

PECHENEG – HUNGARIAN RECONCILIATION AFTER THE DEFEAT AT RIADE

In general, research by no means considers the defeat at Riade in 933 an event with such severe consequences as, for example, the defeat in the battle of Augsburg although György Györffy remarks that it marked the end of the most flourishing period of the raids and the beginning of decline, and that the 'severe financial loss' due to the non-payment of taxes 'might have been critical from the viewpoint of the provision of the escort if ... they had not managed to extend tax collection to a new area, the Balkan right in the following year.'¹ Although he considers the casualties significant, this is not held to be the primary affliction for the Hungarians by Gyula Kristó, either, but rather the fact that at this time, they were unable to take captives and that they could not force Henry to continue tax-payment as before by force of arms, either². There is at least one researcher who does not take any casualties into account as, according to him, when the Hungarians, already in retreat due to the cold and famine, caught sight of the armoured Saxon cavalry drawing up, they immediately fled leaving everything behind – although he later remarks that at this time, 'the Hungarians got very frightened' so much so that 'they steered clear of the country' until Henry's death in 936.³ What could have been the cause of this panic? In another work of his,⁴ Györffy suggests that it was to be feared that Henry would conduct a campaign in revenge: according to him, this can be seen from the fact that each of the second generation leaders got a river valley in the foreground of the western borderland obviously for the purpose that they could draw up by the rivers should the country be invaded from this direction. Even if, probably, one should not jump to a far-fetched conclusion from the place names, on which Györffy's assumption is based, there might easily have been the danger of an invasion from the west as Henry had ample reasons to take revenge.

This means that the defeat at Riade did have two consequences: on the one hand, the loss of regular taxes through the reduction of the areas suitable for plundering, and the possibility of a German revenge campaign on the other, which might as well have had fatal consequences in the case if Henry could find allies in the back of the Hungarians. Consequently, Hungarian diplomacy had a double

¹ György Györffy, *István király és műve*. ['King Stephen and his work'] Budapest, 1977. pp. 45–46.

² Gyula Kristó, *Levedi törzsszövetségétől Szent István államáig*. ['From Levedi's tribal confederacy to St Stephen's state'] Budapest, 1980. 268 p.

³ István Bóna, *A magyarok és Európa a 9–10. században*. ['Hungarians and Europe in the 9-10th centuries'] Budapest, 2000. 39 p.

⁴ *Magyarország története tíz kötetben 1. Előzmények és magyar történet 1242-ig*. ['The history of Hungary in ten volumes 1. Preceding events and Hungarian history until 1242.'] Budapest, 1984. (Hereinafter with Hungarian abbreviation: MOT.) Vol. I., 670 p.

task to solve: it had to find new territories for tax collection and plundering, and the country had to be secured particularly from the west but in general, as well.

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It is enough to take a brief look at the map of contemporary Eastern Europe to see evidently from the geopolitical relations that the solution was to be found in the relations with the Pechenegs.⁵

According to the opinion of one researcher, the Hungarian-Pecheneg cooperation was one of the most fundamental elements of Hungarian foreign policy in the 10th century, and it started directly after 927.⁶ One may more or less agree with this opinion but it must be remarked that the wording is a little bit misleading. As a matter of fact, cooperation was only true of the last two thirds of the century, which period is separated from the earlier decades with a very sharp dividing-line at the beginning of the 930s. Or in other words: at the beginning of the 930s, there was a very sharp turn in the Hungarian-Pecheneg relations, which, however, was obviously not without reason.

The Hungarian-Pecheneg relations, which, in the period following Árpád's conquest of Hungary, were certainly not characterised by cooperation but, to the contrary, by opposition, were vividly and summarily described by emperor Constantinus Porphyrogenetos in his work *De administrando imperio* (hereinafter: DAI). As he writes, '*The clan of the Turks is also very much afraid of the aforementioned Pechenegs as they have often been defeated by them, which almost put them on the verge of final decay. Therefore, Pechenegs always look fearful in the eyes of the Turks, which holds the latter at bay.*'⁷ Naturally, researchers have long taken an interest in what the expression 'often' may stand for in this text, that is, how many wars the Hungarians could have waged with their eastern neighbours. From the aspect of the present topic, this issue is of no importance: the Pecheneg attack preceding and finally leading to Árpád's conquest of Hungary, the memory of which left a deep mark in the Hungarian tradition,⁸ accounts in itself for what is described by Constantinus.

We have another contemporary source which clearly reveals that Hungarian-Pecheneg relations were distinctly bad at the beginning of the 10th century. Again, in DAI⁹ it can be read that '*...when once the cleric Gabriel was ordered by the emperor to be sent to the Turks, and he told them that » the emperor's message is this: go and chase the Pechenegs away from their places of living and settle there (as earlier, you used to live in that place) so that you will be near to*

⁵ Sándor László Tóth devotes a whole chapter to Pecheneg-Hungarian relations before Árpád's conquest of Hungary and the 10th century consequences of these relations in his monograph entitled *Levediától a Kárpát-medencéig* ['From Levedia to the Carpathian basin' (Szegedi Középkortörténeti Könyvtár, 14. Szeged, 1998.), pp. 169–188.

⁶ Ferenc Makk, *Magyar külpolitika (896–1196)*. ['Hungarian foreign policy (896-1196)'] Szegedi Középkortörténeti Könyvtár, 2. Szeged, 1993. 15 p.

⁷ Gyula Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történelem bizánci forrásai*. ['Byzantine sources of Hungarian history in the period of the Árpád dynasty'] Budapest, 1984. 35 p.

⁸ MOT. Vol. I., 594 p.

⁹ Gyula Moravcsik, 1984. 36. p.

Our Majesty so whenever I want, I will send a courier to you and find you easily», all the leaders of the Turks unanimously shouted »we will not start a fight with the Pechenegs as we cannot fight with them because it is a large country and they are a large people and evil chaps; do not ever speak to us like this because this does not please us. «' –Obviously, the words cited got into Constantinus' work from the delegate's report of the cleric Gabriel. As no other source mentions this mission, it is not easy to determine its date: according to the two extreme viewpoints of the different researchers (cited by Gyula Moravcsik in his notes to this part), it might as well have happened before Árpád's conquest in Hungary or even in 948. These two latter attempts at dating are certainly cannot be taken seriously: with regard to other conditions, it is much more likely that the mission must have occurred not long after Árpád's conquest of Hungary and at the end of the 920s the latest. György Györffy, for example, considers that 'relevant opinion' plausible which puts this event in the period of Leo the Wise, i.e. before 912:¹⁰ what is more, as he suspects a connection between Gabriel's mission and the report in DAI, according to which the whole territory of the Hungarians only included the areas around the river Tisza and its tributaries, he suggests that it happened before the occupation of Transdanubia, i.e. between 895 and 899. Through a chain of assumptions, Gyula Kristó rather supposes that the mission was related to the events in the Balkan around 924-925, namely, the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflicts.¹¹ If at this time, Bulgaria really attempted to set up an anti-Byzantium coalition, then it might really have been in the interest of Byzantium to get the potential members of this coalition to confront one another thus neutralising them. However, this may be valid for any period of the three decades after Árpád's conquest of Hungary, when Byzantium was often threatened by a Petcheneg-Bulgarian collaboration. From our viewpoint, the exact determination of the date of Gabriel's mission is of secondary importance, anyway, as the only important thing is that the whole three decades following Árpád's conquest of Hungary was characterised by the Hungarians' keeping distance or strong fear of the Pechenegs, which is well illustrated by the aforementioned two sources.

In any case, the general political conditions of the Balkan cannot be ignored in the investigation of the Pecheneg-Hungarian relations. The place of the Pechenegs in the foreign policy of Eastern Europe's leading power, Byzantium is defined by Constantinus Porphyrogenetos like in a policy: according to it, if there is peace between the Pechenegs and the Byzantine, then neither the Russians nor the Hungarians dare either to attack or harrass Byzantium with extravagant demands as they are afraid of the military power of the aggressive and strong Pechenegs, which can be deployed against them at any time.¹² From this, it clearly follows that the Pecheneg-Hungarian relations were basically determined by the interests of Byzantium. However, in the knowledge of the structuring of DAI, it is justified to put the question: can the emperor's words be applied to the whole of the first fifty years following Árpád's conquest of Hungary or only to some periods of this

¹⁰ MOT. Vol. I. pp. 596–597.

¹¹ Gyula Kristó, 1980. pp. 302–305. Perhaps Ferenc Makk (1993. 14 p.) also has this date in mind, when he writes about the mission and its possible objectives.

¹² Gyula Moravcsik, 1984. 35 p.

era? Or, in other words, were there any turns in the obviously complicated and varied system of the relations between peoples, which is difficult to reconstruct, in any case, due to the lack of sources?

In fact, this picture does not even fit the beginnings: it is a well-known fact that in 895, on the advent of Árpád's conquest of Hungary, the Hungarians, in alliance with Byzantium, were attacked by the Pechenegs at the request of the Bulgarians, who they were at war with then, (and naturally, for other reasons, too) so it could not serve Byzantine interests. The aforementioned mission by Gabriel may only be imagined to have happened in such a period when Byzantium considered it more likely that the Pechenegs would confront them than that the Pecheneg threat would keep their invaders at bay. Therefore, from the point of view of Balkan politics, the first third of the 10th century was not and obviously could not be the period characterised by long-lasting alliances.

Anyway, in the first third of the 10th century, the Byzantine-Hungarian relationship was characterised by peacefulness: so much so that the contemporary or almost contemporary sources attempt to depict the Hungarians as people subordinated to or striving to be subordinated to Byzantium.¹³ (Naturally, it is a question whether following from the aforementioned, this state was the result of a permanent threat from the Pechenegs or not.) Peaceful relations seem to have been broken by only one event: the battle near Anchialos in 917, in which the Hungarians took part in alliance with the Bulgarians and the Pechenegs according to just one source, *Miracula Sancti Georgii*, written at the beginning of the 11th century.¹⁴ And although the listing of the names of peoples seems to be a convention, what is more, the editor of the source himself warns that certain writers 'pile these names upon one another without being aware of their meanings', and it is highly likely that it is true in this case, as well, still, some researchers consider it possible to prove solely on the basis of this source that this event was the beginning of the Hungarian raids against Byzantium and after this until 927, that is, until the death of Bulgarian tsar Symeon, Hungarian raids plundering Byzantine territories became regular.¹⁵ However, this assumption is in remarkable contradiction with the almost contemporary chronicle which expressly emphasises, obviously not without any basis, that the Turks or Hungarians led their *first* campaign against the Romans in 934.¹⁶

All in all, we must imagine the relationship with the Pechenegs of the Hungarian tribal confederation, having settled down in the Carpathian basin, as, being characterised up to the 930s by fear verging on terror so in this period, any kind of cooperation was clearly out of the question. The possibility of cooperation was created by the death of Bulgarian tsar Symeon in 927, whose successor, Tsar Peter concluded both peace and an alliance with Byzantium, also confirmed with marriage. As György Györffy puts it, this alliance clarified the frontlines so from

¹³ Ferenc Makk, 1993. 14 p.

¹⁴ Gyula Moravcsik, 1984. pp. 77–79.

¹⁵ Ferenc Makk, 1993. pp. 14–15. Gyula Kristó, 1980. pp. 302–303.

¹⁶ The continuation of Friar Georgios: see Gyula Moravcsik, 1984. 61 p. It is adopted by Pseudo-Symeon's chronicle (ibid. 70. p.), which is also often referred to in connection with this topic (e.g. Gyula Kristó, 1980. 268 p.)

this time on, Byzantium and Bulgaria could only be attacked together.¹⁷ However, it must be underlined that this only created the *possibility*: the actual realisation of the cooperation that later really proved to be solid depended on a really critical situation.

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And here, we must return to our starting-point: the situation that arose after the defeat in the battle at Riade as in my opinion, the explanation for the Hungarian-Pecheneg reconciliation is hidden in it. Taking the potential consequences into account, the leadership of the tribal confederation, or rather the Grand Duke himself – according to the Hungarian legend recorded by Anonymus, it was Zolta¹⁸ – took the earlier almost inconceivable step: he concluded peace and, what is more, an alliance with the formidable enemy. The memory of this was preserved in the Hungarian tradition, as well: Anonymus writes that after the borderlines of the country were marked out, Duke Zolta had a wife brought for his son, Taksony¹⁹ from the land of the Cumanians. As Taksony ruled until the very beginning of the 970s, at that time, he must have been in his childhood, which fact also underlines the possibility of the political motives of this marriage. We can also get to know from legend that Zolta settled a considerable number of Pechenegs at the border, beyond the swamp named Moson for the defence of the country, fearing the attacks of the Germans being infuriated by their insults.²⁰ Anonymus himself seems to connect these two facts: however, their dates are clearly determined by the fact that the revenge of the Germans infuriated by their insults had to be feared after the defeat at Riade. And this is not yet the end of the events: the following spring, a common Hungarian-Pecheneg campaign was started against Byzantium. The most detailed account of this campaign, considered by Byzantine authors to be the first Hungarian raid towards the Balkan, was left to us by Al-Massoudi.²¹ His description makes it clear that the united Pecheneg-Hungarian armies were very successful: after defeating the Byzantine (and perhaps Bulgarian) army drawing up against them, they ransacked the whole region and their captives were redeemed by the emperor himself – thus, military success was accompanied by financial profits, as well. It also seems to turn out from this account that the army consisting of two parts and having double

¹⁷ MOT. Vol. 1/I., 597 p.

¹⁸ *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum.* (hereinafter: SRH.) Budapestini, MCMXXXVII. vol. I. p. 114.

¹⁹ „... *tunc dux Zolta duxit filio Tocsun uxorem de terra Cumanorum.*” SRH. vol. I. p. 114. Researchers agree that as the area that was the 'land of the Cumanians' at the time of Anonymus used to be inhabited by Pechenegs, the wife must evidently have been Pecheneg.

²⁰ „... *in eodem confinio ultra lutum Musun collocavit etiam Bissenos non paucos habitare pro defensione regni sui, ut ne aliquando in posterum furibundi Theotonici propter iniuriam sibi illatam fines Hungarorum devastare possent.*” SRH. vol. I. pp. 113–114.

²¹ English translation: On the ancestors of Hungarians and on Árpád's conquest of Hungary. Budapest, 1975. pp.100–103. A honfoglalás korának írott forrásai. ['Written sources of the age of Árpád's conquest of Hungary'] Szegedi Középkortörténeti Könyvtár, 7. Szeged, 1995. pp. 52–56.

leadership laid great stress on fair cooperation – as it can be expected in the case of the first common enterprise of ancient enemies concluding an alliance.

To sum up: in the second half of 933 or at the very beginning of 934, the leadership of the tribal confederation achieved that all the potential consequences of the defeat in the battle at Riade no matter how large the extent of it was could be averted as it got military force to protect the western borderlines, eliminated the continuous pressure from the eastern borders, excluded the possibility of a German-Pecheneg alliance against Hungary, and, finally, opened up a new area extremely suitable for plundering and in the long run, for the collection of taxes, which could make up for the revenues lost in the West. And all this was achieved with one *single* move of diplomacy: that as good as defeating itself, it concluded peace and an alliance with the earlier formidable enemies, the Pechenegs. In the knowledge of the preliminaries and consequences, it is not an exaggeration to say that this peace treaty and alliance, also confirmed with a marriage and immediately demonstrated with a military enterprise, was one of the most significant if not *the* most significant move of Hungarian foreign policy in the 10th century, which cannot be praised highly enough by posterity.

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