

**Some Notes on Byzantine Foreign Policy in the 9th-11th Centuries:
was there Really such a Thing as Steppe Diplomacy ?**

**Peter Frankopan
Oxford University, UK**

In many respects, there are contrasting and competing views at play when we look at Byzantium's relations with its neighbours – whether in the Black Sea region or elsewhere for that matter. On the one hand, it is possible to compile a picture of Byzantine interest in its neighbours, of the Byzantines gathering information about those on its periphery, of a sensitivity and alertness to shifts in power beyond the Empire's frontiers, and of a state able and actively seeking to respond to such changes as necessary.

This contrasts sharply with the other – and in many ways the more dominant – picture which can be drawn from the historiography of the middle Byzantine period, with its relentless accent on *Romanitas* and on the superiority of Byzantium and its culture over those around it – to the point, indeed, where chroniclers fail even to record very substantial changes to the Empire's frontiers. So, for example, while we are certainly not lacking source material for third quarter of the 11th Century – with narrative accounts of Michael Psellos, Michael Attaleiates, John Skylitzes, Nikephoros Bryennios covering this period in considerable detail – it is striking to note that none of these historians discusses the growth of Norman power in southern Italy or the consequent collapse of Byzantine authority there; indeed, only one of these authors even mentions the fall of Bari in 1071 which brought to an end centuries of Byzantine power in Italy.¹

Of course, the two competing views need not be considered as being contradictory, and one could certainly make the case that the lack of interest shown by Byzantine historians to their neighbours – whether Norman, Turk, Russian or Turk – says a good deal more about who was writing in Byzantium in the 10th and 11th Centuries than it necessarily does about anything else. And one might well add here, while the fact that the historians of this period (and to the list we should add the Logothete, George the Monk and the continuator of

¹ George Kedrenos, *Compendium Historiarum*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), 720-4.

Theophanes) were essentially based in Constantinople cannot alone explain the disinterest in the Empire's neighbours, then it is surely of some significance that, with the notable exception of Bryennios, none of those writing narrative accounts at this time appear to have had any substantial and substantive experience of affairs outside the city walls.

In this context, therefore, it should be stressed that it is not only Byzantium's relations with its neighbours that so often draws a blank in such sources. There is also precious little, if anything at all, about the Byzantine interior – about Thessaloniki, for example, or about the other major towns of the Empire. Indeed, analysis of Byzantine activity – and even issues so basic as simply assessing and establishing an imperial presence – in areas such as the north-western Balkans and by the Danube have to be pieced together from numismatic and sigillographic sources (with the resultant gaps and problems that these can pose) in the absence of comment in the narrative histories.²

However, information gathering clearly was happening in the Black Sea region in the 9th and 10th Centuries, and this goes some way to allowing us to understand that we should be careful not simply to rely too heavily on what the principal historians for this period tell us. Nowhere is such information gathering clearer than in a text that has come to be known as the *De Administrando Imperio*, a source compiled during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos, ostensibly by the Emperor himself, setting out a raft of information about Byzantium's neighbours, taking in the peoples to the north of Constantinople, the Arabs (*Sarakenoi*), as well as looking at Spain, Italy, the Adriatic and the Caucasus.³ The text is not without its problems, and it poses many questions – not least that of the date of composition or compilation – and also those that stem from an analysis that reveals that the text is made up of a very wide range of sources, such as drawing on at least one Magyar source, on a re-touched account about the Croats and Serbs that is contemporary not with Constantine VII in the mid-10th Century, but with the Emperor Heraklios at the start of the 7th, and on a chronicle otherwise unknown

² P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier* (Cambridge, 2000); P. Doimi de Frankopan, 'The Numismatic Evidence for the Danube Region 971-1092,' *BMGs* 21 (1997), 30-9; id., 'The Workings of the Byzantine Provincial Administration in the 10th-12th Centuries: the Example of Preslav,' *Byz.* 71 (2001), 73-97.

³ Constantine VII, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik and R. Jenkins (Washington, D.C, 1967).

from the town of Kherson in the Crimea.⁴ Nonetheless, the *De Administrando* allows a clear view into a sustained Byzantine interest in the steppe to the north of the Black Sea.

In chapter 37, for example, we learn about the circumstances and (by inference) the date of a large-scale movement of Pecheneg tribesmen from an original location somewhere between the rivers Atil and Geich westwards to the Dniepr;⁵ we learn about Pecheneg tribal structure and about the manner in which the Pechenegs divided territory between constituent members of the tribe.⁶ We learn the names given to these territories by the Pechenegs themselves, and we also have recorded the names of several Pecheneg leaders at the time of composition of this section of the text.⁷ And we learn that one element of the Pechenegs had been incorporated within the Uzes' tribal structure at some point earlier in the 9th Century and that this element had retained a distinct ethnic, as well as visual, identity in spite of this.⁸

Of course, what this chapter does not tell us is why such information was recorded in the first place. Moreover, it prompts further important questions which are no easier to answer – such as why such records were kept in Byzantium; what else was kept; how long records were kept for; how often they were updated; and where they were kept and who by – presumably Constantinople and perhaps by the logothete of the drome – though here again, the very disparate character of the information contained within the text hardly points towards a comprehensive, uniform library.

In this respect then, the primary conclusion to reach and the obvious starting point for any survey of the *De Administrando Imperio* is to treat the text with caution, and to use it judiciously. The temptation with this source is to see it as a Holy Grail for Byzantine attitudes to its neighbours in a period where precious little is known

⁴ R. Jenkins and F. Dvornik, *De Administrando Imperio – Commentary* (London, 1962); J. Howard-Johnston, 'Re-examination of the Evidence of the Arrival of Rus,' in eds. M. Kazanski, A. Nercessian, C. Zuckerman, *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient* (Paris, 2000).

⁵ *DAI*, ch. xxxvii, 166. Also see M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium 600-1025* (London, 1996), 230-33.

⁶ *DAI*, ch. xxxvii, 166-70.

⁷ *DAI*, ch. xxxvii, 166.

⁸ *DAI*, ch. xxxvii, 169.

about this topic generally, and particularly for a more specific subject like steppe diplomacy, where we are essentially reliant on this single source.

The concept and principles of steppe diplomacy as set out clearly in the first twelve chapters of the *De Administrando* – namely the manipulation of a balance of power favourable to Byzantine interests, the playing off of one against another, based on a simple policy of divide and rule – certainly strike a chord with the modern historian, and particularly with the Byzantinist familiar with the image of Byzantium as consistently projected and re-enforced from within as innately and inherently superior, able through power of reason and sheer intelligence to out-manoeuvre its enemies and rivals.⁹

The impression this had on others was not always favourable to say the least, with the fact that we can detect this in the first place going some way to confirming the view of Byzantium's self-promotion at the expense of others. It is striking, for example, that so many of the historians of the Crusades – at least those of the first four Crusades (1096-1204) – have similar reactions to Byzantium in general and to individual Emperors in particular. The various and many accounts share a common literary characterisation – which of course serves to echo contemporary political responses – of Byzantium as duplicitous and untrustworthy, always on the lookout to play off one against another, whether Crusader against Crusader, or Muslim against Crusader. And in this respect, it is important to note that it was not only outsiders who were aware of this and, for that matter, critical of it : John the Oxite, Patriarch of Antioch at the end of the 11th Century, was explicit in his attack on Constantine X Doukas, where the Emperor's readiness to setting Byzantium's neighbours against each other was roundly condemned for being not only immoral but fundamentally un-Christian.¹⁰

The impression of Byzantium's readiness and indeed keenness to base foreign policy on this basis is firmly enforced by the *De Administrando*, which presents itself as a utilitarian primer for Constantine's son, Romanos II. According to the Prooimion (or Preface) therefore, the purpose of the text was “in the first instance to

⁹ *DAI*, chs. i-xiii, 48-76.

¹⁰ P. Gautier, 'Diatribes de Jean l'Oxite contre Alexis I^{er} Comnène,' *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 28 (1970), 41.

set out what each nation (*ethnos*) has power to benefit the Romans,” going on to explain how some could harm the Empire (and therefore the Emperor), and how all could be dealt with.¹¹ It is perhaps not surprising, given the language used at the start of the text – coupled with the ostensibly comprehensive survey of all of Byzantium’s neighbours – that many scholars have seen the text as a blueprint for imperial foreign policy.¹² Some have even gone further, arguing that the *De Administrando* was a highly sensitive top-secret document that would have been enormously detrimental if it fell into non-Byzantine hands, – without considering whether in fact people like the Pechenegs could read Greek or whether the nomads could even read at all.¹³

Certainly, the first section of the text – the first twelve chapters – which are concerned with the area to the north of Constantinople and specifically to the north of the Black Sea are not hard to understand : the clear and explicit intention is for the author to explain how (and why) the Byzantines should control the steppe zone and how it should use the peoples populating it to its own advantage.

These chapters leave little doubt that the overriding concern, and indeed the basis, for Byzantine (foreign) policy in this region was the Pechenegs themselves. It was with the help of these nomads that the Empire would be able to maintain a balance of power that it was happy with and that would be favourable in the long run. Although the author does not explain why he was (and that Byzantium should be) interested in this region in the first place, it does not take much for us to read between the lines and realise that the focus on the Pechenegs had come about as a response to three specific phenomena not just on the steppes themselves but in neighbouring areas.

First, of course, the reliance on the Pechenegs was at least partly prompted by the shifting power on the steppes in the mid and late 9th Centuries, away from the Khazars and the Magyars and very much in favour of the Pechenegs, who proved themselves the dominant force in the reign of Constantine’s father, Leo VI. In addition to the collapse of Khazar power were two further potential and indeed very real threats to Byzantium proper – which came in the form of the Bulgars and the Rus’. The logic here, therefore, is that there is more to

¹¹ *DAI*, Prooimion, 44 ff.

¹² E.g. J. Bury, ‘The Treatise De Administrando Imperio,’ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 15 (1906), 517-77; Stephenson, *Frontier*, 25 ff.

¹³ Jenkins, *De Administrando*, 13.

the *De Administrando*'s focus on the Pechenegs and on the author's strenuous advice that "it is always greatly to the advantage of the Emperor of the Romans to be minded to keep the peace with the nation of the Pechenegs." And in order to ensure that this would be the case, the Emperor was encouraged to conclude conventions with the Pechenegs on a regular basis ("*sunthekas*"); to make friendships ("*spondas*") with them; to send them an envoy every year, presumably to ensure continued support; and to give them gifts regularly – although it is not entirely clear what these would have been.¹⁴

The following chapters go on to explain why it was that the Pechenegs were so dominant and why it was that Byzantium would do well to keep them happy. As the text tells us, all the nomads' neighbours, including the Rus', the Bulgars and the Magyars, had learnt from painful experience that it was not a good idea to be on the receiving end of Pecheneg aggression.¹⁵ It is worth noting that it is unlikely that the stress on Pecheneg aggression is an authorial creation, designed to play up the qualities of a key Byzantine ally. Certainly, there do appear to be fundamental differences in the way that the Pechenegs were reacting to the world around them – in particular retaining a fully nomadic lifestyle rather than becoming increasingly sedentary (unlike the Magyars at the start of the 10th Century, for example), and also resisting, or at least displaying no discernable interest in, Christianity, unlike so many of their neighbours. Moreover, the fact that other sources talk of the exceptional cruelty and barbarity of these nomads provides at least some confirmation of the fact that the Pechenegs really do appear to have been more dangerous than those around them.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the *De Administrando*'s insistence on Pecheneg dominance of the steppe and on the need for the Byzantines to treat them as the Empire's primary allies in the region – and as the basis for military and diplomatic policy above the Black Sea – is not without its problems. In the first place, the language used in these chapters is very simple; there are no details of any note in this part of the text, with the obvious exception of chapter nine which provides a very lengthy account indeed about the route taken by the Rus' on their way to the

¹⁴ *DAI*, ch. i, 48.

¹⁵ *DAI*, chs. ii-v, 48-52.

¹⁶ J. Shepard, 'The Russian steppe frontier,' *Arkheion Pontou* 35 (1979), 218-37; S. Franklin and J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus'* (London, 1996), 176-9.

Black Sea, highlighting precisely where ambushes could be laid;¹⁷ many of the chapters here are very short; and there is the nagging suspicion that what we are being told is rather simplistic and pat.

Indeed, the question that arises here is whether this part of the text perhaps tells us more about Byzantium and the Byzantines, and about the way that they saw themselves, than it does about Byzantine relations with the Pechenegs, or about steppe diplomacy as a whole. Are these chapters not more interesting as a primer for us to understand the Byzantine view of the self – able to choose who to ally with; able to have a role in, and influence, long-distance politics; able to manipulate and control a region far from Constantinople and on the periphery (if not beyond) of the Empire ?

And the fact that we already have one eyebrow raised makes it easier to assess what Constantine VII tells us in this section at least of the *De Administrando* dispassionately. Already suspicious about the very concept of steppe diplomacy, close examination of the text reveal further places where what we are told jars. For example, at the outset, the author explicitly states that he will explain how to deal with the Empire's neighbours by force of arms and making war (“*polemeisasthai*”).¹⁸ However, nothing could be further from what he in fact advocates in the opening twelve chapters, where he instead (repeatedly) advises the use of anything but force – in the form of diplomatic missions, gifts, words and friendships.¹⁹

To this may be added the insistence articulated in the Prooimion that all non-Byzantines have ravenous appetites and insatiable tempers, and that they constantly demand gifts.²⁰ Yet instead of explaining how to counter such demands, the advice set out in these chapters is rather different, and appears to turn on the principle of meeting demand and satisfying greedy appetites, advising payment, or rather presentation, of gifts that were proportionate to a people (“*ethnos*”) as important as the Pechenegs.²¹

And a further point that might be worth making here is to ask just how ambitious the Byzantine programme was on the steppe and what its real target was, for, reading between the lines here suggests

¹⁷ *DAI*, ch. ix, 56-62.

¹⁸ *DAI*, Prooimion, 44.

¹⁹ E.g. *DAI*, ch. i, 48; ch. iv, 50; ch. v, 52; ch. vi, 52; ch. vii, 54

²⁰ *DAI*, Prooimion, 44.

²¹ *DAI*, ch. i, 48.

that the primary thrust of imperial policy was that employment of and payments to the Pechenegs were really directed at and motivated by prevention of attacks on Byzantium and Constantinople by the Rus', Bulgars and Magyars.

Moreover, the temptation to see the Pechenegs as a valve that could be used against these other peoples and turned on and off at will must surely be resisted in the strongest terms as being too simplistic by half. For taken as a whole, the first chapters of the *De Administrando* suggest not only that the Pechenegs were the rock and basis of Byzantine policy in this region; they were also the rock and basis of the policy of all those in this region, to the extent that the Rus' were not only reliant on their neighbours for cattle, sheep and horses, but were unable to leave their homes unless they entertained good relations with the Pechenegs.²² In this way, it is not so much a question of Byzantium controlling the steppe with a considered and careful policy of steppe diplomacy or of a strategy of divide and rule, rather a recognition of that the Pechenegs exercised *de facto* control of the area to the north of the Black Sea from the Danube to the Dniepr and beyond.

This in itself should make us wonder how real and effective any Byzantine steppe policy may have been – or even if there was really one at all. For the impression of a Byzantium pulling strings rather precludes both what the text tells us about Pecheneg ascendancy on the steppe, and also about their own motivations and interests in dominating their neighbours. So, for example, chapter nine at first glance provides a template for how to attack the Rus' and keep them in check by activating trusty imperial allies as required by Constantinople. But surely here it is important to question whether the petty goods mentioned by the text (“purple cloth, ribbons, woven cloth, gold brocade, pepper, scarlet (also Parthian) leather, and other commodities which they might require”) would really have bought large-scale Pecheneg support.²³

Certainly, given the very nature of tribal structure in general, and particularly that along the lines set out in chapter thirty seven of the text, it is worth asking whether buying off was actually a realistic and even a feasible thing to do : it is hard to believe that all tribal

²² *DAI*, ch. ii, 50.

²³ *DAI*, ch. vi, 52.

leaders would have been paid on each occasion, simply for logistic reasons. And even if they had, is it truly reasonable to think that they would always and invariably have followed instructions, in short that they went through with their part of the deal ? Suspicions here point instead to a hypothesis that not only was the concept of steppe diplomacy as laid out in the *De Administrando* one of wishful (or fanciful) thinking, but so too was the list of goods that were ‘paid’ to the nomads : might not even this be a *topos*, designed to show off the simplicity of the Pechenegs against the sophistication of 10th Century Byzantium ? It is hard to see how this was not the case, in fact, given Constantine VII’s early protestations about the greed of Byzantium’s neighbours – for if this amounted to little more than a few pieces of fabric then it is hard to see why or how the Emperor could really complain.²⁴

Certainly, a policy that might conceivably be referred to as steppe diplomacy, but which in fact amounts to little more than standard frontier policy, did exist – as is clear from the case of Byzantium’s ill-fated attempt to ally with and use the Magyars against Symeon and Bulgaria at the end of the 9th Century (where significantly it was a Bulgar alliance with the Pechenegs that proved decisive).²⁵ However, apart from this (often quoted) instance, we are hard pushed to find other occasions where Pechenegs (or others) were successfully activated against each other or against Byzantium’s enemies.

In 941, of course, when Igor of Kiev managed to attack Constantinople itself, the Pechenegs and the Pecheneg deterrence are conspicuous by their absence at precisely a time when we would have expected them to have been in evidence.²⁶ Other cases where Pecheneg involvement, or even non-involvement, are few and far between. And even when we can see the nomads at work with the murder of Sviatoslav of Kiev at the start of the 970s, one wonders just how much this had to do with Byzantium. For while Sviatoslav’s murder suited Byzantium, we are surely not to believe that his assassination did not also benefit the Pechenegs as well.²⁷ And indeed, there is perhaps an even more basic way to see the murder here, not as part of some

²⁴ *DAI*, Prooimion, 44.

²⁵ Whittow, *Orthodox Byzantium*, 287.

²⁶ See Shepard and Franklin, *Emergence*, 114-6.

²⁷ *Russian Primary Chronicle*, Eng. tr. S. Cross and O. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), 90.

Byzantine or Pecheneg master plan, rather as a case of a wealthy man of status, well-known to the nomads, tired and defeated, returning to Kiev after a long journey, carrying many possessions with him, vulnerable at the rapids: in short, too good an opportunity to miss.

Here then it is worth looking to the 11th Century for some instructive insights into steppe diplomacy, and which reveals why such policies (as far as they existed at all) were so problematic and illusory. Faced with increasing threat of the Pechenegs in the Balkans and even as far as the environs of the capital in the 1080s, the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos finally went for an all-out battle with the nomads in 1091 by a hill named Lebounion in southern Thrace, calling in support from as far away as Rome and Flanders. He also appears to have sought an alliance with the Cumans (or Qipchaqs), another nomadic tribe from the steppe region. In the best case scenario, the Cumans proved to be utterly unreliable, only appearing at the very last moment to take on the Pechenegs. Even then, as one source makes clear, the Emperor had to exercise extreme caution when dealing with them in the aftermath of victory.²⁸ At worst, though, alliance with the Cumans proved of marginal long-term value, as they simply replaced the Pechenegs as the thorn in the Byzantine side: whereas it had been the Pechenegs who repeatedly invaded the Balkans in the 1080s, thirty years later it was the Cumans who were causing the problems.²⁹

Unreliability of course was the key, and this really drives any serious hypothesis as to whether the Byzantines were truly prepared to rest their strategy on getting the Pechenegs to do their dirty work for them. And even here it is the *De Administrando* itself that poses the question: as we learn from the text, on at least one occasion, one of the tribes on the steppe had simply refused to do what it was asked by the Byzantines.³⁰ In other words, Byzantium's neighbours in the Black Sea region, like those elsewhere, could not be relied on when needed.

Perhaps then the first twelve chapters of the text do tell us more about Byzantium and about how the Byzantines saw themselves in the middle of the 10th Century, at a time of political and geographic

²⁸ P. Diaconu, *Les Pétchéniègues au Bas-Danube* (Bucharest, 1970), 25-32; Anna Komnene, *Alexiade*, ed. B. Leib, 3 vols. (Paris, 1937-45), Bk VIII, ch. iv-vi, vol. 2, 136-46.

²⁹ P. Diaconu, *Les Coumans au Bas-Danube aux XI^e et XII^e siècles*, (Bucharest, 1978), 37-42.

³⁰ *DAI*, ch. viii, 56.

expansion, a time of economic upswing, and at a time where they saw themselves as masters of their own destiny.

That is not to say that Byzantium was not interested in the Black Sea and in the peoples inhabiting this region, or that they were not careful to monitor the changes that went on there. Indeed, in so far as one can talk about key themes in the foreign policy of the Byzantine Empire in this period, it is clear that the thrust was very explicitly and consistently geared at containing the Bulgaria of Symeon and of managing and controlling the emergence of Rus'. It is no coincidence, however, and certainly worth stressing, that both of these were dealt with and handled without Pecheneg help or assistance, and rather in spite of the nomads, rather than because of them.

However, my purpose here has been simply to flag up the dangers of reading too much into a text drawn from a wide range of disparate sources, with varying motivations and which ask more questions than it solves. Instead, the intention has been to offer a counter-argument to the long accepted hypothesis, essentially lifted *verbatim* from the *De Administrando Imperio*, that Byzantium sought and was able to maintain a favourable balance of power above the Black Sea in the 9th and 10th Centuries by a sustained policy of divide and rule, or by basing a strategy on an unreliable, though truly terrifying, nomadic tribe.