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Byzantine-Pecheneg Conflicts in the Balkans

Abstract: *Pechenegs, a Turkic tribe, entered Byzantine territory in 944 as auxiliary troops of Prince Igor of Kiev. For a time, they maintained contact with Byzantium as mercenaries of the Rus. Later, relations between the Pechenegs and the Rus princes worsened. Pechenegs then began to raid Byzantine lands on their own. Since the 1030s, the Cumans had become active near the Don River. Their pressure forced the Pechenegs to move into Byzantine lands in the Balkans. As a nomadic people, Pechenegs lived by raiding and plundering. Their advance into the Balkans made Byzantine territories a direct target. They even carried out threatening actions near Constantinople. The Byzantine emperors had to develop new policies to defend the empire. This article aims to examine the Byzantine-Pecheneg conflicts in the Balkans from military and political perspectives based on primary sources from the period, with a particular focus on demonstrating the strategic importance of the Balkans for the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Alexius Comnenus.*

Keywords: *Balkans; Pechenegs; Byzantium; Cumans.*

Introduction

There is evidence that the Pechenegs, a Turkic people, lived near the Lower Seyhun and the Aral Sea in the eighth century. Their migration beyond the Yayık River happened during the reign of Abbasid caliph Mahdi-billah or later. It was caused by the attacks of the Oghuz, known as Uzes in Byzantine sources. The Pechenegs settled around the Yayık and Itil rivers and lived there for a long time. Over time, they became a threat to the Khazars. The Khazars allied with the Oghuz and attacked the Pechenegs in 889. They pushed them west of the Itil. After this migration, the Pechenegs came into contact with the Hungarians. They forced the Hungarians from Lebedia to Etelköz in the Don basin, and later to the banks of the Danube and Tisza rivers. In 895, the Pechenegs attacked the Hungarians again as allies of Bulgarian Tsar Simeon and drove them into Pannonia. In this way, they brought the region from the Don to the Danube under their control (Sümer, 2017, p. 213).

An Overview of Byzantine-Pecheneg Conflicts in the Balkans Until the Reign of Alexius Comnenus (1081–1118)

The Pechenegs also served as mercenaries for the Rus. After suffering a defeat against Byzantium in 941, Prince Igor of Kiev (914–945) included the Pechenegs among various peoples in his 944 campaign to take revenge. When the people of Kherson and the Bulgarians learned of Igor's overland expedition, they immediately informed Byzantium. In response, Emperor Romanus Lecapenus (920–944) sent envoys to Igor and proposed peace. He offered to pay more than the tribute previously given to Prince Oleg (879–913), successfully halting the campaign. The emperor also found it necessary to reach an agreement with the Pechenegs, allies of the Rus, and sent them fine fabrics and gold as gifts to invite them to peace. When Igor abandoned the war, he ordered the Pechenegs under his command to attack Bulgarian lands (Yücel, 2020a, p. 161; Kurat, 2016, p. 107).

The next phase of the Byzantine Pecheneg conflict unfolded in connection with Bulgarian activities on Byzantine lands. When the Bulgarians attacked Byzantine territory, Emperor Nicephorus Phocas (963–969) sought help from Svyatoslav (945–972), who had succeeded Igor. In response, Svyatoslav launched a campaign against the Bulgarians in the Danube region in 967. He defeated them and captured around eighty cities along the river (Yücel, 2020a, p. 162; Kurat, 2016, p. 111). According to Cedrenus, the Pechenegs were Svyatoslav's allies in this war. The Byzantine historian refers to them as Patzinaks (Πατζινακοί) and also mentions the Turks (Τούρκοι) living in Pannonia, meaning the Hungarians (Cedrenus, 1838, p. 384). Zonaras confirms these accounts and states that Bardas Skleros, the Byzantine commander with the title Magistros, gained the upper hand against the Pechenegs in this battle (Zonaras, 2008, p. 16). Apparently, Byzantine sources strangely portray this conflict as a Byzantine victory. However, according to Kurat, these records actually refer to later events following Svyatoslav's crossing of the Danube into Bulgaria in 969. The forces Skleros fought were Pecheneg units separated from the Rus (Kurat, 2016, p. 114–115). This suggests that Byzantine sources do not clearly distinguish between two different events. It is also likely that some Pecheneg groups remained loyal to earlier agreements with the Byzantine Empire.

According to the Russian chronicles, Svyatoslav launched a successful campaign against the Bulgarians in 970 and forced them to submit. In the following year, 971, he arrived at Pereyaslavl, and the Bulgarians were forced to abandon the city. A fierce battle followed, and

the Bulgarians suffered a heavy defeat (Yücel, 2020a, p. 163). However, that same year, Svyatoslav suffered a decisive defeat at Pereyaslavl against Byzantine Emperor John Tzimiskes (969–976), which forced him to abandon the city and make peace with the Byzantines. During the peace negotiations, Svyatoslav requested a guarantee from Tzimiskes that the Pechenegs would not attack him on his way back home. Tzimiskes then sent word to the Pechenegs, asking them not to attack Svyatoslav and to allow him to return safely by crossing the Danube without harming Bulgaria (Zonaras, 2008, p. 23). In response, the Pechenegs stated that as allies of the Byzantine emperor, they would not violate the Danube frontier. However, they also said they would not allow Svyatoslav to pass through their lands on his way home. Indeed, as Svyatoslav was returning to Kiev, he was ambushed by the Pechenegs on the Dnieper and killed by their leader Kure along with many of his men. It is believed that Byzantium encouraged the Pechenegs to carry out this attack on Svyatoslav (Kurat 2016: 115-116).

Pecheneg activity on the Danube resumed in 1026. This was closely linked to Emperor Basil the Bulgar Slayer (960–1025) bringing the Bulgarians under Byzantine control in 1018 or 1019. As a result, the Pechenegs became direct neighbors of the Byzantine Empire. From then on, their attacks would target Byzantine borders directly (Kurat 2016: 121). Byzantine sources mention these events. According to Zonaras, the Pechenegs crossed the Danube in 1026 and attacked Bulgaria. Constantine Diogenes, the strategos of Sirmion and dux of Bulgaria, responded and drove many of them back across the Danube (Zonaras, 2008, p. 47; Günaydın, 2020, p. 67; Paroń, 2021, p. 319). Six or seven years later, in 1032 or 1033, the Pechenegs launched new raids on Bulgaria. In this context, the Byzantine historian Cedrenus describes Arab attacks near Melitene in the east, and at the same time notes that the Pechenegs crossed the Ister (Ἰστρος), or Danube, from the west and inflicted damage on Moesia (Cedrenus, 1838, p. 499). Cedrenus's account matches that of Zonaras. Zonaras states, "At the same time the Arabs attacked Mesopotamia, the Pechenegs attacked Bulgaria, and the Sons of Hagar [North African and Sicilian Arabs] raided the coasts of the province of Illyricum" (Zonaras, 2008, p. 52). In 1035, during the early years of Emperor Michael Paphlagon's reign (1034-1041), the Pechenegs again plundered Moesia (Zonaras, 2008, p. 58). According to Cedrenus, their attacks extended beyond Moesia and reached Thessaloniki (Cedrenus, 1838, p. 512). They frequently crossed the Danube and killed the captives they had taken (Zonaras, 2008, p. 59).

By 1048 or 1049, the Pechenegs were launching raids across the region from the Dnieper River in the north of the Danube to Pannonia. They lived a nomadic lifestyle and dwelled in tents. Their leader was Tyrach. Another important figure was Kegenes. Soon, a dispute broke out between Tyrach and Kegenes. In response, Kegenes turned to Emperor Constantine Monomachus (1042–1055) with his loyal followers and reached an agreement. As part of the agreement, Monomachus granted Kegenes three fortresses along the Danube and large tracts of land. This gave Kegenes a base from which he could take revenge on Tyrach and his supporters. Indeed, he soon began to harass and kill Tyrach's followers (Zonaras, 2008, p. 92; Kurat, 2016, p. 157-159; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 123-125; Günaydın, 2020, p. 93; Paroń, 2021, p. 321-322). In reaction, Tyrach threatened Emperor Monomachus to stop Kegenes's attacks. The emperor ignored these threats. Tyrach then crossed the frozen Danube and devastated Byzantine territory. Upon hearing this, Monomachus sent an army against Tyrach, using Kegenes and his forces as reinforcements. But Tyrach's men did not dare fight the Byzantine army. They surrendered. Many were captured, including Tyrach himself. Instead of executing the captured Pechenegs, the Byzantines considered settling them in the uninhabited parts of Bulgaria and arming them for use on their side (Zonaras, 2008, p. 93; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 127). According to Cedrenus, the Byzantine position prevailed in discussions with Kegenes. The Pechenegs were settled in the deserted plains of Bulgaria. Some were relocated elsewhere and taxed. In case of war with the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia or with other foreign tribes, these Pechenegs were to be conscripted. Kegenes accepted this proposal. Except for the captives he had sold, he executed all the others. The high-ranking commander Basileios Monachos took many Pechenegs and settled them near Sardike, Naissos, and Eutzapolis in Bulgaria (Cedrenus, 1838, p. 587; Skylitzes, 2010, p. 429-430; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 128; Günaydın, 2020, p. 94-95; Melnyk, 2022, p. 127). Thus, the Byzantines and their Pecheneg allies under Kegenes won the winter campaign of 1048. However, the 15,000-strong Pecheneg army that Byzantium had raised for war against the Seljuks soon turned against Monomachus. They chose to reunite with their kin in Bulgaria. They crossed the straits and joined their people in Triaditza. Many Pechenegs later settled along the Osmos River, which flows into the Danube (Skylitzes, 2010, p. 431-432; Kurat, 2016, p. 163-165). Afterward, the Pechenegs were pushed back to the area between the Balkans and the Danube. Eventually, they withdrew to Hundred Hills, a

rich pastureland on the left bank of the Danube near the Black Sea (Yücel, 2020b, p. 208; Günaydın, p. 2020: 98).

On 8 June 1050, the Pechenegs appeared at Adrianopolis. The local commander, Arianites, made a strategic decision not to move his troops outside the fortified zone. He intended to weaken the Pechenegs' resistance by letting them attack the fortifications, then counterattack once their strength had waned. However, this plan was disrupted by a subordinate commander who acted without Arianites' permission and initiated combat. The Pechenegs launched a fierce attack and inflicted heavy losses on the Byzantine troops. But when a stone hurled from the fortress struck the Pecheneg leader Soultzous, the Pecheneg formation broke down, and they lifted the siege (Cedrenus, 1838, p. 600-602; Skylitzes, 2010, p. 438-439; Attaleiates, 2012, p. 59, 60; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 133-134; Kurat, 2016, p. 171-173). Emperor Constantine Monomachus knew the Pecheneg raids would not stop. Soon after the Adrianopolis battle, they began plundering Macedonia. The emperor appointed Nicephorus Bryennius to lead an army of twenty thousand to fight them (Skylitzes, 2010, p. 440). He also requested aid from Pecheneg chief Kegenes. Kegenes responded positively and was sent as a Byzantine envoy to Pechenegs who had promised to support Byzantium. However, the Pechenegs did not keep their word. They killed and dismembered Kegenes (Skylitzes, 2010, p. 440-441). As Pecheneg raids in Thrace and Macedonia continued, Byzantium and the Pechenegs signed a thirty-year peace treaty in 1053 (Zonaras, 2008, p. 94; Skylitzes, 2010, p. 443; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 137). Yet the treaty soon collapsed during the reign of Isaac Comnenus (1057–1059), in 1059. Hungarian king Andrey (1057–1059) likely played a role in this breakdown (Yücel, 2020b, p. 232). In the chronicle of Attaleiates, a group identified as the Sauromatai – probably the Hungarians—joined forces with the Pechenegs to threaten Byzantine territory from the west. Emperor Isaac responded by sending his army to remove the threat. His troops secured the Hungarians through diplomacy. A similar offer was made to the Pechenegs. But Pecheneg chief Selte refused and chose to fight the Byzantines. He was defeated. As Attaleiates wrote, he "hid in a deep wood, like a small hare" (Attaleiates, 2012, p. 121, 122; Zonaras, 2008, p. 113; Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 137-138). Upon hearing this, Isaac decided to capture Triaditza and delivered a major blow to the Pechenegs (Comnena, 1969, p. 122-123). This campaign proved highly significant. As a result, Byzantine control over the Danube was restored. Basil Apokapes and Nicephorus Botaneiates were appointed to

govern the cities along the river. Although the Pechenegs, still living among the Bulgarian population, acknowledged Byzantine superiority, their nomadic lifestyle led them to leave the assigned areas and continue raiding nearby regions (Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 138).

Following these events, the Balkans once again became a zone of movement for nomadic Turkic tribes. One such tribe was the Uzes, who had reached the Dnieper region around 1048. They had been pushed into this area by the Cumans, who had been active along the Don River since the 1030s. From the 1060s onward, the entire steppe region of southern Rus came under Cuman control and became known as Deshti Kipchak. Pushed by the Cumans, some Uzes settled near the Ros River, while a larger group moved toward the Lower Danube and joined the Pechenegs. However, in addition to Cuman pressure, tensions likely arose between the Uzes and the Pechenegs. As a result, in 1064, the Uzes were forced to cross the Danube and enter the Balkans (Kurat, 2016, p. 179-180; Günaydın, 2020, p. 114-115; Paroń, 2021, p. 302). Although not detailed, Attaleiates provides information on this migration. The Greek historian states that the Uzes (Οὔζοι), said to number six hundred thousand, crossed the Danube by boat, defeated the Bulgarians and other tribes who tried to block the crossings, and captured many prisoners (Attaleiates, 2012, p. 153). Upon hearing of this, Byzantine Emperor Constantine Ducas (1059–1067) became extremely anxious. Realizing he could not resist the powerful warriors of the steppe, he sent envoys with valuable gifts and negotiated peace (Vasilyevskiy, 1972, p. 139). In addition, severe cold and disease, along with Pecheneg attacks, had greatly weakened the Uzes. The surviving Uzes were settled in Macedonia by Emperor Ducas. After the Uzes, control of the Danube returned to the Pechenegs, who in 1067 launched new attacks on Byzantine territory (Kurat, 2016, p. 181-182).

After Byzantium's defeat by the Seljuks at Manzikert in 1071, the Pechenegs took advantage of the resulting internal unrest in the empire. They used this opportunity to attack the Slavs and Romans living along the Danube. These two groups found the imperial financial support insufficient and made an agreement with the Pechenegs to revolt against Byzantium. In response, a Slav named Nestor was sent to Dristra to suppress the rebellion. That region was under the control of a Pecheneg chief named Tatos, which allowed the Pechenegs to move freely along the Danube. When Nestor realized that Byzantium had no real authority in the area, he reached an agreement with Tatos and betrayed the empire. Together with the Pechenegs, he began preparing to march on

Constantinople (Yücel, 2020b, p. 246-247). At the time, Emperor Michael Parapinaces (1071–1078) was elderly, so administration was in the hands of the eunuch Nicephorus. The people had grown weary of Nicephorus's despotic rule. The Bogomils, especially those living nearby, were deeply discontent. Nestor exploited this unrest and drew them to his side. In 1074, with the support of the Pechenegs, he besieged Constantinople. During the siege, the Pechenegs were sent to the emperor to negotiate. Likely due to disputes over the gifts they received during these talks, tensions arose between the Pechenegs and Nestor. As a result, Nestor lifted the siege (Kurat, 2016, p. 185).

A few years later, in 1078, public dissatisfaction with the rule of Michael Parapinaces reached its peak. At the same time, Nicephorus Bryennius and Nicephorus Botaniates declared their claims to the imperial throne with the support of the Pechenegs (Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 148). However, the Pechenegs had no intention of remaining loyal to any one side. At first, they supported the legitimate rule of Emperor Michael and marched against Bryennius. They entered Macedonia, plundered widely, and besieged Adrianopolis. Realizing he could not defeat them, Bryennius chose negotiation. He managed to persuade the Pechenegs to withdraw from Adrianopolis. Later, when Nicephorus Botaniates (1078–1081) succeeded in taking the throne as emperor, Bryennius gathered the Pechenegs who had been settled in Byzantine territory and marched on Constantinople. The siege was brief. His troops soon withdrew and returned to Macedonia (Kurat, 2016, p. 186-187). To eliminate Bryennius, Emperor Nicephorus sent one of his key commanders, Alexius Comnenus, who would later become emperor himself. Alexius advanced with Turkish and Latin mercenaries (Bryennio, 1975, p. 264). Bryennius's Pecheneg-backed army met Alexius's forces in Thrace near Calabria. In the early phase of the battle, Pecheneg units commanded by Bryennius on the army's left wing gained the upper hand (Bryennio, 1975, p. 266 ff.). However, because the Pechenegs moved too soon to plunder, their disorder disrupted the army's formation. Alexius took advantage of this and routed the enemy (Comnena, 1969, p. 42). After Bryennius's defeat, another figure, Nicephorus Basilakios, commander of Dyrrachium, rebelled against Emperor Nicephorus. Basilakios hoped to use the Pechenegs against the emperor. But when the Pechenegs heard that Basilakios had been defeated near Thessaloniki, they changed course. They headed instead toward Adrianopolis and attacked the homes outside the city walls. In this event from

1078, the Cumans appeared as allies of the Pechenegs (Zonaras, 2008, p. 155; Yücel, 2020b, p. 252).

During this period, the Byzantine Empire was experiencing internal turmoil. The Bogomils, especially those living in and around Philippopolis, posed a serious threat to the empire. To prevent the spread of this sect, the Byzantines relocated many of its members to Bulgaria. They intended to use them as a buffer against attacks coming from the Danube region. However, the sect unexpectedly gained followers in Bulgaria. Between 1078 and 1081, a Bogomil named Leka, originally of Greek origin, formed a family alliance with a Pecheneg chief. With their support, he launched a rebellion against the emperor in the region between Sofia and Naissos. Although Emperor Nicephorus reached an agreement with Leka, he could not stop the Pecheneg attacks. As a result, the emperor sent Alexius Comnenus to deal with the Pechenegs. Through successful maneuvers, Alexius cleared Thrace of their presence. This was probably the last campaign Alexius conducted against the Pechenegs before becoming emperor (Kurat, 2016, p. 189; Yücel, 2020b, p. 253-254; Meško, 2023, p. 54).

Emperor Alexius Comnenus's Struggle with the Pechenegs in the Balkans

Alexius Comnenus had proven himself not only through his military victories against the enemies of Byzantium but also as a skilled politician. After securing the necessary ground for his claim to the throne, he was crowned emperor of Byzantium on 4 April 1081 (Ostrogorski, 2006, 323-324). He possessed sharp intelligence and had a strong talent for public speaking, which he enjoyed displaying. His political cunning was shaped in large part by his experience in the imperial court, where he learned to understand people. He was highly determined in pursuing his goals and never left anything to chance (Chalandon, 1900, p. 51). The new emperor faced a serious challenge. The empire had grown weak and lost much of its defensive power. It was under attack from the Normans, the Pechenegs, and the Seljuks. Therefore, Emperor Alexius had to first eliminate the activities of the Normans and then confront the other threats to the empire (Ostrogorski, 2006, p. 330; Meško, 2023, p. 89; Kozlov, 2014, p. 84).

At the time of this change of throne in the Byzantine court, the Pechenegs were settled in the plains along the Danube and in the region known as Hundred Hills. Some of them were likely living east of the

Danube as well. One Pecheneg chief, Tatos, ruled Dristra. Another, Satazas, controlled Bitzina on the Danube. Anna Comnena also mentions a figure named Sesthlavos among the Pecheneg leaders. Based on this Slavic name, it is likely that the Pechenegs lived together with Slavic communities in these cities. From these regions, the Pechenegs launched many raids across the Danube and even captured some fortresses. During peacetime, they cultivated the land and grew millet and wheat (Comnena, 1969, p. 212; Kurat, 2016, p. 197).

Emperor Alexius carefully assessed the situation. He first eliminated the Norman threat, then turned his attention to the Pechenegs. The Norman campaign clearly influenced his decision to fight the Pechenegs. During that campaign, the Byzantine army had included 2,800 Bogomils led by Ksanta and Kleon. The Bogomils abandoned Alexius at a critical moment in battle, leaving him alone on the battlefield. In this difficult situation, Alexius managed to win the battle with Seljuk support. After returning to the capital, he severely punished the Bogomils for their betrayal. Unable to endure these punishments, the Bogomils chose to revolt. One of those affected by Alexius's harsh policies was a Bogomil named Traulos, who served in the imperial court. Influenced by Bogomils who had come to Constantinople and shared their suffering, Traulos took action. He gathered many followers and revolted in 1084 at the fortress of Beliatoba. He also formed an alliance with the Pechenegs against Emperor Alexius. To strengthen this alliance, he married a Pecheneg woman. This gave him their full support for the war he planned to wage against the emperor in 1086 (Yücel, 2020b, p. 258-259; Chalandon, 1900, p. 105-108). Emperor Alexius learned of these developments. He sent the Western Domestikos Pakourianus, a skilled commander, along with the brave soldier Branas, to confront the rebels. Pakourianus encountered the Pechenegs near the mountain passes while they were camped at Beliatoba. But upon seeing their numerical superiority, he avoided battle to prevent unnecessary losses. Branas was disturbed by this decision. Not wanting to be seen as a coward, Pakourianus ordered his troops to attack the Pechenegs. The sight of the large Pecheneg force terrified the Byzantine soldiers. In the fierce battle that followed, many Byzantine soldiers were killed. Branas was badly wounded. Pakourianus was killed on the field, and the remaining soldiers fled in all directions (Comnena, 1969, p. 212-213; Chalandon, 1900, p. 108-109).

When Emperor Alexius learned of the heavy defeat suffered by his army, he mourned deeply for the fallen. The death of Magistros Pakourianus affected him profoundly. He immediately summoned Taticius, gave him a substantial sum of money, and sent him to Adrianopolis. He also instructed him to form an army. The emperor provided this money so that Taticius could hire mercenaries to fight the Pechenegs. Alexius also ordered Humbertopoulos to leave a garrison in Cyzicus and join Taticius along with the Celts. Upon seeing the arrival of these reinforcements, Taticius advanced straight toward the Pechenegs. Near Philippopolis, he saw that the Pechenegs were returning from a raiding campaign with heavy plunder. He quickly divided his army in two and ordered one group to attack. As the Pechenegs returned from looting, they saw the approaching Byzantine troops and hurriedly rejoined their main force by the banks of the Eurois River. A very intense battle followed. The Pechenegs were defeated. Taticius seized their plunder and returned to Philippopolis in triumph (Comnena, 1969, p. 213-214; Chalandon, 1900, p. 109-110).

While stationed in Philippopolis, Taticius began planning the details of a new campaign against the Pechenegs. Having previously witnessed their large numbers, he sent reconnaissance units in all directions to gather more accurate information on their movements. These units reported that a large Pecheneg army was concentrated near Beliatoba and that the surrounding areas had been plundered. Upon receiving this news, Taticius decided to wait for the Pechenegs to come to him. He realized he could not confront such a large enemy force directly. This put him in a difficult and humiliating position. Despite his distress, he chose to fight. At that moment, he learned that the Pechenegs were already on their way to engage him. He quickly began preparations for battle and crossed the Eurois River with his troops. He then organized his army. The Pechenegs, for their part, arranged their forces in their traditional style and showed a willingness to fight. In reality, both sides were reluctant and feared the outcome. Only the Latin troops showed eagerness for battle, but Taticius restrained them. As an experienced soldier, he wanted to observe how things would unfold. Both armies waited for the other to make the first move. For two days, they stood facing each other. At dawn on the third day, the Pechenegs began to retreat. Taticius pursued them with his men but failed to catch up. The Pechenegs crossed Sidera, and Taticius withdrew with his army to Adrianopolis. He left the Celts there, dismissed the rest of his troops, and returned to Constantinople himself (Comnena, 1969, p. 214-215).

The war against the Pechenegs resumed the following year, in the spring of 1087. That same year, the Pecheneg army led by Tzelgu had crossed into the upper Danube valley. This army, numbering around eighty thousand, included various steppe peoples as well as the deposed Hungarian King Solomon (1063–1074). After pillaging Charioupolis and the surrounding area, the Pechenegs set up camp at Skotinos. The Byzantine army did not appear until the invading forces reached Charioupolis. Once informed of their location, the Byzantine army under Nicolas Maurocatalon moved and positioned itself at Pamphilon. From there, it continued to Koule, a location along the road to Constantinople. The Pechenegs followed behind. At dawn, Tzelgu gathered his troops to confront Maurocatalon. In response, Maurocatalon climbed a ridge overlooking the plain with a few select soldiers to observe Pecheneg movements. Seeing that the Pecheneg army was extremely large, he returned to his camp and consulted with Joannaces and other commanders about whether or not to engage in battle. They decided to fight. Maurocatalon divided his army into three sections and gave the signal for attack. In the ensuing battle, which resulted in the deaths of many Pecheneg soldiers, Tzelgu himself was mortally wounded and died. The surviving Pechenegs fled but drowned in the river between Skotinos and Koule. Victorious, the Byzantine army returned to Constantinople (Comnena, 1969, p. 216-217; Chalandon, 1900, p. 112-113).

Despite suffering a heavy defeat, the Pechenegs returned to the Danube after being expelled from Macedonia and the area around Philippopolis. There, they established a new camp and continued to raid Byzantine lands. When Emperor Alexius heard of this, he refused to accept their presence on imperial territory. He feared they would once again cross the mountain passes and cause even greater destruction. For this reason, he ordered immediate preparations for a new campaign. By mid-June 1087, the Byzantine army had set out and arrived in Adrianopolis. From there, it marched to Lardea, located between Diampolis and Goloë. At Lardea, the command of the army was given to George Euphorbenus, who was sent by sea to Dristra. Emperor Alexius waited for forty days to assemble an army strong enough to confront the Pechenegs. During this time, he held consultations with his generals and reaffirmed his decision to go to war. The emperor could not stop the Pechenegs' repeated raids and also failed to sow division among them. He had made several attempts but was unable to persuade even a single Pecheneg to secretly side with him (Comnena, 1969, p. 218-219; Kurat,

2016, p. 203). However, Nicephorus Bryennius and Gregory Maurocat-
acalon opposed fighting the Pechenegs in the region of Paristrion. They
persuaded the emperor to cross the Haemus Mountains and confront the
enemy closer to the Danube (Comnena, 1969, p. 219). The Pechenegs
soon learned that Euphorbenus's army was advancing by sea along the
Danube while Emperor Alexius was approaching by land. Realizing
they could not fight on two fronts, they sent a delegation of 150 men to
negotiate peace. They promised that if their conditions were accepted,
they would support the emperor with 30,000 horsemen in wartime. But
Emperor Alexius was suspicious of the Pecheneg envoys. He believed
their peace offer was a ruse and feared a greater threat if he agreed to
their terms. Using Byzantine cunning, Alexius had the envoys arrested.
The captured Pecheneg delegation was handed over to the eunuch Leo
Nicerites, who was ordered to escort them to Constantinople. On their
way, near Little Nicaea, the Pechenegs attacked their inattentive guards
at night, killed them, and escaped. They used hidden paths and returned
to their own people. Nicerites, barely escaping with three others, re-
joined Emperor Alexius at Goloë (Comnena, 1969, p. 220-221).

When Emperor Alexius learned what had happened, he feared
that the escaped Pecheneg envoys might stir their kinsmen and lead a
large army against him. Determined to act first, he crossed Sidera with
his troops and set up camp near the Bitzina River, which flowed down
from the neighboring hills. Many of his men who had gone far to graze
their animals were cut down or captured. At dawn he hurried toward
Pliscoba and climbed a hill called Simeon where the Pechenegs held
their kenesh council. Those who had gone out for provisions there met
the same fate as their comrades. The next day Alexius reached a river
near Dristra, left his equipment, and made camp. The Pechenegs
launched a surprise attack from the rear on the emperor's tent, killed
several light armed soldiers, and captured some fiercely fighting Bo-
gomils. Confusion spread and galloping horses overturned the em-
peror's tent. Alexius with a group of soldiers drove the attackers away
from the tent, mounted his horse, and restored order. He then marched
on Dristra, surrounded the city, and entered through a breach in the
walls. Two of Dristra's fortresses were still held by relatives of the
Pecheneg chief Tatos, who had departed to seek support from the Cu-
mans in order to attack Byzantium. As he left, Tatos addressed his kins-
men with these words:

I know quite well that the emperor will besiege this town. When
you see him marching on to the plain, make sure you seize the ridge

that dominates it before he can do so. It's the finest position of all. Make your camp there. In that way he'll have no free hand in besieging the garrison; he'll be forced to look out for his rear, watching for trouble from you. Meanwhile you keep up incessant attacks on him, all day and all night, with relays of men (Comnena, 1969, p. 222-223).

Emperor Alexius was forced to withdraw under the terms. He lifted the siege of the fortresses and left Dristra. He camped near the Danube and consulted his commanders on attacking the Pechenegs. Palaeologus and Gregory Maurocatalon advised delaying the battle. They also suggested capturing the stronghold of Great Peristhlaba near the river. They believed it was impregnable. From there they could ambush the Pechenegs. The emperor approved this plan. He entrusted his tent and arms to George Koutzomites and sent them to Betrinos. He warned his troops not to sleep or light fires during the night. At dawn he broke camp and formed his army for battle. Nomadic Turkic tribes such as the Uzes were among his forces. The Pechenegs also took up battle formations. They set ambushes and used their covered wagons as shields. They advanced in detachments, firing arrows from a distance. They brought women and children with them. When the Pecheneg chiefs commanding thirty six thousand men appeared, the Byzantine troops knew they could not stand the numbers and began to flee. The battle was fierce. The Pechenegs won decisively. Leo, son of former emperor Romanus Diogenes, was badly wounded in the fighting (Comnena, 1969, p. 223-225; Kurat, 2016, p. 208-210). Although Alexius fought bravely, he could not hold off the attacks and withdrew with difficulty to Goloë. Palaeologus fell from his horse while fleeing. He found another mount and kept fighting the Pechenegs along the way. He reached Constantinople at last (Comnena, 1969, p. 227-228).¹

Returning to the accounts of Anna Comnena, Emperor Alexius did not stay long in Goloë. At dawn the next day, he moved to Beroë. The emperor stayed there for a while. His aim was to ransom the captives (Comnena, 1969, p. 227). The Pecheneg chiefs wanted to kill the

¹ There is no consensus among researchers about the exact date of this war. According to Kurat, Vasilyevskiy stated that the heavy defeat of Byzantium occurred after 20 July 1088. He also noted that Dieter opposed this view. Kurat rejects Chalandon's claim that Emperor Alexius made peace with the Pechenegs in 1089. He believes the war took place in the autumn of 1087. At the beginning of that autumn, the Pechenegs defeated Byzantium and were then besieged by the Cumans. After overcoming the Cuman threat, the Pechenegs captured Philippopolis. They plundered all of Thrace and even threatened the capital Constantinople. The emperor was forced to make peace with them (Kurat, 2016, p. 212).

prisoners. But most of the Pecheneg warriors opposed this. They preferred to sell the captives for ransom. This view was eventually accepted. Mellisenus, who was also captured by the Pechenegs, provoked them and wrote letters to the emperor to prevent the captives from being sold to others. At that time the emperor was still in Beroë. Upon receiving the news, he had a large amount of money brought from Constantinople and ransomed his men from the Pechenegs (Comnena, 1969, p. 228).

While these events were unfolding, Tatos, the Lord of Dristra mentioned earlier, reached the Danube with the Cumans he had called for help. When the Cumans saw the priceless spoils and captives held by the Pechenegs, they said to them:

We have left our homes. We have come a great distance to help you, with the purpose of sharing your danger and your victory. Now that we have contributed all that we could, it is not right to send us away empty-handed. It was not from choice that we arrived too late for the war, nor are we to be blamed for that: it was the emperor's fault — he took the offensive. Hither therefore divide up all the booty in equal shares with us, or instead of allies you will find us ready to fight you (Comnena, 1969, p. 228-229).

The Pechenegs rejected the demands of the Cumans. Not getting the answer they hoped for, the Cumans could not tolerate the Pechenegs' attitude. A fierce battle broke out between the two sides. In this battle, the Pechenegs were defeated by the Cumans. Some barely escaped and fled to Ozolimne. There they were besieged by the Cumans for a long time. However, the Cumans lifted the siege and withdrew due to lack of supplies. Their intention was to attack the Pechenegs again after restocking (Comnena, 1969, p. 229). It seems that the conflict between the Cumans and the Pechenegs prevented their planned attack on Byzantine territory.

Emperor Alexius, who had ransomed his soldiers from the Pechenegs, gathered his troops in Beroë and armed all his men. The Count of Flanders, on his way back from Jerusalem, met the emperor there. He pledged loyalty and promised to send 500 men as auxiliary troops. Then the emperor marched toward Adrianopolis in 1088 with his new forces. Meanwhile, the Pechenegs had set up camp at Marcella, between Goloë and Diampolis. Fearing a Cuman attack, the emperor sent Synesios to propose peace to the Pechenegs. His aim was to meet their demands and prevent them from crossing the Danube, thus securing the region (Comnena, 1969, p. 229-230). Synesios succeeded in reaching an agreement. Around that time, Cuman forces approached the

Pechenegs fully armed. Not finding them at their previous location, they crossed the Balkans and arrived at Marcella. Upon arrival, they learned of the agreement between the emperor and the Pechenegs. They requested passage through the straits to fight the Pechenegs. The emperor declined, as he did not need their help at that time. However, by offering them valuable gifts, he avoided provoking their hostility. After receiving the gifts, the Cumans departed peacefully. But when the Pechenegs heard of the gifts, they grew bold. They broke the agreement and began pillaging the nearby regions (Comnena, 1969, p. 230).

Synesios informed Emperor Alexius that the Pechenegs had broken the agreement and launched attacks. Their siege of Philippopolis caused the emperor great concern. He lacked the military strength to face them in open battle. Therefore, he decided to use ambush and light skirmish tactics to weaken the enemy. He identified areas likely to be attacked and reached them before the Pechenegs. There he used hit and run tactics and ambushes. Eventually, both sides confronted each other at Cypsella. The emperor feared a Pecheneg attack on Constantinople, as the reinforcements he awaited had not arrived. His forces were too small to defeat the numerous Pechenegs. He offered peace once more. The Pechenegs accepted the proposal. However, the peace did not last long. They broke the agreement again, left Cypsella, and occupied Taurocomos. They spent the winter there and plundered nearby villages (Comnena, 1969, p. 231).

At the beginning of spring 1090, the Pechenegs left Taurocomos and moved toward Charioupolis. At that time, Emperor Alexius was in Bulgarophygon. Without hesitation, he prepared an elite unit known as the Archontopuli. He ordered them to attack the Pechenegs from the rear. The Archontopuli set out in full order to carry out this command. However, the Pechenegs had already hidden at the foot of a hill and were watching them. When they saw the unit advancing rapidly toward the wagons, they launched a fierce attack. In the brutal battle that followed, 300 Archontopuli were killed. The emperor fell into deep mourning over their deaths (Comnena 1969, p. 231-232; Chalandon, 1900, p. 125). After this victory, the Pechenegs moved from Charioupolis to Aspra and destroyed everything along the way. In response, Emperor Alexius returned to his former strategy. He reached Aspra ahead of them, likely intending to use hit and run tactics again, as his forces were too small for direct combat. Knowing the Pechenegs usually searched for food at dawn, he summoned Taticius. He instructed him to take the bravest young soldiers, all the Latins, and his personal guards.

They were to observe Pecheneg movements closely just before dawn. The plan was to strike when the Pechenegs moved far from their camp in search of food. Taticius followed the instructions and killed 300 Pechenegs, taking many prisoners (Comnena, 1969, p. 232; Chalandon, 1900, p. 125).

At that time, Emperor Alexius was fighting the Pechenegs in the Balkans while also trying to stop the Seljuks, who were advancing westward in Anatolia and plundering Byzantine lands. Surrounded on two fronts, Byzantium could not resist them alone. For this reason, the emperor turned to Western Europe and the Papacy to seek help (Kurat, 2016, p. 233). In a letter sent to Pope Urban II (1088–1099), the emperor wrote the following:

Thus in the name of God and all Christian saints we beg you warriors of Christ whoever you may be come to the aid of me and the Roman Christians. We entrust ourselves to your hands. We prefer the rule of you Latins over the yoke of pagans. Let Constantinople belong to you not to the Turks or Pechenegs. The holy relics that adorn the city of Constantine should be as precious to you as they are to us. The instruments of our salvation such as items related to the torture and death of the Savior the crown of thorns placed on His head the reed given to Him a fragment of the cross He was crucified on and others must not fall into the hands of pagans. These also include countless sacred relics belonging to the apostles and martyrs the head of John the Baptist the uncorrupted body of the first martyr Stephen. Their loss would be a great disaster and curse for Christians. If unexpectedly these Christian treasures do not move you I remind you of the countless riches and precious items in our capital. Some churches in Constantinople have such wealth in silver gold pearls gemstones and silk that they could adorn the churches of the entire world. The treasures of Hagia Sophia surpass them all and are only comparable to those of Solomon's Temple. There is no need to mention the countless treasures hidden in the chambers of former emperors and Roman nobles. So hurry come with all your people and give your utmost effort so these treasures do not fall into the hands of the Turks and Pechenegs. In addition to these countless treasures on imperial lands an army of sixty thousand soldiers is expected to arrive daily. The soldiers under my command are not trustworthy either for they too might be tempted by the hope of shared plunder in this chaos. Therefore act while there is still time so that the Christian Empire and more importantly the Holy Sepulchre do not slip away from you. In doing so you will not face punishment but receive eternal reward in heaven (Vasilyevskiy, 1872, p. 273-274).

But Emperor Alexius's letter did not prove very effective. The dukes who were to join the Crusade had views quite different from

those of Pope Urban II. Their opinions on the Crusade had formed independently of the pope. Although the pope's call for the Crusade was well received among knights from Flanders Normandy and France it overshadowed the call made by Emperor Alexius (Yücel, 2020b, p. 312). Judging from the content of the emperor's letter it is clear that the Byzantines wanted the Crusade to be launched against the Pecheneg and Seljuk attacks. On the other hand according to Anna Comnena the Turkish lord Tzakhas who had learned of the emperor's troubles in the West and his conflicts with the Pechenegs began to act against Byzantium by establishing a fleet (Comnena, 1969, p. 233). Tzakhas had been one of the Turkish captives brought to Constantinople in his youth. He lived in the Byzantine court until the accession of Emperor Alexius and managed to escape to Anatolia at that time. Apparently this Turkish lord who knew Byzantium closely had made up his mind to undermine its maritime trade (Chalandon, 1900, p. 126-127). Tzakhas did not stop there and also formed an alliance with the Pechenegs against Byzantium. When these allied forces besieged Constantinople by land and sea in 1090 Emperor Alexius was severely cornered (Ostrogorski, 2006, p. 332).

In 1090 and 1091 Constantinople endured an anxious winter under siege from both land and sea. Emperor Alexius realized that he could not fight alone against the Pechenegs Tzakhas and the Seljuks. Therefore he needed an external ally against the Pechenegs who constantly threatened the capital. Meanwhile Seljuk raids in Anatolia had reached the shores of the Bosphorus making it essential to secure an ally for the empire. The emperor quickly sent Byzantine diplomats to the north of the Black Sea to negotiate with the Cumans and succeeded in forming an alliance (Kurat, 2016, p. 215). The Cumans likely accepted due to their earlier hostility with the Pechenegs. The Cumans long awaited in the palace arrived in Byzantine lands in the spring of 1091. On 29 April 1091 a bloody battle took place at Lebunion between the allied Byzantine Cuman forces and the Pechenegs. The Pechenegs suffered a devastating defeat. Anna Comnena explain this with these words: "a whole people comprising myriads of men women and children was blotted out in one single day" (Comnena, 1969, p. 259; Ostrogorski, 2006, p. 333). This victory brought some relief to Constantinople. It also ruined the plans of Tzakhas (Ostrogorski 2006: 333). Furthermore the defeat at Lebunion marked the end of the Pechenegs as a powerful people. Anna Comnena hardly mentions them again after this event. Those who survived the battle likely fled to the Danube region

and the captives taken by Byzantium were settled in Macedonia. The Moglena region in Macedonia became a significant Pecheneg settlement. The Byzantine chronicler Zonaras even referred to them as the Moglena Pechenegs (Kurat, 2016, p. 269-270).

Conclusion

It appears that Byzantine Pecheneg relations had become quite tense by the reign of Emperor Alexius. Especially during his rule, Pecheneg attacks on Byzantium reached a serious level and nearly led to the capture of Constantinople. During this period, the emperor was surrounded from the Balkans, the north of the Black Sea, and Anatolia. Emperor Alexius analyzed the situation well and managed to maintain a balanced policy both domestically and abroad. The events show that holding the Balkans under Byzantine control was of vital importance. This explains why Emperor Alexius shaped his policy in that direction. The events also reveal that Byzantium was mostly in a defensive position at the time. While fighting the Pechenegs, Emperor Alexius also allied with the Cumans. This move prevented a possible alliance against him. In fact, he had fought the Pechenegs even before ascending the throne and continued these efforts with determination after becoming emperor. With Cuman support, he struck a final blow to his fierce enemies and saved the empire from a grave danger. Consequently, the Pechenegs ceased to pose a threat to Byzantium in the Balkans. Undoubtedly, this outcome was the result of Emperor Alexius's military and diplomatic capabilities. These prolonged and uninterrupted conflicts in the Balkans also had local repercussions. The settled population was adversely affected by the wars, suffering not only from loss of life but also from forced migration and resettlement across different regions.

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