intent on capturing Constantinople from which he might rule a united Byzantine-Bulgarian empire. However, recent scholarship (notably the work of Bozhilov and Shepard) has questioned this, and maintained that Symeon's ambitions were more limited until the final years of his reign, the 920s, when he engineered a series of confrontations with the Byzantine Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (920-44). (We will cover these years elsewhere: see the letters of Nicholas Mystikos and Theodore Daphnopates.) Symeon died on 27 May 927, and his successor Peter (d. 967) immediately launched a major invasion of the Byzantine administrative district of Macedonia. As one of four sons such a show of strength would have been necessary to secure the support of his father's boyars. However, the Bulgarian troops withdrew swiftly, at the same time razing the fortresses that they had held until then in Thrace, and this early performance was not repeated. Instead, it heralded forty years of apparent harmony and cooperation between the two major powers in the northern Balkans. The reason for the withdrawal, and the centrepiece of the enduring Bulgarian-Byzantine accord was the marriage in 927 of Peter to Maria Lekapena, granddaughter of the (senior) ruling emperor Romanos I Lekapenos. Peter has generally been held to have presided over the dramatic decline of Bulgaria. Thus Browning (1975: 194-5) concludes his stimulating comparative study with the observation 'the grandiose dreams of ... Symeon ended in the dreary reality of Peter's long reign, when Bulgaria became a harmless Byzantine protectorate'. Such interpretations focus on Bulgaria's military prowess, comparing Symeon's successes with his son's inactivity, and draw heavily on Byzantine narrative sources. If we examine the material evidence the indications are entirely different, suggesting a period of political consolidation and economic expansion. Byzantine sources, as much by their silences as their occasional references to the tsar's irenic disposition, bear testimony to the relative peace, if not the prosperity of Peter's reign and his good relations with Constantinople. This is not to suggest that Bulgaria was not considered a potential threat in Constantinople, for as we will see shortly many other peoples were considered suitable allies against Peter. Nevertheless, in the mid-tenth century the productive hinterland of Constantinople was no longer trampled under the boots of Bulgarian troops. Perhaps the most significant indication of the new status quo is the absence of any substantive chapter on the Bulgarians in the treatise known as the *De Administrando Imperio* (*DAI*). Compiled on the instruction of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, to whom it is generally attributed, it comprises 53 chapters of advice addressed to his son and heir Romanos II (959-63). Some chapters are culled directly from earlier histories to provide antiquarian information on peoples and places of contemporary concern to the imperial court. However, the chapters of greatest interest are those based on dossiers of information on the empire's neighbours compiled in the century before the work was completed c. 954. Virtually all that we know of Byzantine

diplomatic procedure is based on the *DAI*, and it is possible to construct a detailed picture of imperial policy in the Balkans and beyond from a close examination of the text.

[Adapted from P. Stephenson, [*Byzantium's Balkans Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900-1204*](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 1.]

DE ADMINISTRANDO IMPERIO

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The *DAI* begins with eight chapters dedicated to the Pechenegs, and in chapter 5 Constantine observes:

To the Bulgarians the emperor of the Romans will appear more formidable, and can impose on them the need for tranquility, if he is at peace with the Pechenegs, because the said Pechenegs are neighbours to these Bulgarians also, and when they wish, either for private gain or to do a favour to the emperor of the Romans, they can easily march against Bulgaria, and with their preponderating multitude and their strength overwhelm and defeat them. And so the Bulgarians also continually struggle and strive to maintain peace and harmony with the Pechenegs. For from having frequently been crushingly defeated by them, they have learned by experience the value of being always at peace with them. (*DAI*: 52.3-13)

Constantine provides further details of the Magyars' socio-political organization in chapter 40 of the *DAI*, entitled 'of the clans of the *Kabaroï* and the *Tourkoi*'.

The first is the aforesaid clan of the *Kabaroï* [which consisted of three distinct clans, and] which split off from the Chazars; the second, of *Nekis*, the third, of *Megeris* [hence the name Magyar]; the fourth of *Kourtougermatos*; the fifth of *Tarianos*; the sixth, *Genach*; the seventh, *Kari*; the eighth, *Kasi*. Having thus combined with one another, the *Kabaroï* dwelt with the *Tourkoi* in the land of the Pechenegs. (*DAI*: 174.1-7).

The edition and full English translation by Jenkins and Moravcsik is available from [Dumbarton Oaks](#).

DE ADMINISTRANDO IMPERIO

The Tourkoi and Megale Moravia

Adapted from Jenkin's translation

Ch. 13. (64-5) On the peoples that are neighbours to the Tourkoi

These peoples are adjacent to the Tourkoi: on their western side Frankia; on their northern side the Pechenegs; and on the south side of great [or former (1.)] Moravia (megale Morabia), the land of Sphendoplokos, which has now been totally devastated by these Tourkoi, and occupied by them. On the side of the mountains, the Croats are adjacent to the Tourkoi.

Ch. 38 (172-3) The Tourkoi, in flight and seeking a place in which to dwell, came and in their turn expelled the inhabitants of great [or former] Moravia (megalen Morabian), and settled in their land, in which the Tourkoi now live to this day.

Ch. 40 (177) In this place a various landmarks of the olden days: first, there is a bridge of the emperor Trajan, next to the principedom of the Tourkoi; then a three days journey from this same bridge, there is Belgrade, in which is the tower of the holy and great Constantine, the emperor; then again, at the running back of the river [i.e. upstream] is the renowned Sirmium by name, a journey of two days from Belgrade; and beyond lies great [or former] Moravia (megale Morabia), the unbaptized, which the Tourkoi have blotted out, over which in former times Sphendoplokos ruled.

Ch. 41 (180-1) The prince (archon) of Moravia, Sphendoplokos, was valiant and terrible to neighbouring peoples. This same Sphendoplokos had three sons, and when he was dying he divided his land into three parts and left a share to each of his three sons, leaving the eldest to be the great prince, and the other two to be under the command of the eldest son ... [metaphor of the three sticks] ...

After the death of this same Sphendoplokos they remained at peace for a year, and then strife and rebellion fell upon them, and they fought a civil war against each other, and the Tourkoi came and utterly ruined them and possessed their land, in which even now they [the Tourkoi] live. And those of the people (ton laon) who were left were scattered and fled for refuge to the adjacent peoples, to the Bulgarians, the Tourkoi and Croatians and the other peoples.

Ch. 42 (182-3) From Thessalonica to the river Danube where stands the city called Belgrade, is a journey of eight days, if one is not travelling in haste but by easy stages. The Tourkoi live beyond the river Danube, in the land of Moravia, but also this side of it, between the Danube and river Sava (2.). From the lower reaches of the river Danube, opposite Dristra, stretches Patzinakia, and its inhabitants control the territory as far as Sarkel, the city of the Khazars, in which garrisons of 300 men are posted annually relieved.

Notes

1. I. Boba notes, when discussing past events, text uses *megale*, but when discussing contemporary events omits it. *Megale* ?must? therefore mean ?former? rather than ?great?, the preferred translation of Czech and Slovak nationalists.

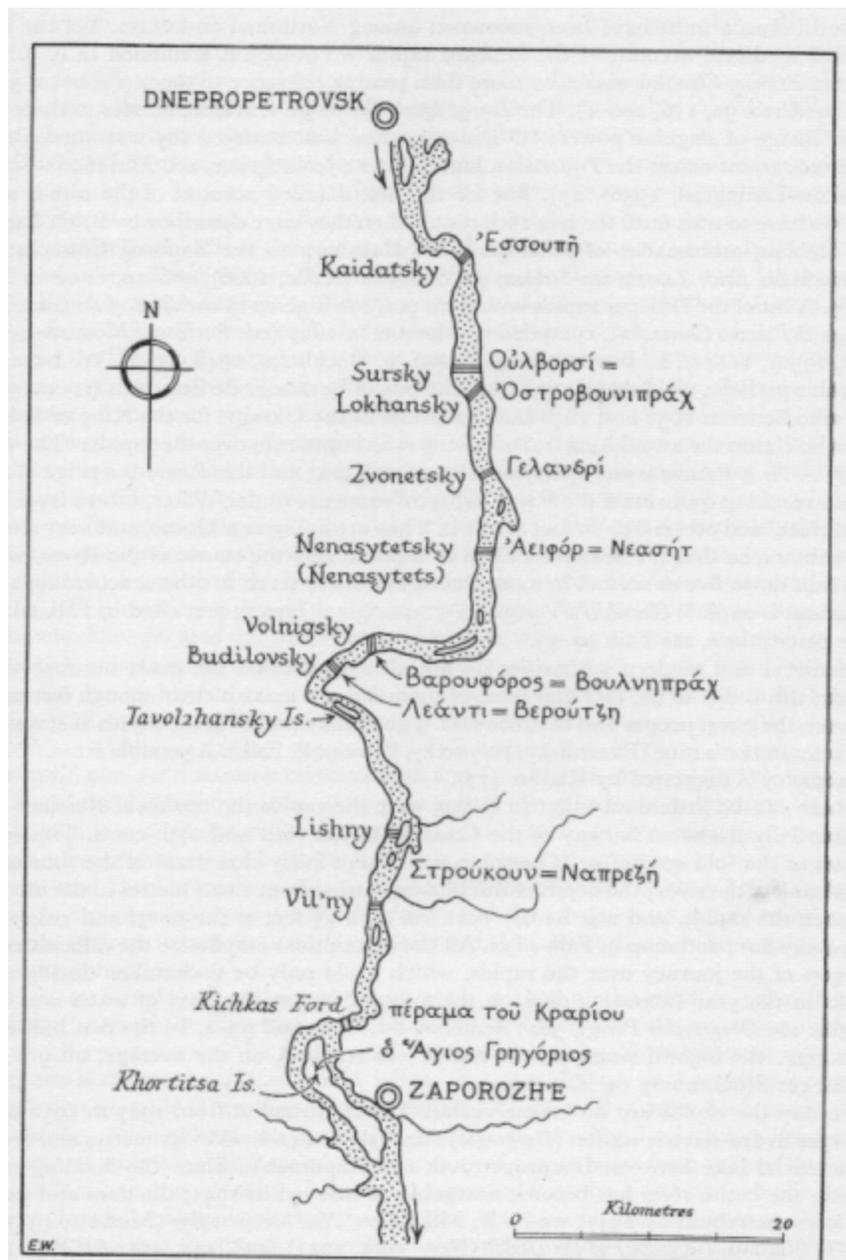
2. I. Boba seeks to correct Jenkin?s reading to: ?The Turks live on the other side of the river Danube, but also on this side of it, in the land of Morava, between the Danube and Sava river.?

The edition and full English translation by Jenkins and Moravcsik is available from [Dumbarton Oaks](#).

DE ADMINISTRANDO IMPERIO

9. Of the coming of the Rus in *monoxyla* from Russia to Constantinople.

The *monoxyla* which come down from outer Russia to Constantinople are from *Nemogarda*, where Sviatoslav, son of Igor, *archon* of Russia, had his seat, and others from the city of *Miliniska* and from Teliutza and Chernigov and from Vishegrad. All these come down the river Dnieper, and are collected together at the city of Kiev, also called Sambatas. Their Slav tributaries, the so-called Krivichians and the Lenzanenes and the rest of the Slavonic regions, cut the *monoxyla* on their mountains in time of winter, and when they have prepared them, as spring approaches, and the ice melts, they bring them on to the neighboring lakes. And since these lakes



The Dnieper rapids

debut into the river Dnieper, they enter thence on to this same river, and come down to Kiev, and draw the ships along to be finished and sell them to the Russians. The Russians buy these bottoms only, furnishing them with oars and rowlocks and other tackle from their old *monoxyla*, which they dismantle; and so they fit them out. And in the month of June they move off down the river Dnieper and come to Vitichev, which is a tributary city of the Russians, and there they gather during two or three days; and when all the *monoxyla* are collected together, then they set out, and come down the said Dnieper river. And first they come to the first barrage, called Essoupi, which means in Russian and Slavonic 'Do not sleep!'; the barrage itself is as narrow as the width of the Polo-ground; in the middle of it are rooted high rocks, which stand out like islands. Against these, then, comes the water and wells up and dashes down over the other side, with a mighty and terrific din. Therefore the Russians do not venture to pass between them, but put in to the bank hard by, disembarking the men on to dry land leaving the rest of the goods on board the *monoxyla*; they then strip and, feeling with their feet to avoid striking on a rock. This they do, some at the prow, some amidships, while others again, in the stern, punt with poles; and with all this careful procedure they pass this first barrage, edging round under the river-bank. When they have passed this barrage, they re-embark the others from the dry land and sail away, and come down to the second barrage, called in Russian Oulvorski, and in Slavonic Ostrovouniprach, which means 'the Island of the Barrage'. This one is like the first, awkward and not to be passed through. Once again they disembark the men and convey the *monoxyla* past, as on the first occasion. Similarly they pass the third barrage also, called Gelandri, which means in Slavonic 'Noise of the Barrage', and then the fourth barrage, the big one, called in Russian Aefor, and in Slavonic Neasit, because the pelicans nest in the stones of the barrage. At this barrage all put into land prow foremost, and those who are deputed to keep the watch with them get out, and off they go, these men, and keep vigilant watch for the Pechenegs. The remainder, taking up the goods which they have on board the *monoxyla*, conduct the slaves in their chains past by land, six miles, until they are through the barrage. Then, partly dragging their *monoxyla*, partly portaging them on their shoulders, they convey them to the far side of the barrage; and then, putting them on the river and loading up their baggage, they embark themselves, and again sail off in them. When they come to the fifth barrage, called in Russian Varouforos, and in Slavonic Vouniprach, because it forms a large lake, they again convey their *monoxyla* through at the edges of the river, as at the first and second barrages, and arrive at the sixth barrage, called in Russian Leanti, and in Slavonic Veroutzi, that is 'the Boiling of the Water', and this too they pass similarly. And thence they sail away to the seventh barrage, called in Russian Stroukoun, and in Slavonic Naprezi, which means 'Little Barrage'. This they pass at the so-called ford of Vrar, where the Chersonites cross over from Russia and the Pechenegs to Cherson; which ford is as wide as the Hippodrome, and, measured upstream from the bottom as far as the rocks break surface, a bow-shot in length. It is at this point, therefore, that the Pechenegs come down and attack the Russians. After traversing this place, they reach the island called St. Gregory, on which island they perform their sacrifices because a gigantic oak-tree stands there; and they sacrifice live cocks. Arrows, too, they peg in round about, and others bread and meat, or something of whatever each may have, as is their custom. They also throw lots regarding the cocks, whether to slaughter them, or to eat them as well, or to leave them alive. From this island onwards the Russians do not fear the Pecheneg until they reach the river Selinas. So then they start off thence and sail for four days, until they reach the lake which forms the mouth of the river, on which is the island of St. Aitherios. Arrived at this island, they rest themselves there for two or three days. And they re-equip their *monoxyla* with such tackle as is needed, sails and

masts and rudders, which they bring with them. Since this lake is the mouth of this river, as has been said, and carries on down to the sea, and the island of St. Aitherios lies on the sea, they come thence to the Dniester river, and having got safely there they rest again. But when the weather is propitious, they put to sea and come to the river called Aspros, and after resting there too in like manner, they again set out and come to the Selinas, as is called a branch of the Danube river. And until they are past the river Selinas, the Pechenegs keep pace with them. And if it happens that the sea casts a *monoxylon* on shore, they all put in to land, in order to present a united opposition to the Pechenegs. But after the Selinas they fear nobody, but, entering the territory of Bulgaria, they come to the mouth of the Danube. From the Danube they proceed to the Konopas, and from the Konopas to Constantia, and from Constantia to the river of Varna, and from Varna they come to the river Ditzina, all of which are Bulgarian territory. From the Ditzina they reach the district of Mesembria, and there at last their voyage, fraught with such travail and terror, such difficulty and danger, is at an end. The severe manner of life of these same Russians in winter time is as follows. When the month of November begins, their chiefs together with all the Russians at once leave Kiev and go off on the 'poliudia', which means 'rounds', that is, to the Slavonic regions of the Vervians and Drugovichians and Krivichians and Severians and the rest of the Slavs who are tributaries of the Russians. There they are maintained throughout the winter, but then once more, starting from the month of April, when the ice of the Dnieper river melts, they come back to Kiev. They then pick up their *monoxyla*, as has been said above, and fit them out, and come down to Romania.

The Ouzes can attack the Pechenegs.

The edition and English translation of the *DAI* by Gyula Moravcsik and Romilly Jenkins (CFHB 1, Washington, D. C., 1967) is still available from [Dumbarton Oaks](#).

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