

# THE IMAGE OF NOMADS OF THE BLACK SEA STEPPES IN THE BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES. PERCEIVING OF THE "OTHER" AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

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**Keywords:** *nomads of the Black Sea Steppe, perceiving of the "Other", Byzantine historiography, Byzantine policy against nomads.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *nomazi din stepa Mării Negre, percepția asupra "Celuilalt", istoriografie bizantină, politica bizantină împotriva nomazilor.*

**Abstract:** *On the basis of the selected Byzantine sources, the author attempts to outline the image of nomadic peoples in the Byzantine historiography of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries.*

*Information of the Byzantine sources on the nomads of the Western Eurasian steppes is still regarded as very valuable and reliable. The autor tries to examine this too favorable opinion indicating the very stereotypical method of description of nomads which is very common in the Byzantine historiography. Its autors, however they belonged to the elite of empire, saw the inhabitants of the steppe as a primitive and abominable hordes, deprived of basic political and social institutions as state, religion or law. Adittionaly nomads' vices were exposed, inter alia their abominable dietary or sexual habits, treachery, greed, etc.*

*The way in which nomads were perceived by the Byzantine authors dictates the rethinking of the thesis of particular importance of the steppe peoples for the Byzantine northern policy. This thesis seems to be based on the data of the treatise De administrando imperio by the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. However, its impact on the Byzantine diplomacy is usually exaggerated.*

**Rezumat:** *Pe baza izvoarelor bizantine scrise selectate, autorul încearcă să sublinieze imaginea popoarelor nomade în istoriografia bizantină a secolelor X-XII.*

*Informațiile oferite de izvoarele bizantine despre nomazii stepelor din vestul spațiului eurasiatic sunt încă privite ca surse valoroase și de încredere. Autorul încearcă să examineze această opinie favorabilă, indicând metoda stereotipică de descriere a*

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nomazilor, folosită frecvent în istoriografia bizantină. Autorii bizantini, deși aparțineau elitei imperiului, îi vedeau pe locuitorii stepei ca hoarde primitive și înfiorătoare, lipsite de instituții politice și sociale fundamentale, precum stat, religie sau lege. În plus, erau prezentate viciile nomazilor, printre care obiceiurile lor alimentare și sexuale dezgustătoare, trădarea, lăcomia, etc.

Modul în care erau percepuți nomazii de către autorii bizantini dictează revizuirea tezei importanței speciale a popoarelor stepei pentru politica bizantină nordică. Această ipoteză pare să fie bazată pe informația furnizată de tratatul *De administrando imperio*, al împăratului Constantin VII Porfirogenetul. În orice caz, impactul său asupra diplomației bizantine este de obicei exacerbat.

Considerations comprised in this study should start with two quotations. More than 100 years ago Karl Krumbacher, in his monumental *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur* wrote:

“None other nation, maybe with the exception of the Chinese, has such extensive historical literature as the Greeks. Historiographic tradition continues in an uninterrupted chain from Herodotus to Laonikos Chalkokondyles”<sup>1</sup>.

By mentioning the name of “the father of historiography” and his Byzantine follower, whose creativity fell on the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the scholar suggests that there is continuity of historiographic tradition, which is displayed not only in the rhetoric and literary sphere but also in the methodological one. The same view seems to be expressed by Gyula Moravcsik who emphasised special significance of Byzantine sources for research on nomadic peoples in Eastern Europe:

“If, except for high level and extreme abundance of Byzantine historical literature, we also take into account its intellectual longevity, which was inherited by Byzantine Greeks from their ancient ancestors, vivid interest in all historical events, and especially in Barbaric peoples posing a threat to the Empire’s existence, then we will be able to understand why Byzantine sources preserved for us the richest, the most valuable and the most versatile data about the history of eastern European peoples, including Turkish peoples”<sup>2</sup>.

The above quoted opinions of two renowned scholars arouse expectations of every researcher of nomadic people who reaches out for Byzantine sources. Our

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<sup>1</sup> KRUMBACHER 1897, p. 219. „Kein Volk, die Chinesen vielleicht ausgenommen, besitzt eine so reiche historische Literatur wie die Griechen. In ununterbrochener Reihenfolge geht die Überlieferung von Herodot bis Laonikos Chalkokondyles“.

<sup>2</sup> MORAVCSIK 1983, p. 166. “Wenn wir außer dem hohen Niveau und dem großen Reichtum der byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung auch noch die geistige Regsamkeit in Betracht ziehen, die die byzantinischen Griechen von ihren antiken Vorfahren geerbt haben, das rege Interesse für alle geschichtlichen Ereignisse und insbesondere für die den Bestand des Reiches gefährdenden Barbarenvölker, so wird es uns verständlich, warum uns gerade die byzantinischen Quellen das reichste, wertvollste und vielseitigste Nachrichtenmaterial zur Geschichte der osteuropäischen Völker, und daher auch Türkvolker, erhalten haben“.

expectations are additionally heightened by tacit or explicit, as in the case of K. Krumbacher, comparison of Byzantine and Chinese historical literature. We expect to find in it not only extensive information on steppe inhabitants, and in fact there truly is a lot of information about them, but first and foremost profound knowledge of mechanisms ruling these overly active and – it should be admitted – frequently quite troublesome neighbours for the Empire. Expectations of this kind seem to be additionally justified by the fact that, the majority of authors, quoted also in this paper, belonged to the exact intellectual and political Byzantine elite. They were very well informed and it seems that their knowledge about the Empire's political partners should also be reflected in their creativity.

Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that our hopes are bound to be shattered. Arnold Joseph Toynbee claimed in one of his works that 80% of information in Greek historiography relates to the so called political history and especially military struggles<sup>3</sup>. It is hard to say what formed the basis for such respect; however, it seems that the remarks of this British scholar can also be referred to Byzantine historiography. This last circumstance means that a large majority of references to the nomads is related to political events – fights with nomads or peace treaties with them. Among the remaining references one can hardly find any excursion similar to the description of Scythia by Herodotus. Much more frequently one can find short, sometimes not longer than a dozen of words, characteristics of steppe inhabitants. This is exactly the type of literary phenomenon which will be analysed in my paper. Their content is often quite stereotypical and secondary, which means that they are not treated by modern historians as a valuable source of information. Despite these disadvantages and somewhat laconic character, they deserve scholars' attention as they provide knowledge on dominant ideas about the inhabitants of the Eurasian Steppe, common among educated Byzantine elites.

The descriptions collected here come from Byzantine sources; their authors lived in High Middle Ages. The earliest one created their works in the 10<sup>th</sup> c. and the latest one on the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. The selection is quite subjective. Anyhow the author of this study would like to emphasise that this selection can by no means be treated as a complete set of authors writing in the 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> c., belonging to Byzantine literary tradition, who included in their works information about the nomads from the Eurasian Steppe.

Leo, the Deacon of Basil II belongs to Byzantine historiography of the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> c. In his history he described events which took place between the death of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (959) and the end of the rule of John Tzimiskes (976). Describing the murder of Prince Sviatoslav Igorevich, coming back to Rus after being defeated in a war with Byzantium, the author made a very short characterization of the Pechenegs, the murderers of the ruler of Rus. This is what he wrote:

"[...] Patzinaks (they are very numerous nomadic people, who eat lice and carry their houses with them, living for the most part in wagons) [...]"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> TOYNBEE 1924.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Diaconus, *Historia*, IX 12 (p. 157). „Πατζινάκαι [...] ἔθνος νομαδικόν τοῦτο καὶ

At the end he also added that, together with Sviatoslav, nearly the whole of his squad was killed, so only very few of its members came back to their homeland. The characteristics presented here shows three of the most typical characteristics of the Pechenegs: quite unusual eating customs, nomadic lifestyle involving constant change of their place of stay and extraordinary belligerence. The last of these characteristics results from the context of events. Destructing the army of this powerful, although defeated by Byzantium, ruler of Rus, seems to be a clear exemplification of this trait of the Pechenegs. Leo does not know anything more about them. It is hard to say whether he understood their rather complex relations with Sviatoslav. However, for us this is of lesser importance. Much more significant are the above mentioned characteristics revealed in this situation. The fact that they ate lice seems to be revolting even for contemporary scholars. However, we do not have any reason to question the truthfulness of Leo's information. Even the fact that Strabon attributed identical practices to the Scythes using the same expression, does not change it<sup>5</sup>. The reception of the creativity of the author of *Geography* was a universal phenomenon among educated Byzantines, however, comparative material, completely independent of the Medieval Greek tradition, evidently confirms the practice of eating lice by steppe inhabitants. Ahmed ibn Fadlan, travelling in Transvolga region in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> c., observed a similar custom among Bashkir tribes<sup>6</sup>. It was also noted by John di Piano Carpini, staying among the Mongols in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> c<sup>7</sup>. The information gained from experience and related to people who were culturally similar to the Pechenegs, make Leo's record more credible. Another question, however, is its evident bias. It is even hard to imagine that the only type of food known to the Pechenegs were lice. Placing this fact in the centre of the characteristics of the steppe inhabitants, Leo probably consciously wanted to make his readers feel disgust and strangeness. The latter one was also strengthened by nomadic lifestyle. It is probably the characteristic that is the easiest to notice and at the same time the most elementary sign of their otherness for representatives of settled societies. Nearly exactly the same can be said about belligerence, which was only indirectly indicated by Leo the Deacon.

It was emphasised much more clearly later in a description of the Pechenegs written in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> c. by Michael Attaliates (about 1028 - about 1085). The author was close to Constantinople power elites and presented events related to the invasion of steppe inhabitants of the Danube Byzantine provinces in his "History" in the following way:

"[...] the Scythians, who are popularly called Pechengs, crossed the Danube with all their people and soon established themselves on Roman territory. This race practises armed raids more than any other skill or art and makes its living by

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πολύανθρωπον, φθειροφάγον τε καὶ φερέοικον, ἐπ' ἀμαξῶν ὡς τὰ πολλὰ βιωτεῦον, [...]". English translation by TALBOT & SULLIVAN 2005, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Strabo, *Geographika*, XI 2,1 (p. 190); XI 2,19 (p. 214).

<sup>6</sup> ibn Fadlan, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Carpini, *Storia dei Mongoli*, VI 7 (p. 248). „Immo vidimus etiam eos pediculos manducare“.

continuous use of the sword, bow and arrow. They are loathsome in their diet and the other aspects of their life, and do not abstain from eating foul foods”<sup>8</sup>.

Attaliates emphasises that fighting is probably the only *raison d'être* for the Pechenegs. This is how we should understand the claim that it was the form of activity cultivated by them. It is definitely not an ascertainment which sounds honourable. If steppe inhabitants managed to develop only their military skills with simultaneous nearly complete abandonment of other spheres of life (this is a clear message in Attaliates's record), then they become not only courageous and dangerous people when it comes to fighting, but first and foremost savage and ready for senseless cruelty. Moreover, their military skills seem to be not so much an art, understood as a skill cultivated by generations and learnt during years of practice, but an attribute received from the nature. This primeval unstoppable savageness becomes the main source of military skills of the nomads. This is the observation we find in the 11<sup>th</sup> century *Chronographia* by Michael Psellos (1018-about 1080), an author who was only a little older than his above quoted namesake:

“In one mass, close-packed and pell-mell, fortified by sheer desperation, they emit loud war-cries, and so fall upon their adversaries. If they succeed in pushing them back, they dash against them in solid blocks, like towers, pursuing and slaying without mercy”<sup>9</sup>.

This educated author clearly stated before that the Pechenegs, referred to in this fragment, not only do not know basic strategic and tactical rules, but also do not use any type of weapons except for spears. An opponent described in this way, resembles an unpredictable horde of wild beasts, always ready for aggressive activity disregarding earlier peace pacts. In the light of the records presented here, belligerence of the nomads does not have much to do with martial arts. It seems to be more of a product of inborn aggression which in turn is a sign of their savageness.

In the description written by Michael Attaliates there is also another element of the characteristics of the steppe inhabitants which deserves closer analysis. The author attributes eating impure meat to the Pechenegs. Interpretation of this passage is rather difficult. Attaliates could have meant impure food in a ritual sense, eating such food would mean defying a religious ban, or possibly eating what must seem revolting for a civilised man. In the case of this author,

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<sup>8</sup> Ataliates, *Historia*, p. 24. „Σκύθαι δέ, οὓς Πατζινάκους οἶδεν ὁ δημῶδης λόγος καλεῖν, τὸν Ἰστρον παγγενεὶ διαβάντες μεθ' οὐ πολὺ τοῖς Ῥωμαικοῖς ἐγκατεσκήνωσαν τόποις, γένος ἀντὶ πάσης ἄλλης ἐπιστήμης καὶ τέχνης τὴν μεθ' ὅπλων ἐπιδρομὴν ἡσκηκός καὶ βίον ἔχον τὸ ἐν ῥομφαίᾳ καὶ τόξῳ καὶ βέλει συνεχῶς διαζῆν, μυσαρὸν δὲ τὰ πρὸς τροφὴν καὶ τὴν ἄλλην διαγωγὴν καὶ μιαροφαγεῖν οὐδαμῶς ἀπεχόμενον”. English translation by KALDELLIS & KRALLIS 2012, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Psellos, *Chronographie*, VII 68 (p. 125). „[...] ἀλλ' ὁμοῦ φύρδην συμπλακέντες ἀλλήλοις καὶ τῇ πρὸς τὸ ζῆν ἀπογνώσει ῥωσθέντες, μέγα τε ὀλοαύζουσι καὶ οὕτω τοῖς ἀντιτεταγμένοις ἐμπίπτουσι· κὰν μὲν ἀπώσωσιν, οἷα πύργοι ἐπιρραγέντες αὐτοῦς ἀφειδῶς ἐπόμενοι κατασφάττουσιν [...]”. English translation by SEWTER 1953, p. 242.

undoubtedly representing the Christian perspective, and being a part of Constantinople elites, both of these possibilities should be taken into account. Disgust experienced by Attaleiates is a product of a *cultural shock*, which can be based on both conscious religious bans or quite spontaneous feeling of disgust. The experience of Leo the Deacon must have been analogous. Contrary to this author, Michael Attaliates does not give any details about dietary habits of the Pechenegs. However, we can find some in Psellos's records:

"When they are thirsty, if they find water, either from springs or in the streams, they at once throw themselves down into it and gulp it up; if there is no water, each man dismounts from his horse, opens its veins with a knife, and drinks the blood. So they quench their thirst by substituting blood for water. After that they cut up the fattest of the horses, set fire to whatever wood they find ready to hand, and having slightly warmed the chopped limbs of the horse there on the spot, they gorge themselves on the meat, blood and all"<sup>10</sup>.

This description, written by a sophisticated Byzantine, strikes us with the vision of Barbarians, who similarly to wild beasts devour food and drink. It is important, however, not only how they eat but also what they eat. Devouring half raw meat and lapping up horse gore may arouse particular disgust. Such practices must have been seen as signs of particular savageness. A civilised man does not eat raw meat. In the case of Psellos, however, there could have been one more ancient tradition which influenced him. According to this tradition people eating raw meat were located in the most extreme parts of the ecumene far from civilised centres<sup>11</sup>. There is one more, equally important, circumstance which could have strengthened the feeling of disgust. It seems that it should be located in the religious sphere. It should be noticed that in the Old Testament tradition there was a categorical ban on eating blood since it was a substance which was seat of life<sup>12</sup>. In practice it meant a ban on drinking blood and eating meat containing it. Such regulations became to a large extent part of Christian tradition<sup>13</sup>. The dietary customs described by Psellos made the nomads seem savage and unmannerly, and first of all defiled, i.e. impure in a religious sense, or, if we use Old Testament terminology, not knowing the law. We will return to this last remark in the summary. In this place we should refer to a description written by Niketas Choniates, a Byzantine historian and politician living on the

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<sup>10</sup> Psellos, *Chronographie*, VII 68 (p. 125). „Δεῖσαν δὲ αὐτοῖς πιεῖν, εἰ μὲν ἐντύχοιεν ὕδασις ἢ πηγαίοις ἢ ποταμίοις, λάπτουσιν αὐτίκα ἐπεισπεσόντες, εἰ δ' οὖν, τοῦ ἵππου ἕκαστος ἀποβάς ἐξαιματοῦσι τούτους, σιδήρῳ τὰς φλέβας ἀναστομώσαντες, καὶ τὴν δίψαν οὕτως ἰῶνται, ὥς ὕδατι τῷ αἵματι χρώμενοι· εἴτα δὴ καὶ τὸν πίοτατον τῶν ἵππων ἀνατεμόντες, καὶ τὴν εὐρημένην ἀνακαύσαντες ὕλην, αὐτοῦ που τὰ ἐντετμημένα τοῦ ἵππου μέλη βραχύ τι διαθερμάναντες μετὰ τοῦ λύθρου λαφύσσουσι, [...]”. English translation by SEWTER 1953, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> MÜLLER 1972, p. 120-121. See here remarks on the indicators of wildness by Herodotus.

<sup>12</sup> See particularly: *Book of Genesis* IX 3-4; *Book of Leviticus* XVII 10-16; *Book of Deuteronomy* XIV 3-21.

<sup>13</sup> *Act of the Apostles* XV 29.



turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c. In his short ethnographic digression devoted to the Cumans-Kipchaks he wrote among others:

“The same horse bears the Scythian, carries him through tumultuous battle, provides him nourishment by having its veins opened, and, as men say, is used by him for copulation to relieve the barbarian's brutish lust<sup>14</sup>”.

This caricature image of a nomad-Scythe, for whom the closest creature, a war companion, a provider and a lover is a horse, is developed by Choniates in the further part of the discourse, when describing the way of crossing a river which was really used by the nomads:

“The Scythians crossed the river by the following device: they filled the skin with straw and stitched it together so tightly that not a drop of water could penetrate within. It was then tied to the horse's tail and straddled by the Cumans, along with his saddle and engines of war, and navigated, as if it were a boat and the horse a sail, safely over the broad, open Istros<sup>15</sup>”.

It should be noticed that Choniates, in his characteristics of the Cumans, cumulates in a special way descriptive motives occurring in the works of the earlier mentioned authors. A nomad (Scythian) is presented as a creature closer to the animal world of primeval savageness. He is understood as anti-reality, chaos, the world of anomy. This is particularly clearly shown in an image of man copulating with a horse. This scandalous practice, mentioned by Choniates, destroys the natural order defined by the Providence. A man or community allowing for such practices was situated between the world of people and the world of animals. It was given a status of oddness (*monstrum*), which was decisively repulsive.

It is characteristic that closeness to nature does not give birth to a tendency to idealise a nomad. Quite contrary, it seems that his savageness may give birth to all sorts of vices. Except for the above mentioned characteristics typical of the steppe inhabitants, was insatiable and unstoppable greediness. The author of *Strategikon* accuses the Avars of this feature<sup>16</sup>, Emperor Leo VI in his *Taktika* attributes it to the Hungarians<sup>17</sup>, and at last his son Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, claims that it is a negative characteristic of all northern peoples:

<sup>14</sup> Choniates, *Historia*, p. 94. „ὁ δ' αὐτὸς ἵππος καὶ τὸν Σκύθην ὀχεῖ, διὰ μαχησμοῦ φέρων τοῦ πολυάϊκος, καὶ τροφὴν χορηγεῖ σχαζομένης φλεβός, ὡς δέ φασι, καὶ ὀχευόμενος τὴν ἄλογον ἀφροδίτην τοῦ βαρβάρου ἀποκενοῖ”. English translation by MAGOULIAS 1984, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> Choniates, *Historia*, p. 94. „σχεδιάζει δ τοῖς Σκύθαις τοῦ ποταμοῦ τὴν διάβασιν κάρφης πλήρης διφθέρα, λίαν ἐς τὸ ἀκριβὲς σύσπαστος, ὡς μὴδὲ βραχὺ λιβάδιον ἐνείσρῃεν ἐνδοθι. οὐκοῦν ταύτην περιβάς ὁ Σκύθης, ἱππείας ἐξημμένην οὐράς, καὶ τὴν ἀστράβην ἐπαναθεὶς καὶ ὅσα τοῦ πολέμου ὄργανα διαπλωῖζεται, οἷα σκάφος λαίφει τῷ ἵππῳ χρώμενος, καὶ τὸ τοῦ Ἰστροῦ διανήχεται πέλαγος”. English translation by MAGOULIAS 1984, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Mauricius, *Strategikon*, XI 2,4 (p. 360).

<sup>17</sup> Leo, *Tactica*, XVIII 25 (p. 454).

"[...] all tribes of the north have, as it were implanted them by nature, a ravening greed of goods, never satiated, and so they demand everything and hanker after everything and have desires that know no limit or circumscription, but are always eager for more, and desirous to acquire great profits in exchange for a small service"<sup>18</sup>.

Another equally frequent motif is disloyalty and perversity of the nomads. The above quoted Constantine VII used the words *apistos* and *atimos*, i.e. infidel and dishonourable, as a constant epithet used in reference the northern neighbours of Byzantium, including the nomads. Breaching agreements was also to have resulted from natural features of the nomads. Thus it was a sign of their savageness, lack of any rules governing their behaviour, in one word anomy. Being similar to a horde of wild animals, they are a *sine rege, lege et religione* community. A perfect example of such perception of the nomads is the opinion of Psellos about the Pechengs:

"Taken in the mass, this is a nation to be feared, and a treacherous one. Treaties of friendship exercise no restraining influence over these barbarians, and even oaths sworn over their sacrifices are not respected, for they reverence no deity at all, not to speak of God. To them all things are the result of chance, and death they believe to be the end of everything. For these reasons they make peace with great alacrity and then, when they find it necessary to resort to war, they at once violate the terms of their treaty"<sup>19</sup>.

This sophisticated Byzantine emphasises a lack of any rules governing the barbarians' behaviour. He concludes that this must be the case as there is no basic social institution, i.e. religion. Lack of moral order seems to be also connected with a nomadic lifestyle, the main tool used to discern the nomads. Changing places to stay becomes synonymous with changeability, and perverse nature of the steppe inhabitants. Thus one may look for the interesting for us period of trends depicting nomadic life seen as guarantee of freedom and independence, in vain. The idea of *bon sauvage* seems to be completely strange to Byzantines.

Approaching the end of our considerations, one more characteristic phenomenon should be mentioned. Namely, all the above mentioned authors had

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<sup>18</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, XIII 15-19 (p. 66-67). „[...] τοῖς βορείοις ἅπασι γένεσι φύσις ὥσπερ καθέστηκεν τὸ ἐν χρήμασι λίχνον καὶ ἀπληστον καὶ μηδέποτε κορεννύμενον, ὅθεν πάντα ἐπιζητεῖ καὶ πάντων ἐφίεται, καὶ οὐκ ἔχει τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ὁρῶ περιγραφομένης, ἀλλ' αἰ τοῦ πλείονος ἐπιθυμεῖ, καὶ ἀντὶ μικρᾶς ὠφελείας μεγάλα κέρδη προσπορίζεσθαι βούλεται". English translation by R.J.H. JENKINS.

<sup>19</sup> Psellos, *Chronographie*, VII 69 (p. 126-127). „[...] τὰς γνώμας ὑποκαθήμενοι; οὔτε δὲ συνθῆκαι τούτους φιλίας ἐπέχουσιν, οὔτε κατὰ τῶν θυμάτων ὁμόσαντες τοῖς ὅρκοις ἐμμένουσιν, ἐπεὶ μηδὲ τι θεῖον σεβάζονται, ἵνα μὴ λέγω θεὸν, ἀλλ' αὐτόματα τούτοις πάντα συνέστηκε, καὶ τὴν τελευτὴν πέρας συμπάσης ὑπάρξεως οἰοῦνται; διὰ ταῦτα ῥᾶστά τε σπένδονται, καὶ πολεμεῖν δεῖσαν, εὐθὺς ἡθετήκασιν τὰς σπονδὰς; κἂν ἐλοῖεν τῷ πολέμῳ, οἱ δὲ πάλιν δευτέρας ἐπικαλοῦνται φιλίας, [...]". English translation by SEWTER 1953, p. 243.



a tendency to replace the proper ethnonyms of particular nomadic peoples with one handy *nomen collectivum*. The Pechenegs, Oghuz, Cumans and Khazars are simply Scythes. Most often we can observe this kind of practice as a kind of habit resulting from willingness to use old, especially the Attic, Old Greek dialect. Archaic ethnonyms sounded better in them than the contemporary ones. This explanation seems persuasive, however, there is one more circumstance we will draw our attention to. It seems that, especially in the context of the earlier presented observations, medieval Greek-speaking Romans were convinced that the steppe world was uniform. From a similar perspective, differences between particular nomadic peoples were of secondary importance, as in essence they were connected with their roots (they came from the north or from the north-east), their lifestyle and the related customs (nomadism) and at last relations with Byzantium. The Pechenegs, Kipchaks and other steppe peoples were perceived as subsequent embodiments of the Scythians, which in turn seemed to justify the use of descriptive motifs, coming from older authors, to characterise later peoples. For the majority of authors writing in the period of our interest, the events in the region of the Black Sea Steppe and its direct neighbourhood were nothing new, in the sense that they repeated the same scenario, already known from the classics ancient and early Byzantine historiography.

An introductory analysis of the perception of Byzantine historiographic tradition of the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. brings quite surprising results. Centuries-long relations with the nomads did not contribute to creation of their more nuanced image, as one could conclude on the basis of the above mentioned texts. A Medieval Greek-speaking Roman also placed the nomads in a kind of scheme, according to which they were savage, animal-like people. The characteristics of nomadic peoples, constructed by Byzantine authors, can be easily reduced to a few motifs, usually discrediting the barbarians. These disappointing ascertainties have, however, a positive value; they incline us to pose more questions. First of all some questions should be asked about the political practice of Byzantium. Dimitri Obolensky in one of his studies about the diplomacy of the Empire expressed the following opinion:

In stressing the crucial importance to Byzantium of the lands that lay beyond the Empire's northern borders Constantine Porphyrogenitus was giving expression to a *concern that underlines the whole history of Byzantine diplomacy* [underlined by A.P.]<sup>20</sup>.

This view was based mainly on data coming from *De administrando imperio* by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The problem is that the actually vivid interest of the educated emperor in the area of the Black Sea Steppe and its inhabitants seems to be an exceptional phenomenon in the historiography of the period of our interest, especially in the light of the above mentioned examples. It was related to political plans assuming a more active role of Byzantium in this region and using the nomads for this purpose. It is hard to suspect that the

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<sup>20</sup> OBOLENSKY 1994, p. 2.

subsequent generations of Byzantines would have similar plans, if for them the steppe inhabitants were an unfaithful mass devoid of basic social institutions, which seems to be also indicated in the literary works mentioned in this paper. Did Constantinople have such vivid interest in events related to its northern neighbours, based on some political doctrine developed over centuries, or did it maybe simply react to renewed threats?

One more important question refers to the mechanisms of creating an image of a strange nomad in the interesting period. It is mainly connected with the condition of the Byzantines themselves. It is obvious that the creation of an image of the other is confronted with the image of oneself and thus, even if only unconsciously, it still leads to constructing one's own identity. Maybe the answer should be sought for in the fact that the majority of the mentioned authors were the children of the period in Byzantine history which was defined by Robert Browning as confidence and classicism. Considerations of this type however go beyond the scope of this text<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> BROWNING 1992, p. 123ff.

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