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ANNA KOMNENE'S NARRATIVE OF THE WAR AGAINST THE SCYTHIANS*

The Alexiad by Anna Komnene is well-known. At times it raises controversial issues (e.g. concerning "full" authorship of the Byzantine princess), but all in all it represents a very valuable source of information. In this paper the author strives to examine just how precise and valuable the pieces of information she gives us in connection with the war of her father emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081–1118) against the Scythians (the Pechenegs) are. He also mentions chronological issues which at times are able to "darken" the course of events and render their putting back into the right context difficult. There are many inconsistencies of this type in Anna Komnene's narrative and for these reasons it is important to reestablish clear chronological order of events. Finally the author presents a concise description of the war against the Pechenegs based on the findings in the previous parts of his paper.

Key words: Byzantium, Pechenegs, medieval, nomads, *Alexiad*, warfare

The *Alexiad* by Anna Komnene¹ is well-known to most of the Byzantine history scholars. At times it raised controversial issues (e.g. concerning "full" or "partial" authorship of the Byzantine princess),² but all in all it represents a valuable written source. Regardless of these issues most of the scholars involved agree that it will always remain a unique piece, a special case, of Byzantine literature,³ despite the obvious fact that Anna Komnene's

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¹ *Alexias* (2001).

² See: HOWARD-JOHNSTON (1996: 260–302); MACRIDES (2000: 63–81); REINSCH (2000: 83–105).

³ BUCKLER (1968: 256); HUNGER (1978: 408); MACRIDES (2000: 72); REINSCH (2000: 101).

main goal was to praise her father's deeds⁴ and the precise narration of the historical events was only secondary. One of the deeds achieved by Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) that “should certainly not be lost in silence”,⁵ and which Anna celebrates with her extensive writing, was his victory in a protracted and costly war against the Scythians. Anna Komnene is stressing how many hard labors this war demanded of her father and how sweet and well earned his final victory over this gruesome enemy tribe was. One can almost feel the immense relief felt by the members of Constantinopolitan elite and also simple inhabitants of the Queen of the cities when the war finally ended. They even composed a short chant in order to celebrate and commemorate this great event.⁶ But who exactly are those Scythians and why they earned such a special attention of the Byzantine princess?

Most of the scholars unequivocally agree that Scythians of Anna Komnene are the Pechenegs, nomadic Turkic-speaking grouping of various tribes. Their early history is mostly unknown; the very first historical record of the Pechenegs dates back to the 7th century and occurs in the Chinese historical annals *Sui-shu*. According to this early source the Pechenegs inhabited the lands between the Aral Lake and the Caspian Sea in Central Asia (modern Kazakhstan).⁷ In the early 9th century they were expelled from there by their more powerful and troublesome neighbors, the Turkish Oghuz and Kipchak/Cumans, moved further westward, and settled between the Ural and the Volga river.⁸ Beyond the Volga was the realm of the Khazars, the allies of the Byzantine Empire on the Black sea steppe. But the Oghuz Turks continued to push on, and also made an alliance with the Khazars against the Pechenegs. The Pechenegs were trapped, but in 889 they somehow managed to break loose by defeating the Khazars and they took over most of their territory.⁹ Several years later they also defeated and expelled the Hungarians towards their new homeland in Carpathian basin and from this time on they entered the orb of the Byzantine politics and

⁴ Purple-born Byzantine princess declares this goal openly in the introduction of the *Alexiad*. *Alexias* (2001: 6).

⁵ *Alexias* (2001: 6).

⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 248–249).

⁷ PRITSAK (1981b: 163); PRITSAK (1981a: 8); GOLDEN (1990: 271); GÖCKENJAN (1993: 1845–1846); SPINEI (2003: 113).

⁸ *De adm. imp.* (1967: 166); PRITSAK (1981a: 9); GOLDEN (1990: 272); SPINEI (2003: 113).

⁹ *De adm. imp.* (1967: 166–167); GOLDEN (1990: 272); GÖCKENJAN (1993: 1846); PRITSAK (1981b: 163).

within it they became useful allies firstly and foremost against Bulgaria and then against the Rus of Kiev.¹⁰

This almost “idyllic” situation in the Pontic steppe (from the Byzantine diplomacy point of view) lasted throughout the 10th century and altered dramatically only in the first two decades of the 11th century, during the reign of another famous Byzantine emperor – Basileios II Bulgaroktonos (976–1025). There were two main reasons for this change; firstly – the old nemesis of the Pechenegs – the Oghuz/Ghuzz Turks – now simply called Uzes (in Russian sources *Torki*), resumed their push westwards, and begun to generate more and more pressure on the Pecheneg territory.¹¹ Secondly, the continuous wars of the Byzantines against the Bulgarians since the 980s ended up with the crushing military defeat of the latter in the battle of Kleidion pass in 1014 and subsequently with the occupation of all the Bulgarian territory by the victorious Byzantine armies. This resulted in the fact that the Byzantine frontier followed the flow of the river Danube as it had done some four centuries earlier. The Pechenegs and the Byzantines became direct neighbors.¹²

Since then the situation was deteriorating; the Pechenegs hard pressed by the Uzes sometime after ca. 1017¹³ lost all their territories east of the Dnieper and were steadily moving westward.¹⁴ In the process the nomads must have most probably lost a lot of their cattle and horses too, which must have undermined their nomad economy.¹⁵ They were desperate to find new resources. This in fact explains why in 1027, just two years after the death of Basil II, the Pechenegs attacked the newly recovered Byzantine territories in the Balkans.¹⁶ They were repulsed, but in the following years, they kept

¹⁰ See: *De adm. imp.* (1967: 40, 50, 52).

¹¹ GOLDEN (1990: 276); DIACONU (1970: 59).

¹² Scyl. (1979: 355–356); OIKONOMIDES (1976: 76); STEPHENSON (1999: 89).

¹³ Probably in this year started a new wave of migratory movements in Eurasian steppe triggered by Pseudo-Kitans. Attacked by the Tanguts the Pseudo-Kitans moved into territory of the Kimak tribal federation (including tribes of Kipchaks/Cumans), which collapsed. Kipchak/Cumans in their turn started to migrate into eastern Oghuz/Uzes territories thereby pushing them against the Pechenegs. PRITSAK (1981b: 162–163).

¹⁴ Scyl. (1979: 455); ПАСОВСКИЙ (1933: 8); PRITSAK (1981a: 21); ПЛИТНЕВА (1958: 217); SPINEI (2003: 131).

¹⁵ The pressure of the Uzes and loss of grazing grounds must have had impact on the size of the Pecheneg animal herds. The domestic animals (including horses, but primarily sheep and cattle) also suffer when they have to move fast from one location to another without stops for rest, watering and grazing, which is standard situation when one nomadic society is chased after by another (in this case the Pechenegs by the Uzes). See: MASANOV (1990: 199).

¹⁶ Scyl. (1979: 373); DIACONU (1970: 40); SPINEI (2003: 131). The territory adjacent to

coming back (during this period they not only raided Byzantium, but also invaded Hungarian kingdom and Kievan Rus as well).¹⁷ Another massive Pecheneg invasion into Byzantine province of Paradunavon took place in the winter of 1046/47.¹⁸ This time, the Pechenegs crossed the frozen Danube with the firm intention to stay, and even the first Byzantino-Pecheneg war of 1049–1053 did not eventuate into their dislodging from the Byzantine territory.¹⁹

Between the 1050s and 1070s, as the political, economic and military situation of the Byzantine Empire worsened, the Pechenegs living in Paradunavon were interfering with the local population, and some of their chieftains (e.g. Tatos/Tatrys) even attained a position of power.²⁰ The open break with Constantinople occurred in 1072 or 1074. Subsequently, the Pechenegs from Paradunavon resumed raiding the Byzantine lands south of Haemus Mountains; to the provinces of Thrace and Macedonia.²¹ Sometimes, they received help from their relatives, the “free” Pechenegs living north of the Danube.²² Their raids were largely enabled by the general political unrest in Byzantium at that time. Not only could the Pechenegs from Paristrion invade Thrace practically unopposed, but they also became a desired military force for the various Byzantine insurgent generals (e.g. famous Nikephoros Bryennios), or for the Paulician leaders in the area around Philipoupolis (today Plovdiv in Bulgaria).²³

the new frontier was that of newly established province of Paradunavon (also called Paristrion). On Paradunavon see: MADGEARU (2013a: 68); KÜHN (1991: 223–226).

- 17 Scyl. (1979: 373); РАСОВСКИЙ (1933: 130); ПЛЕТНЕВА (1958: 216); SPINEI (2003: 125–126, 131).
- 18 See: SHEPARD (1975: 61–89) а КАЖДАН (1963: 177–184); KAŽDAN (1977: 65–77), and also LEFORT (1976: 265–303); SPINEI (2003: 132–136).
- 19 Concerning the war see: Scyl. (1979: 465–473, 475–476); Attal. (1853: 30–43); Zon. (1897: 644); DIACONU (1970: 73–76). The Pechenegs were instead treated as *sym-machoi*: MADGEARU (2013b: 213).
- 20 On Tatos see: *Alexias* (2001: 199). On population in Paradunavon during the second half of the 11th Century see: ТАРКОВА-ZAIIMOVA (1974: 331–339); ТАРКОВА-ZAIIMOVA (1979: 615–619).
- 21 SPINEI (2003: 138). The reason for this break of *status quo* was the new wave of Pecheneg settlers that arrived to Paradunavon from the areas north of the Danube between the years 1074–1078. *Alexias* (2001: 199); MEŠKO (2012: 62–65); MEŠKO (2013: 191).
- 22 We discussed this problem in length elsewhere: MEŠKO (2013: 188–197).
- 23 ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 147); MALAMUT (1995: 132–134); Attal. (1853: 290, 302); Bryen. (1975: 267–277); Scyl. Con. (1968: 184); ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΟΥ (1959: 111); DIACONU (1970: 111); SPINEI (2003: 141).

In other words, the Pechenegs that Anna Komnene had knowledge of during her childhood and teenage years were numerous and quite deeply entangled in the Balkan affairs of the Byzantine Empire. In her account of the war of her father Alexios I Komnenos against them she appears to be only vaguely familiar with the fact that there were various groups and her frequent use of archaizing name Scythians (*Skythai*) reflects partly this lack of precise knowledge. At least it is clear that by Scythians she unquestionably refers to the Pechenegs. The further differentiation between various Pecheneg groups she makes is only superficial. In majority of the cases she fails to mention the allegiance of the Scythians in question, so that we have very few clues which of the Pecheneg groups are being mentioned. Only rarely is she more specific as she mostly identifies Pecheneg groups with the names of their leaders (Tatos/Tatrys, Satzas, Tzelgu).²⁴ Yet, there is one important feature in her account that Anna Komnene does mention; the division between the Pechenegs living in Paristrion, and those who were still “free” and lived north of the Danube.²⁵

Apart from Anna Komnene's lack of precise differentiation between various groups of Pechenegs, her account includes more severe inconsistencies of chronological character.²⁶ Only six times Anna Komnene gives us precise dates of the events in her account of the war. First exact date can be found in her description of the reception in the Byzantine army camp at Lardea, where a strong group of 150 Pecheneg envoys was present. During this event the participants witnessed a solar eclipse.²⁷ Five other dates can be found in the text of the Book VIII, and they are solely connected to the sequence of events which took place during the year 1091. Thus, thanks to Anna Komnene we know that her father Alexios started his campaign on February 14, 1091 (Friday).²⁸ We also know that the next day²⁹ he fought against Pechenegs near the city of Choïrobakchoi, and that in the morning of February 17, 1091 (Monday) he was already returning as a victor to

²⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 199, 203); SPINEI (2003: 141).

²⁵ Tzelgu with his army was obliged to cross the Danube and the province of Paradunavon in order to attack Byzantium. See: *Alexias* (2001: 203).

²⁶ First historian who decided to deal with this matter in a systematic manner was a German scholar K. Dieter: DIETER (1894: 386–390). Latest attempts to clarify the chronological errors in the *Alexiad* concerning the war against the Pechenegs are summarized and commented in our contribution, see: MEŠKO (2011a: 134–148).

²⁷ *Alexias* (2001: 207–208).

²⁸ *Alexias* (2001: 236); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 253); CHALANDON (1900: 128); GAUTIER (1970: 9).

²⁹ *Alexias* (2001: 238); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 253); CHALANDON (1900: 128); GAUTIER (1970: 9).

Constantinople.³⁰ Further on, the last military campaign of the war against the Pechenegs started on March 23, 1091, the day of the spring equinox.³¹ The last positively established date is of course the day when the decisive battle of Lebonion was fought, on April 29, 1091 (Tuesday).³² Furthermore, Anna Komnene mentions three times the coming of spring and two times the beginning of winter which again does not provide useful support for any chronology of the war, even when we take into account only the events that happened after 1086 (we still have to deal with five full years).³³

The War against the Scythians

When on 4th of April 1081 Alexios Komnenos was crowned emperor in Hagia Sophia – at the age of just 24 – the old empire was facing huge problems. The Byzantines virtually lost control over most of Asia Minor, once the heartland of Byzantium, and also the Balkans were exposed to the threat of Norman duke Robert Guiscard, who had only 10 years earlier accomplished the conquest of what was left of the Byzantine possessions in the South of Italy.³⁴ Only the Pechenegs appeared to be appeased for the time being, due to a peace treaty of October 1080.³⁵ But it was all too apparent that they too, would strike again soon. The young emperor had some hard decisions to make. Money in form of taxes is vital to any kind of government, and the ruler of Byzantium was no exception. Due to the fact that at that particular moment only the Balkan provinces represented the only area under the control of the Byzantines capable of providing taxes, Alexios decided to abandon the struggle in Asia Minor for the time being. He made peace with the Turkish ruler Süleyman ibn Qutalmish (1077–1086) and de-

³⁰ *Alexias* (2001: 239); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 255); CHALANDON (1900: 128); GAUTIER (1970: 9). K. Dieter dates this short campaign against Pechenegs in February 1090, thus a whole year earlier. No other researcher followed his assumption. See: DIETER (1894: 390).

³¹ *Alexias* (2001: 242).

³² *Alexias* (2001: 249); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 283); DIETER (1894: 386); CHALANDON (1900: 133).

³³ For the coming of spring see: *Alexias* (2001: 203, 220, 242), and for the coming of winter, *Alexias* (2001: 220, 235). K. Dieter writes that Anna Komnena mentions three times the coming of winter, starting with the year 1086. Even after most careful reading we were able to find only two, not three such allusions. Compare: DIETER (1894: 387, 390), and *Alexias* (2001: 204).

³⁴ *Ord. Vit.* (1983: 100); MATTHEW (1992: 16–17); MCQUEEN (1986: 428).

³⁵ *Scyl. Con.* (1968: 185).

parted from Constantinople to face the Norman invasion.³⁶ It was a very costly war, which occupied the emperor's full attention and ended only in the summer of 1085, when, luckily for the Byzantines, Robert Guiscard died on the island of Kerkyra.³⁷

That was the main reason why, when sometime during the summer of 1083³⁸ the Pechenegs from Paristrion renewed their raids in the Balkans, Alexios did not deal with their attack in person, but sent his entrusted general of Georgian origins Gregory Pakourianos against them. Unluckily, this first Pecheneg attack during the reign of Alexios Komnenos is not very well known. This is hardly surprising, for there is no mention of it, only a few indirect hints, in the work of Anna Komnene.³⁹ Several researchers⁴⁰ tried to extract more specific details from the *Alexiad* and from the *typikon* of Pakourianos,⁴¹ but the final result is only limited and leaves room for speculations.

We also do not know where this initial attack did take place;⁴² the only information we have is that Pakourianos was successful and the Pechenegs were beaten off.⁴³ Not for long though, because in 1086 they were again raiding the Byzantine provinces south of Haemus, yet again in assistance of a new troublemaker with Paulician background – Traulos.⁴⁴ This time, too, Alexios Komnenos chose to let Pakourianos and local military units from Macedonia and Thrace deal with them.⁴⁵ However, in the battle of Beliatoba north of Philipoupolis the Byzantines were routed and Pakourianos, along with his second-in-command Nikolaos Branias, died on the battlefield.⁴⁶ In order

³⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 116).

³⁷ *Gesta* (1961: 254); *Alexias* (2001: 180).

³⁸ MEŠKO (2011a: 137–142).

³⁹ For example Alexios's speech at the synod of Blachernae in December 1083 or January 1084, where he mentions the attacks of the Pechenegs: *Alexias* (2001: 172), or Alexios's second attempt to deconsecrate Church possessions, *Alexias* (2001: 145); MEŠKO (2011a: 140).

⁴⁰ АРУТЮНОВА (1972: 115–119); FRANKOPAN (1996: 278–281).

⁴¹ The text of the *typikon* was edited and published by P. Gautier, see: GAUTIER (1984: 5–145).

⁴² Maybe it was directed, as was the later attack in 1086, in the area just north of Philipoupolis. MEŠKO (2012: 125–126).

⁴³ GAUTIER (1984: 43).

⁴⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 174); CHALANDON (1900: 107); ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΟΥ (1959: 115); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 182).

⁴⁵ *Alexias* (2001: 200); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 155); CHALANDON (1900: 109); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 185).

⁴⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 200); CHALANDON (1900: 109); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 156).

to rectify the damage done, Alexios sent his trusted general of Turkish origin Tatikios with fresh troops, including mercenaries from the Latin West, into the area and they forced the nomads to withdraw.⁴⁷

In fact, during this first stage of the war, the pattern of the military confrontations among Byzantines and Pechenegs from Paristrion did not differ much from the way it was in the past. There were no major shifts in the overall situation, and no battle was by any means decisive. Alexios Komnenos, as the other emperors before him starting with Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055), was recognizing the Pecheneg settlement in Paristrion as a fact, and only tried to maintain the *status quo*. He did not even “bother”, as we have seen, to fight against them in person. Alexios Komnenos’s main adversaries were the Normans of south Italy, and after their defeat in 1085 the Seljuks in Asia Minor. This also seems to be reason why Anna Komnene does pay so little attention to this initial stage of the war.

The way in which the war against the Pechenegs was fought changed dramatically in early spring of 1087.⁴⁸ For the first time, there was an intervention from outside, represented by the Pechenegs living north of the Danube. Anna Komnene is very clear at this point, and even in spite of this most of the researchers are overlooking this important distinction. Tzelgu, the leader of the Pechenegs living north of the Danube,⁴⁹ possibly because of the instigation of Pecheneg chieftains from Paristrion, or because of the pleas of Solomon, the ex-king of the Hungarian kingdom (who perhaps wanted to use the help of the Pechenegs to carve out some new principality for himself)⁵⁰ decided to lead an all-out attack deep into Byzantine territories. It is rather frustrating that, as in the case of the initial attack of the war, Anna Komnene does not provide the necessary information in connection with the motives that pushed the Pechenegs living north of the Danube into this major military adventure. Nor does she describe the first phase of their attack, since we learn about it only when the Pecheneg army swept by the city of Adrianoupolis and penetrated deep into Thrace.⁵¹ The whole account

⁴⁷ *Alexias* (2001: 200–202); SPINEI (2003: 142).

⁴⁸ Also in this case the chronology is only estimative, but since the major Byzantine counterattack is dated by the famous solar eclipse to 1st of August 1087, all the previous events fall naturally to spring and summer months of the same year.

⁴⁹ *Alexias* (2001: 203), see also the footnote 25 above.

⁵⁰ Anna Komnena mentions the ex-king of Hungary only once in her account. *Alexias* (2001: 203). For further information about the story of Solomon see: MEŠKO (2011b: 77–94).

⁵¹ *Alexias* (2001: 203). Compare with: CHALANDON (1900: 112); DIACONU (1978: 36); SPINEI (2003: 142).

of the alleged fighting in the Haemus mountain passes is simply missing.⁵² As mentioned above, we can only suppose that the initial phase of this great Pecheneg attack was in fact similar to the later attack of the Cumans in 1094/1095, which Anna Komnene describes in much greater detail.⁵³

Also this time, it was up to local military units, the *tagmata* from Thrace and Macedonia under the command of Nikolaos Maurokatakalon and (Theodore?) Bempetziotes, and possibly some minor reinforcements from the capital, to deal with this threat.⁵⁴ The Byzantine forces shadowed the movements of the huge nomad army for a while. Both commanders were reluctant to attack, for the Pechenegs seemed to be too numerous.⁵⁵ Finally, the battle was fought south of Adrianople at a location called Koule, and the Byzantines miraculously prevailed. The Pecheneg chieftain Tzelgu and ex-Hungarian king Salomon, and many of their warriors, were slain.⁵⁶ There is no direct evidence in the *Alexiad* that the Pechenegs from Paristrion took part in this campaign although they actually might have taken advantage of it, and were pillaging in the rear of the fighting armies.⁵⁷

In any case, Anna Komnene states that this unexpected major victory amazed Alexios Komnenos so much that he decided to respect the *status quo* no longer and to solve the Pecheneg problem once and for all.⁵⁸ This was the first time since 1059 that the Byzantines would take the initiative and wage war on enemy territory. It is also possible that the emperor and his military commanders did not simply wish to renew the direct control over the province of Paradunavon which eluded them for more than thirty years (since 1053), but to put an end to the existence of the Pechenegs south of

52 This fact has already been noted by K. Dieter. DIETER (1894: 387). Among contemporary researchers it is mainly A. Madgearu who strongly supports the hypothesis about initial fighting in the mountain passes before the Pechenegs reached Thracian plain. See: MADGEARU (1999: 430).

53 See: *Alexias* (2001: 283–295).

54 *Alexias* (2001: 203).

55 Anna Komnene estimates the Tzelgu's army as 80,000 men strong. *Alexias* (2001: 203). This seems to be rather an exaggeration; we suppose that the half of this figure is closer to reality. See: MEŠKO (2012: 156).

56 *Alexias* (2001: 203–204); SPINEI (2003: 142). Tzelgu fell during the battle, but it seems from the account in the Hungarian *Chronicon pictum* that Hungarian ex-king Solomon was probably able to flee from the battlefield, only to be killed later by the pursuing Byzantines. *Chron. pic.* (1937: 409–410). Although according to this text he was able to extricate himself from the pursuit, his death is confirmed by other Western sources, see: Saxo Gram. (1926: 724); Bernold (1926: 446).

57 *Alexias* (2001: 204).

58 *Alexias* (2001: 204). See also: MEŠKO (2013: 198–199); SPINEI (2003: 142).

the Danube. At the end of May 1087, the preparations for the major military campaign were set in motion.⁵⁹ Importance of this campaign for the final outcome of the war is corroborated by a nearly total coverage provided by Anna Komnene in her *Alexiad*.⁶⁰ The Pechenegs in Paradunavon recognized the intentions of the Byzantine emperor and while he was mustering his army in a camp outside the city of Lardea in Thrace, they send an embassy to him.⁶¹ Tatos, the Pecheneg ruler of Dristra (now Silistra) on the banks of the Danube, left Dristra and rode out to the Pontic steppe to ask the Cumans for help against the imminent Byzantine invasion.⁶²

In the morning of 1st August 1087⁶³ the Pecheneg embassy offered very alluring proposals to Alexios Komnenos, as many as 30,000 Pecheneg mercenaries for service in the Byzantine army, should he be willing to stop his preparations and cancel the attack.⁶⁴ Alexios declined, thinking he had the opportunity to crush his enemies. But eventually the final outcome of this campaign (which was the biggest concentration of military forces of the western half of the Empire since the battle of Dyrrachion in 1081) turned out to be very different from what the both adversaries expected. In the battle near Dristra⁶⁵ in mid-August 1087,⁶⁶ the Byzantine forces of some 15,000 troops⁶⁷ were decisively defeated and subsequently crippled by serious losses in manpower and horses.⁶⁸ Alexios himself barely managed to escape. Moreover, the winning nomads, apart from booty, took a lot of Byzantine rank-and-file soldiers and noblemen captives, but they were willing

⁵⁹ *Alexias* (2001: 204–206). For the chronological issues see: MEŠKO (2012: 156), footnotes 666 and 668.

⁶⁰ In fact it is one of the most detailed accounts of any military campaign in the *Alexiad*.

⁶¹ *Alexias* (2001: 207).

⁶² *Alexias* (2001: 209); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 165); SPINEI (2003: 143).

⁶³ This date was proposed by K. Dieter and F. Chalandon, see: DIETER (1894: 388–389); CHALANDON (1900: 114). For more information see also: MEŠKO (2011a: 135).

⁶⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 207); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 159–160); CHALANDON (1900: 114); DIACONU (1970: 117); SPINEI (2003: 143).

⁶⁵ The exact location of this battle was discovered only recently in the vicinity of today Dulovo in Bulgaria. ЙОТОВ – НИКОЛОВ (2009: 438).

⁶⁶ Probably on August 14, 1087. See: MEŠKO (2012: 156), footnote 703.

⁶⁷ From the enumeration of the commanders and their units before the battle by Anna Komnene emerges an impression that Alexios Komnenos mustered for his campaign against the Pechenegs most of his western *tagmata*. Only units that were destroyed in the battle of Dyrrachion (e.g. *Excubitores*, *Vestiaritai*) in 1081 are missing. MEŠKO (2012: 170–173).

⁶⁸ *Alexias* (2001: 211–214); MALAMUT (1995: 138).

to set them free for ransom in cash.⁶⁹ Yet the Pechenegs were unable to take advantage of their victory, because their allies the Cumans led by Tatos did finally arrive.⁷⁰ They were late for fighting the Byzantines, but their leaders claimed they should be given a part of the booty to cover their trouble of travelling far from their homes in the Pontic steppe to the lower Danube.⁷¹ The Pecheneg chieftains made the mistake of not complying with their wishes, and so in the fall of 1087 the Cumans attacked and defeated them.⁷² After that they withdrew back to their homeland, promising to return and continue to fight their former allies.⁷³

With the new Cuman threat looming in their rear, the Pechenegs from Paradunavon were more susceptible to Byzantine calls for peace. A peace treaty was signed,⁷⁴ but the Pechenegs soon ignored it (with the Cuman army gone), because during the winter of 1087/1088 their war bands reappeared in Thrace and Macedonia.⁷⁵ Moreover, it seems that they intended to settle there, as during the next winter of 1088/89 they did not withdraw back to Paradunavon.⁷⁶ It is possible that the Pechenegs wanted to avoid a new Cuman attack by settling south of the Haemus.⁷⁷

There was little that Alexios Komnenos could do in order to prevent these upsetting events from happening, since his western *tagmata* were terribly shaken. Eventually, from time to time the Byzantines were able to win a skirmish or two, but this did not change the overall difficult situation. The only viable strategy was to avoid any major battles, wall-in in the fortified

⁶⁹ *Alexias* (2001: 214); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 164); CHALANDON (1900: 117); SPINEI (2003: 104, 143).

⁷⁰ It was the fourth appearance of the Cumans in the Balkans which they „visited“ for the first time in 1078.

⁷¹ *Alexias* (2001: 216); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 164); CHALANDON (1900: 117); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 195); DIACONU (1970: 119); SPINEI (2003: 143).

⁷² *Alexias* (2001: 216); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 165); CHALANDON (1900: 117); MORAVCSIK (1958: 228); SPINEI (2003: 143).

⁷³ *Alexias* (2001: 217–218); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 165); CHALANDON (1900: 117). See also: SHEPARD (1985: 262–265). The Cumans eventually returned in spring 1091, which was the hour of biggest need for the Byzantines, see below.

⁷⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 218); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 197); DIACONU (1970: 130); SPINEI (2003: 143).

⁷⁵ *Alexias* (2001: 219); CHALANDON (1900: 119).

⁷⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 220); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 250); CHALANDON (1900: 124); DIACONU (1970: 131).

⁷⁷ This idea is not new, and it was firstly formulated by V. Vasilevskij, see: ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 248); МЕШКО (2013: 204).

positions in Thrace,⁷⁸ seek for allies, restore own military strength, and wait until the Pechenegs finally leave, or the military might of Byzantium is restored enough to risk another pitched battle (there is a strong resemblance with the strategy used by the Byzantines during the first war against the Pechenegs in 1050/51).⁷⁹ This required a lot of time and patience, and there was no immediate chance for glorious victory in the battle. Thus, with the arrival of winter 1087 Alexios Komnenos returned to Constantinople and left the care of the military operations to his competent commanders. With his departure from the theatre of war his daughter Anna loses interest in the exact course of the struggle against the nomads, and her account becomes laconic, dark, and confused. In fact it is one of the most mixed-up accounts in the whole *Alexiad*. In this way the events during the time period from 1088 till the end of 1090 are the least known and their chronology highly inaccurate.⁸⁰

The military “disaster” at Dristra compelled Alexios Komnenos to another move that he was probably not contemplating beforehand and which is not mentioned by his daughter. In the spring of 1088 the Byzantine emperor undertook the first steps to restore the relationship with the papacy (interrupted since the Great Schism in 1054).⁸¹ Unfortunately, for the biggest part of his pontificate the new pope Urban II was occupied by the struggle against his anti-pope Clement III and German Emperor Henry IV and therefore was in no position to provide any immediate support.⁸²

Until the beginning of the year 1091 the Pechenegs were gradually pushing closer and closer to the Byzantine capital, and in spite of occasional

⁷⁸ The biggest fortified military base of the Byzantines was the city of Adrianoupolis, and there were also several other fortified locations, for example Tzouroulon (today Çorlu), Brysis (today Pınarhisar), Bizyé (today Vize), and Médeia (today Kiziköy), etc., see: PRALONG (1988: 179–200).

⁷⁹ SHEPARD (1985: 251, 260–269). The question of the Byzantine „operational code“ was recently discussed by E. N. Luttwak. His theoretical deductions are in accord with the general strategy of Alexios Komnenos after 1088. See: LUTTWAK (2009: 415–418).

⁸⁰ DIETER (1894: 390); CHALANDON (1900: 119); GAUTIER (1962: 96); GAUTIER (1977: 217).

⁸¹ It seems though that the initiative came from the newly elected pope Urban II (who was seeking aid against the German emperor Henry IV) and not from Alexios Komnenos. See: Ord. Vit. (1983: 166): „*Urbanus (...) missit legatos et epistolas Romanæ auctoritatis Francis et Grecis*“.

⁸² This would also explain why the „détente“ between Urban II and Alexios Komnenos was developing only very slowly. HOLTZMANN (1928: 47–50).

Byzantine successes⁸³ they were within the sight of its walls by March 8.⁸⁴ In spite of that fact, the Byzantines still hoped to regain all the occupied territories eventually, as long as they retained control over the strongholds and walled cities in the area. However, a new deadly danger emerged, and again it came from outside. Simultaneously with the Pecheneg attacks in Thrace, the Seljuk emir of Smyrna Tzachas,⁸⁵ possessing a small but very capable pirate fleet,⁸⁶ was about to conquer a large part of the Byzantine Aegean.⁸⁷ Due to the lack of care, the Byzantine navy, once dominating the Aegean, apart from few units was virtually non-existent, and the building of new ships was a time and money consuming process. To make the situation even worse, Tzachas's successes made him believe that he could actually capture Constantinople itself. But in order to succeed in this endeavor, he needed an army that would cut off the Byzantine capital from the rest of the Empire. Therefore in the early spring Tzachas sent messengers to the Pecheneg chieftains with a proposal of a military alliance. He asked them to capture the Thracian peninsula, so he could attack Constantinople with his fleet.⁸⁸

Alexios Komnenos could wait no longer; he had to act quickly, before the plans of the ambitious Turkish emir could take final shape. His holding strategy was now useless. There would be no *modus vivendi* with the Pechenegs, the only option was to defeat them before they could become the tools of the Seljuks. First of all, he sent to all possible allies many letters asking for help and support, many of them to the pope in Rome, and to the rulers of the Latin West.⁸⁹ It is worth noting that those letters, urging the Latin Christians to help their eastern brethren in the fight against the infidel Turks, actually triggered the sequence of events, which only four years later led to the launching of the First crusade.⁹⁰ But no real military assistance could arrive that quickly. Therefore Alexios decided that it was

⁸³ For example: the Byzantine victory at Choïrobakchoi in February 1091. *Alexias* (2001: 236–238).

⁸⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 240); CHALANDON (1900: 129). Compare also with the testimony of the patriarch of Antioch John VI Oxeites: GAUTIER (1970: 35); SPINEI (2003: 145).

⁸⁵ On Tzachas see: MORAVCSIK (1958: 310); *Alexias* (2001: 225); BRAND (1989: 17); GAUTIER (1977: 218).

⁸⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 222); AHRWEILER (1966: 184); GAUTIER (1977: 217–218).

⁸⁷ GAUTIER (1970: 12, 35); HAGENMEYER (1973: 132–133); AHRWEILER (1966: 184); GAUTIER (1977: 217); CHEYNET (1998: 145–146).

⁸⁸ *Alexias* (2001: 241); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 256, 277); CHALANDON (1900: 129); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 203); ΣΑΒΒΙΔΗΣ (1991: 52).

⁸⁹ *Alexias* (2001: 241); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 256–258, 271–273); CHALANDON (1900: 129–131); SHEPARD (1988: 103–104).

⁹⁰ CHARANIS (1949: 27); SHEPARD (1988: 105).

vital to prevent the joining of the Pechenegs with the naval forces of the Turks. He left Constantinople with his army and headed for Ainos (today Enez in Turkey), a port with strategic position controlling the mouth of the Hebros (today Maritsa) river.⁹¹

Before long, the Pechenegs (along with their wives and children on the wagons)⁹² quickly gathered in the same area willing to fight. Luckily enough, Alexios was careful to deploy his precious armed forces which were about 13,000 men strong⁹³ on the right bank of the river, so the Pechenegs, camping on the opposite bank, were unable to launch immediate attack.⁹⁴ At this decisive point, a third unexpected party appeared on the horizon. It was the huge host of Cumans, led by their two khans Togortag and Boniak, who allegedly wanted to settle their dispute with the Pechenegs.⁹⁵ However, Alexios Komnenos was not sure about the intentions of the Cumans and feared they might join forces with the Pechenegs.⁹⁶ According to his reckoning, he had to face now two major threats, not just one. He knew the motifs of the Pechenegs, but what about the Cumans? He invited Togortag and Boniak for a lavish banquet in order to win them over, and he succeeded in doing so.⁹⁷ In the following battle of Lebounion, fought on April 29, 1091⁹⁸ the joint forces of the Byzantines and the Cumans crushed the Pechenegs so decisively that they never recovered from this blow and gradually ceased to exist as a distinct nation. The survivors were either enrolled in the Byzantine army, or sold into slavery.⁹⁹

Taking all into account we can perceive clearly that Anna Komnene had all the reasons to be jubilant when she was describing her father's victory at Lebounion some half a century later. The war against the Scythians – the Pechenegs – was hard and protracted and in fact these nomads were the only adversaries of Alexios Komnenos that he was able to pin down and destroy completely during his long reign (unlike the Normans and the

⁹¹ *Alexias* (2001: 242–243).

⁹² *Alexias* (2001: 248).

⁹³ MEŠKO (2012: 218–220).

⁹⁴ *Alexias* (2001: 242).

⁹⁵ *Alexias* (2001: 243); CHALANDON (1900: 132); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 204). Both Cuman khans Tugtorakan (Тугтораканъ) and Boniak (Бонякъ) are well known from Russian chronicles. See: ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 279).

⁹⁶ *Alexias* (2001: 244).

⁹⁷ *Alexias* (2001: 243); ВАСИЛЬЕВСКИЙ (1872: 280); CHALANDON (1900: 133); ЗЛАТАРСКИ (1934: 205).

⁹⁸ *Alexias* (2001: 249). See also footnote 32 above.

⁹⁹ Zon. (1897: 740–741); Ephr. (1984: 123); SPINELI (2003: 145).

Seljuks). There also lies interest and importance of Anna Komnene's narrative, because it is the only part of the *Alexiad* in which she can assign to her father full and indivisible victory.

Abbreviations

AEMaE	Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi
Alexias	REINSCH, D. R. – KAMBYLIS, A. [EDS.]. 2001. <i>Annae Comnenae Alexias</i> . CFHB. Berlin.
Attal.	BEKKER, I. [ED.]. 1853. <i>Michaelis Attaliothae Historia</i> . CSHB. Bonnæ.
Bernold	PERTZ, G. H. [ED.]. 1926. <i>Bernoldi chronicon</i> . MGH SS, V. Leipzig
Bryen.	GAUTIER, P. [ED.]. 1975. <i>Nicephori Bryenii Historiarum libri quattuor</i> . CFHB. Brussels.
BSI	Byzantinoslavica
Byz. Forsch.	Byzantinische Forschungen
Byz. Zeitschr.	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
CFHB	Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae
CSFB	Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae
De adm. imp.	MORAVCSIK, GY. [ED.]. 1967. <i>Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De administrando imperio</i> . English Translation by R. J. H. Jenkins. Dumbarton Oaks.
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
Ephr.	LAMPSIDIS, O. [ED.]. 1984. <i>Εφραίμ του Ατνίου χρονογραφία</i> , Τόμος Α'. Athens.
Gesta	MATHIEU, M. [ED.]. 1961. <i>La geste de Robert Guiscard</i> . Palermo.
Chron. pic.	DOMANOVSKY, A. 1937. „Chronici hungarici compositio saeculi XIV.“ In SZENTPÉTERY, E. [ED.]. <i>Scriptores rerum hungaricarum</i> , Vol. I. Budapest.
JÖB	Jahrbuch des Österreichischen Byzantinistik
MGH SS	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores
МИА СССР	Материали и исследования по археологии СССР
REB	Révue des Etudes Byzantines
Ord. Vit.	CHIBNALL, M. [ED.]. 1983. <i>The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis</i> . Volume II: Books III and IV. Oxford.
Saxo Gram.	PERTZ, G. H. [ED.]. 1926. <i>Annalista Saxo</i> . MHG SS, VI. Leipzig.
Scyl.	THURN, I. [ED.]. 1979. <i>Ioannis Scylitzæ Synopsis historiarum</i> . CFHB. Berlin.
Scyl. Con.	TSOLAKES, T. [ED.]. 1968. <i>Ἰωάννου Σκυλίτση χρονογραφίας συνέχεια</i> . Thessalonike.
TM	Travaux et Mémoires
ВВ	Византийский Временник
ZRVI	Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta
Zon.	PINDER, M. [ED.]. 1897. <i>Ioannis Zonaræ Epitome Historiarum</i> . CSHB. Tomus III. Bonnæ.
ЖМНП	Журналъ Министерства народного просвѣщенія

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