AN OVERVIEW OF BYZANTINE SOURCES ABOUT THE PECHENEGKS (11TH AND 12TH CENTURIES)

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From today’s retrospective point of view, it is possible to state with great certainty that the 11th and 12th centuries represent a key period in the millennial history of the Byzantine Empire. Not only did Byzantium reach its greatest political and cultural boom in this period, its development in this period also left behind significant traces and predestined the direction of other important events in the centuries to come. Its cultural radiation in this period reached to a greater or lesser extent all parts of the then Europe; however, many incentives also directed eastward into the Eurasian steppe area, which has always been the subject of lively Byzantine interest. Successive migration waves of nomadic peoples have been coming from there for centuries and oftentimes had destructive effect on the Byzantine territories in the Balkans. Byzantine historians repeatedly documented raids of new and previously unknown invaders from the steppe. In the 11th and 12th centuries, these were mainly the Pechenegs and, to a lesser extent, also the Uzes and the Cumans. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the sources from this period mentioning these nomadic peoples.

Michael Psellos

Michael Psellos represents one of the most interesting historical figures of the Byzantine Empire in the 11th century. He was born soon after 1018. ¹ He started his career at the imperial court in the first half of the 11th century and thanks to his exceptional education and intellect he made it to important positions at court (especially regarding law). During the reign of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055), he held the position of the so-called consul of the philosophers (hypatos ton filosofon) ² and later became a personal advisor and, to some extent, also an eminence grise of other emperors, e.g. Isaac I Komnenos (1057–1059) and Constantine X Doukas (1059–1067).³ He ended his varied and lengthy political career at the imperial court, which he pursued also thanks to his highly developed skills of intriguing and a large dose of political opportunism, serving as a personal teacher of Michael, Constantine X Doukas’ son, who succeeded on the imperial throne in 1071 as Michael VII. At the end of his life (he died probably in 1082), he wrote a text entitled Chronographia,⁴ where he described historical events of the Byzantine Empire from 976 to 1077 from his own perspective.⁵ It is a continuation of the chronicle of Paul Diakonos. However, this is not a typical historical work, because Michael Psellos does not bother with exact dating of events he mentions or with a thorough description of all the details. The work includes only his own memories and personal depiction of backstage practices of high-level Byzantine policy at the imperial court in Constantinople.⁶ Despite, or perhaps because of this, his work sometimes offers unprecedented insightful and detailed information about some events. Its great contribution lies in his particularly pertinent and plastic literary portraits and psyche of

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¹ Σαθας (1874: xxx).
² Σαθας (1874: lvi).
⁴ Psel. (1928).
emperors and empresses who Michael Psellos gradually served in the course of his long career.

Although this author de facto does not mention the Pechenegs (except for the expedition of Isaac Komnenos),\(^7\) I included him into this overview, as his work provides us with useful backstage information about activities at the Byzantine imperial court in the second half of the 11th century, i.e. during the period of conflicts with these nomadic peoples.

**Michael Attaleiates**

Michael Attaleiates was a younger contemporary of Michael Psellos. He came from the port city of Attaleia (today’s Antalya, Turkey) to Constantinople at a young age to pursue studies in law.\(^8\) His career at the imperial court in Constantinople culminated during the reign of Romanos IV Diogenes (1068–1071), Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078) and Nikephoros III Botaneiates (1078–1081),\(^9\) when he served as krités epi tou hippodromou kai tou bélou.\(^10\) In 1080, towards the end of his life, he wrote a historical work entitled Historia,\(^11\) which covers the period between 1034 and 1079.\(^12\) This work is particularly important because it, in a sense, complements the work Chronographia by Michael Psellos, and provides us with an alternative view of some events. Michael Attaleites also described events which he often directly witnessed.\(^13\) The text contains several clearly celebratory parts in honor of the aforementioned emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates;\(^14\) therefore, it is probable that Michael Attaleiates dedicated his work to this emperor.

Attaleiates’ historical work includes a very detailed, yet incomplete, description of a massive invasion of the Pechenegs to the south of the Danube in the winter of 1046/47,\(^15\) the first Byzantine-Pecheneg war between 1049 to 1053,\(^16\) as well as fighting against these nomads during the reign of emperor Isaakios Komnenos.\(^17\) This author also described the invasion of the Uzes in 1064/65 which was stopped with the help of the Pechenegs living in Paristrion,\(^18\) and finally also some episodes from the fight for the imperial throne in 1078 where also the Pechenegs fought on the side of the rebellious general Nikephoros Bryennios at the battle of Kalavryai.\(^19\)

**John Skylitzes**

Synopsis historion penned by John Skylitzes\(^20\) represents another important source for the history of Byzantium in the 11th century. It is a classic chronicle describing the history of humanity since the creation of the world. Therefore, older periods are less interesting than the description of events between 811 and 1057, which is actually a continuation of the well-known chronicle of Theophanes.\(^21\) Very little information has been preserved about personal life of John Skylitzes; it is assumed that he was born in the thema Thrakësion around 1040

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\(^7\) Σαθας (1874: 249).
\(^8\) Καραγιαννοπούλος (1987: 305).
\(^10\) Krumbacher (1891: 74).
\(^11\) Attal. (1853).
\(^12\) Krumbacher (1891: 74); Καραγιαννοπούλος (1987: 305).
\(^13\) Krumbacher (1891: 74); Καραγιαννοπούλος (1987: 305).
\(^14\) E.g. Attal. (1853: 56, 185); Kazhdan & Franklin (1984: 24).
\(^15\) Attal. (1853: 30–31).
\(^16\) Attal. (1853: 31–43).
\(^17\) Attal. (1853: 66–68).
\(^18\) Attal. (1853: 83–87).
\(^19\) Attal. (1853: 288–291).
\(^20\) Scyl. (1979).
\(^21\) Krumbacher (1891: 138); Καραγιαννοπούλος (1987: 300).
and died after 1101. John Skylitzes was a peer and a contemporary of Michael Psellos. During his life, he received a high-ranking court title *kouropalatēs* and the position of the chief of the watch (*droungarios tēs viglēs*), and as the work of Georgios Kedrenos notes, he is identified with his own name as John Thrakesios.

Considering information about the Pechenegs, Skylitzes’s chronicle covers contacts between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines during the 10th and the beginning of the 11th centuries, as well as their first raids to the Byzantine territory starting from 1027, which intensified until 1036. Unfortunately, these events are described in a dry, minimalist style. The overview of the Pechenegs shortly before their massive invasion to the Byzantine territory to the south of the Danube in 1046/47 is more detailed and complements the text of Michael Attaleiates. The same applies to the description of the first Byzantine-Pecheneg war from 1047 to 1053.

**John Skylitzes continuatus**

In some manuscripts, the text *Synopsis historion* by John Skylitzes does not end in 1057 (see above), but continues uninterrupted until 1079. Therefore, the text covering events from 1057 to 1079 is nowadays considered an independent piece of work entitled as continuation of John Skylitzes, or John Skylitzes continuatus. Based on the comparative textual methods, some historians believe that the author was also John Skylitzes, some deny this possibility.

This work narrates about the expedition of Isaac Komnenos against the Pechenegs in 1059, as well as the aforementioned raid of the Uzes in 1064/65 (again, it is possible to confront these passages with the text of Michael Attaleiates). Contrary to the Attaleiates’ chronicle, Skylitzes describes the insurgency in the province of Paristrion, which was later headed by the Pechenegs residing in this area, as well as other activities of various Pecheneg groups in the turmoil preceding the accession of Alexios I Komnenos to the throne.

**Anna Komnene**

The *Alexiad* by the first-born daughter of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos represents a unique historical source in the context of the whole history of the Byzantine Empire from the end of 11th to the beginning of the 12th centuries. The impulse to write this text was for this purple-born historian the death of her husband Nikephoros Bryennios. Nikephoros Bryennios left behind an unfinished historical work, whose aim was to describe the life and reign of his father-in-law Alexios Komnenos. After Bryennios’ death (after 1136), Anna decided to continue in his unfinished work. Therefore, the *Alexiad* focuses solely on the description of events which happened during Alexios’ life and reign, i.e. between 1069 and 1118.

Since Anna Komnene wrote her work after a long period of almost half a century since the historical events she described happened, there have been doubts among historians about the

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22 Krumbacher (1891: 138).
28 *Scyl. con.* (1968).
32 *Scyl. con.* (1968: 166).
34 *Alexias* (2001).
authenticity of information it contains. Although she was born in December of 1083, Anna could not witness most of the military activities in the first half of her father’s reign she describes because of her young age.

Historians have pointed out several times that this narrative full of details and dedicated descriptions of military operations does not really correspond to the philosophical and art “humanistic” education which the princess received during her life at the imperial court. Historian J. Howard-Johnston put it very aptly when he said that if historians did not know the name of the author of the Alexiad, they would probably came to conclusion that the work had been written by an experienced high-ranking military officer, regularly participating in person on military campaigns of Alexios I Komnenos.

A key to solve this problem is the relationship between the text of Anna Komnene and the text Hylé historias written by her husband Nikephoros Bryennios, including the notes and excerpts which he definitely gathered when writing from 1118 until his death. His material had to be extensive and probably contained already processed information which was based on his personal experience, as well as on archival materials. No scientists nowadays deny that Anna Komnene directly drew information from her husband’s work when writing the first two books of the Alexiad, and to some extent also took it over, so that some parts verbatim match passages from Hylé historias. Her text faithfully copies the relevant part of her husband’s work also in other cases. However, Anna Komnene usually avoided using Bryennios’ specific military terms and replaced them with more general expressions; she also modified his mostly straightforward and objective style of narration to the more artistic and archaizing one that was in line with the models of ancient Greek historical texts.

In terms of information about the Pechenegs and the Cumans, the Alexiad represents a very valuable historical source since it is the only work which in some detail describes the second Byzantine-Pecheneg war under the reign of Alexios Komnenos; yet, her description is not exhaustive and there are significant gaps, as well as chronological inaccuracies. Anna Komnene also details the great Cuman invasion to the Balkans in 1094/95.

John Zonaras

Historical work Epitomé historion by John Zonaras consists of eighteen books and describes historical events from the creation of the world to 1118. Description of the Byzantine history (i.e. the period from the reign of Emperor Constantine I the Great) starts with the book XII. During the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, John Zonaras belonged to the higher-ranking bureaucracy strata in the capital, first as megas droungarios tés viglés (chief of the watch in Constantinople) and then as protoasekrétés (senior secretary) of the imperial office. Later, he withdrew from public life and became a monk in the monastery on the island of St.
Glykeria in Propontidos.\textsuperscript{48} It was there where his historical work was written; he gathered information for the text from Byzantine sources of the 11th century.\textsuperscript{49} There is no direct information about his further life, but he most certainly lived until the mid-12th century.\textsuperscript{50} Zonaras’ evidence of the reign of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos is generally highly valued by historians, as when compared to the panegyric-like text of the Alexiad, it offers more independent and critical evaluation of the reign of this emperor.\textsuperscript{51}

The text which also mentions the war of Alexios I Komnenos against the Pechenegs can be found in book XVII and is considerably shorter than the narrative of Anna Komnene. In fact, Zonaras condensed the long-time course of two main Byzantine military campaigns of 1087 and 1091 into a single brief description\textsuperscript{52} – i.e. the same campaigns that are more detailed in the text by Anna Komnene. In view of this finding, it is obvious that the main source of information of John Zonaras in relation to the war against the Pechenegs was the Alexiad, and therefore, besides the critical tone, his text cannot offer us any new information diametrically different from the details known from Anna Komnene’s description.

\textbf{John Kinnamos}

Historical treatise entitled \textit{Epitome} (Greek: summary, digest) penned by the Byzantine historian John Kinnamos\textsuperscript{53} consists of seven books and describes the events from 1118 to 1176, i.e. the events that occurred during the reign of Emperors John II Komnenos (1118–1143) and his son Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180).\textsuperscript{54} John Kinnamos was born shortly after 1143.\textsuperscript{55} It is believed that he pursued his career at the imperial court during the second half of the reign of Manuel I Komnenos.\textsuperscript{56} John Kinnamos wrote his historical treatise probably between the years 1180–1183.\textsuperscript{57} In this respect, it is apparent that this Byzantine historian was unable to recount the historical events, which occurred already during the reign of John II Komnenos, based on his own life experience. However, owing to his post of imperial secretary (\textit{basilikos grammatikos}).\textsuperscript{58} John Kinnamos had access to the imperial archives, where he could easily obtain documents necessary for the \textit{Epitome}. Nevertheless, the historians who have done a detailed analysis of his works often state that his style of describing historical events is short and laconic, especially in the first book of his chronicle.\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, the chronological data provided by the author are often inaccurate. Additionally, besides speaking about expeditions of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos against the Hungarian Empire, in which he participated personally, his text rarely contains lively and detailed narration.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Niketas Choniates}

The chronicle of Niketas Choniates entitled \textit{Historia}\textsuperscript{61} consists of 21 books and covers the period of the Byzantine history between 1118 and 1206.\textsuperscript{62} Like the above-mentioned John

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\textsuperscript{48} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 321).

\textsuperscript{49} For a detailed analysis of sources used by John Zonaras and recently published by D. Černoglazov, see: Χριστοφιλοπουλου (2001: 23); Hunger (1978: 416).

\textsuperscript{50} Χριστοφιλοπουλου (2001: 23); Hunger (1978: 416).

\textsuperscript{51} Zon. (1897: 740–741).

\textsuperscript{52} Χριστοφιλοπουλου (2001: 23); Hunger (1978: 417); Birkenmeier (2002: 7).

\textsuperscript{53} Cin. (1836).

\textsuperscript{54} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{55} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{56} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{57} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{58} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{59} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{60} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 345).

\textsuperscript{61} Chon. (1975).
Kinnamos, also Niketas Choniates was born in the Phrygian city Chonai in the western Asia Minor after the death of Emperor John II Komnenos around 1150, or according to some historians after 1160.\textsuperscript{63} The young prospective historian started his career in the Byzantine administration towards the end of the reign of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos.\textsuperscript{64} Under Emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195), he became logothétés tón sekretón.\textsuperscript{65} Thanks to his successful career as a government official, Niketas Choniates belonged to the elite living in the Byzantine capital. Events related to the arrival of the IVth crusade in 1203 and the conquest of Constantinople by western knights in April 1204 represented a sharp turning point in his brilliant career. Under dramatic circumstances, Niketas Choniates had to leave the Byzantine capital and settled down in Nicaea where he held a senior position at the court of the first emperor of the so-called Nicaean empire, Theodore I Laskaris (1204–1222).\textsuperscript{66} He completed the writing of his extensive historical work in Nicaea, where he probably died shortly after 1210.\textsuperscript{67}

Regarding the characteristics of Choniates’ Historia, the same conclusions apply to it as to the work of John Kinnamos. Although the whole work is from a rhetorical point of view written in richer and more colorful language, events of the reign of John II Komnenos are described there with a similar lack for details, which is characteristic of the work of Kinnamos.\textsuperscript{68} Striking similarity of both historical works has led many historians to a conclusion that Niketas Choniates knew the chronicle of John Kinnamos well and that he used it as a basis for his own work, especially when describing the reign of John II Komnenos (1118–1143) and Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180).\textsuperscript{69} However, when comparing the two chronicles we can see that Choniates’ Historia contains more detailed information than the work of John Kinnamos. This finding is probably based on the fact that a higher position at the Constantinople imperial court offered Choniates much easier access to various documents in the imperial archives than to the lower-ranked official John Kinnamos.

**Abbreviations**

- **CFHB**: Corpus Fontium Historiæ Byzantinæ
- **Chon.**: *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*. Ed. I. A. van Dieten (1975), CFHB. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- **CSHB**: Corpus Scriptorum Historiæ Byzantinæ
- **JÖB**: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik

\textsuperscript{62} Grecu (1949: 197); Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 355).
\textsuperscript{63} Krumbacher (1891: 84); Grecu (1949: 197).
\textsuperscript{64} Birkenmeier (2002: 30).
\textsuperscript{65} Birkenmeier (2002: 31).
\textsuperscript{66} Καραγιαννοπουλος (1987: 355).
\textsuperscript{67} Krumbacher (1891: 85).
\textsuperscript{68} Birkenmeier (2002: 30).
\textsuperscript{69} Grecu (1949: 197, 200–201).
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