REVISTA CICSA

serie nouă

IX/2023

In memoriam

LIGIAE BÂRZU

(1930-2003)

archaeologist and professor

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Between archaic and modern: σκύθαι and πατζινάκοι in *The Alexiad* of Anna Komnene

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Abstract: Since the emergence of Byzantine culture, the influences of Ancient Greece stood out due to the authors' desire to be inspired by the erudition of classical works. For this reason, medieval Greek literature is the product of a classicizing style that intertwines with modern tendencies. This practice had the merit of increasing the artistic quality of the chronicles but simultaneously caused numerous confusions. Frequently, authors borrow classical terminology to name contemporary ideas or concepts, but sometimes they even use ancient and modern terminology in the same phrase. The reasons behind the writers' intention to alternately use a common and a scholarly language are challenging to discern, especially since the complexity of some works such as The Alexiad makes the terminology used highly open to interpretation. The situation becomes much more complicated when, for three Eurasian nomadic peoples (Pechenegs, Uzes, and Cumans) different naming techniques are applied.

Keywords: Scythians, Pechenegs, The Alexiad, Turkic, Greek influences.

Medieval Byzantine literature, especially from the height of Greek civilization, is profoundly influenced by classicizing ideas taken from ancient Greek culture, whose presence was seen as a sign of knowledge mastered by authors, frequently resorting to stylistic procedures based on imitation of the writing style of the ancients. This manner of veneration brings a manifold of methods used by byzantine writers to reveal their cultural heritage, which means that occasionally the chroniclers preserve some words or phrases in their works from ancient Greek literature or even whole sequences that were revived in a new context. Indeed, the aforementioned characteristics are applicable to numerous Byzantine chronicles mostly because their authors were concerned with building and strengthening a comprehensive culture based on philosophical and historical lection from classical antiquity. The cultural burden kept by Byzantine authors after reading the famous works of the classics appears prominently in their style, outlining a phenomenon of *imitatio* through which ideas, concepts, and terms are reconsidered and updated in order to have a conceptual charge in a completely new context.

This praxis is widely used by authors in accordance with the cultural level reached by every one of them. In medieval Byzantine culture, Classical and Hellenistic models become a standard and benchmark of artistic creation, the highest standard which must be attained, and when this was too difficult, they try at least to imitate their model. The devotion to the culture

of the ancients is demonstrated above all by the frequent references to works of rhetoric, philosophy, or history from classical antiquity, sometimes collected in volumes that were supposed to serve this purpose: a guide for writing to the highest cultural standards.[1]

An interesting and puzzling aspect arises when the authors approach actual and contemporary events in their writings which are transposed and presented from an archaizing and classicizing perspective. In this regard, the numerous works in which the contemporary events described by the authors are exposed in a form greatly influenced by similar events that happened in Antiquity are revealing. The phenomenon is also found at a much lower level when terms or concepts that were used to describe realities of Classical Antiquity are revived and used by Byzantine authors who give them a new consistency to represent and depict coeval concepts. In the Byzantine literature, the aforementioned practice appears frequently in that kind of chronicles that discuss the emergence of Turkic migrants with Eurasian origins, who made their presence felt in the North Pontic steppes starting with the 10th century, a moment when they also came under the purview of Byzantine sources. In the next three centuries, Byzantium dealt with the new ethnic groups that would cross the Danube River, a fact that left a deep mark not only in the political, military, and social evolution of the state but also in the historiography of the Comnenian era. Here we have in mind a historiography characterized by a profound affinity towards ancient literature, which pushes the Byzantine authors to continuously strive to reach standards of literary purity in their own works, even at the cost of marginalizing the common reader.[2]

The particular case which is the subject of this paper begins with the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene, a comprehensive chronicle whose purpose was, among many others, to present the reign of her father, the emperor Alexios I Komnenos.[3] The Byzantine princess reveals in her chronicle a lovely passion for Greek classical culture since *Alexiad* recalls Homer's famous *Iliad*. But the classical inspiration is not only found in the title but also at the level of the form, content, and phraseological construction because the authors managed to understand the meanings found in the works of the ancients and could no longer wriggle from their influence.[4]

Among the numerous wars and political actions undertaken by the founder of the Komnenian dynasty and preserved in *Alexiad*, special attention was paid to the description of the presence of Eurasian nomads who were part of the Pechenegs ethnic group and who, during

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[1] Dölger 1971, 145-146.
[2] Knös 1971, 142-143.
[3] Vilimonović 2015, 207-235.
[4] Moravcsik 1971, 156-157.

the reign of Emperor Alexios, found their end following the battle of Levunion.[5] Far from aiming for an approach to the military or political aspects regarding the presence of the Pechenegs at the boundaries of the empire,[6] this paper is meant to highlight another part of this subject: a conceptual approach regarding the way in which Anna Komnene prefers to name the members of the Pecheneg ethnic group. Dominant, in the present case, is the use of the archaic term 'Scythians' (*Σκύθης / Σκύθαι*), a term that is found throughout the work and which refers exclusively to the ethnic group of the Pechenegs. However, there are some very particular situations where the modern term 'Pechenegs' (*Πατζινάκοι*) is also used, but only in a few cases, within books 7th and 8th.

In the work of Anna Komnene, the accounts of the Pechenegs represent a uniform amalgamation of events that are as current as possible but seen and described from an archaizing perspective. Moreover, from a conceptual point of view, the described episodes tend to make the presence of the Pecheneg ethnic group in the political spectrum of Byzantium ambiguous through an uneven use of the terminology by which this Eurasian ethnic group was nominated. In this sense, the dichotomies between the author's archaic and contemporary concepts deepen and lead to a difficult understanding of the reasons that were the basis of Anna Komnene's preference for one term or another. More precisely, it can be said that the terminological approach of the Byzantine princess is uneven because it frequently alternates archaic-type names for certain ethnic groups with modern ones, in the sense of the author's contemporary modernity, for other groups.

In order to understand the reasons why Anna Komnene use sometimes the term *Πατζινάκοι* rather than the archaizing term that seems to be preferable to her, it is necessary to identify the precise context of the appearance of these terms and observe the particularities of the phrases. Upon careful analysis of the text of the *Alexiad*, the term *Πατζινάκοι* appears exclusively in books 7th and 8th, in some accounts of the battles of 1087 between the generals of Alexios I Komnenos and the Pechenegs who arrived south of the Danube[7] or in these accounts of the conflicts between Byzantines and Pechenegs in which the Cumans are also involved[8]. From a quantitative point of view, the term *Σκύθαι* appears approximately 248 times, being distributed throughout the work,[9] while the term *Πατζινάκοι* is found only 10 times,

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[5] Diaconu 1970, 133. Curta 2006, 301-302.
[6] Meško 2014, 53-70.
[7] Comnenae 2001, 210, 214, 216, 219, 221.
[8] Comnenae 2001, 222, 243, 245, 246.
[9] More precisely in the books I, II, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX and XII.

exclusively in books seven and eight.[10] The particularities of the construction of *Alexiad* are clear from this perspective and it can be said that Anna Komnene has a preference for the archaizing term, but the question that arises in the present case is related to the reasons why, on 10 particular occasions, she resorted to the use of another term to define the same ethnic group. The fact that the term *Πατζινάκοι* appears in the same sentences in alternation with the term *Σκύθαι*[11] should not be omitted, so it is not completely missing and the two appellatives complement each other.[12]

The term *Σκύθαι* was not at all foreign to the Byzantine world, being already known through the writings of classical Greek authors such as Herodotus, Thucydides, or Hippocrates[13] to whom Anna Komnene had an intellectual affinity, being familiar including with works such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* of Homer,[14] from which he sought to be inspired in the creation of his own work. The use of this term in medieval Byzantine literature can be considered more than common practice, representing a statement of Hellenism in a cultural context deeply labeled by the literary influences of classical Greece. But the proclivity of the authors to enhance the modern concepts with a Hellenic heritage does not respond to the uncertainty that arises from the alternation of these two different formulae in the designation of the Pechenegs, one with classicizing values, and the second with a modern conceptual load. Throughout his book, Anna Komnene leans towards the use of a classicizing style not only in terms of the vocabulary used but also from the perspective of grammar,[15] which represents an essential characteristic of the *Alexiad*.

It often happens in the works of Byzantine authors to use an archaizing terminology to denominate allogeneic ethnic groups, a practice that was attributed to the common belief of the writers that there must be a direct connection between the ethnic groups that came from or lived in the same regions, even if there are some centuries between the contemporary invaders and the ancient ones. This belief is demonstrable by the very references that the same authors used when they said that a certain ethnic group had a different name in ancient times. The archaizing influences even led to a reconfiguration of the historical information obtained through direct observation and disguised in forms that represented manifestations of classicism.[16] It must also be borne in mind that the frequent use of archaic terminology has another effect on the writing

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[10] Kozlov 2014, 92.
[11] Comnenae 2001, 214.
[12] Durak 2009, 74.
[13] Minns 2011, 35.
[14] Cooper 2013, 269.
[15] Comnène 1937, 162. Knös 1971, 145. Kriaras 1971, 261. Kaldellis 2007, 187.
[16] Moravcsik 1971, 159-161.

style, more precisely that of outlining and portraying an archetype. Thus, the appellative *Σκύθαι* did not only have the role of designating an ethnic group but also went further and introduced a series of preliminary characteristics, turning those designated by this term into 'barbarians' in essence.[17]

The term *Πατζινάκοι* appears in medieval Byzantine literature with Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio*, a guide for leading the state written by the emperor for his son, a work which represents a broad description of the political realities seen from Constantinople. The use of this term can be considered an excellent proof of the knowledge of contemporary political realities and in the following centuries, it will represent the concept in the common language by which references to the Pecheneg ethnic group were made. In the chronicles, its appearance takes place when it manages to overcome the archaizing tendencies of the writers or when the work is intended to be very close to contemporary realities. Thus, Anna Komnene was in the position where she knew the conceptual heritage of each term: she meets the word *Σκύθαι* during the readings of the historical and mythological books from Classic Greek,[18] while the term *Πατζινάκοι* must have become familiar during the discussions heard between Alexios I Komnenos and his soldiers at court.

On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary to clarify the natural inclination of Anne Komnene toward an archaic style of writing. In general, Byzantine literature from the 11th-12th centuries has this proclivity to imitate ancient models via quotations or archaic-terms usage, a fact that diminishes the access of the common reader to this type of writing. However, it is a matter of choice that depends on the writer's preference to select a style of writing, a problem solved decisively by authors such as Michael Psellos or Anna Komnene who embrace the characteristics attributed to classical Greek scholarship. To bring these features into the debated terminological discussion, the archaizing directions of Anna Komnene are very clear and demonstrable, first of all, by the quantitative argument of the presence of the term *Σκύθαι* in the *Alexiad*, which appears with a frequency about 25 times more often than the term *Πατζινάκοι*. Besides this, there are two particular ways to transpose the presence of Eurasian nomads from the north of the Danube into a conceptual approach used in Byzantine chronicles. One of them demonstrates the congeniality of the author for archaic and ancient writing styles and considers the use of the term *Σαυρομάται* to portray the members of the ethnic group of the Uzes. Moreover, throughout the work, Anna Komnene exclusively uses this archaic term to

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[17] Buckley 2014, 151.
[18] Diehl 1971, 80.

denominate the Uzes, although she also knew the modern/contemporary name of this ethnic group. This can be demonstrated by a mention she makes about one of the Uzes who entered the service of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, namely Uzas, about whom he says *δὲ τὴν κλῆσιν φερώνυμον ἐκ τοῦ γένους λαχών*.[19] From this phrase, it can be easily understood that Anna Komnene knew the actual name of the Uzes tribe but in the *Alexiad* she chooses to not employ it at all yet prefers to designate them by the archaizing term of 'Sauromates'. The second instance is bound to the name given by Anna Komnene to the race of the Cumans. For them, she exclusively uses the modern term of *Κόμανος*, a fact that can be explained by the relatively recent presence of this Turkic group in the political sphere of Byzantium, compared to the Pechenegs and the Uzes with whom the Greeks had become acquainted during the previous decades.

Indeed, it can be said about Anna Komnene that she has a common acquaintance with these Eurasian ethnic groups, as she has the ability to distinguish them from one another in very rigorous conditions. However, there is a gap when we talk about precise and extensive information about the subdivisions of Turkic tribes, and that is the reason why she gathers beneath an archaic word like *Σκύθαι* or *Σαυρομάται* all the individuals who were part of that ethnic group, without taking into consideration the numerous tribal subdivisions, which were very rarely identified by the name of the chieftain.[20] Therewith, she sometimes has little trouble placing certain individuals in their proper ethnic group, such was the case of Charatzas, whom she says at various times is either a 'Scythian'[21] or a 'Sauromat'.[22]

The mechanism used to describe the barbarians via archaizing concepts is a very precise one, since the author, as long as he can distinguish the different ethnic groups, must allow the reader to make the same distinctions. For that, it is necessary to rationally use the archaizing words and avoid designating a couple of different ethnic groups under the same concept. Therefore, in this way, can be enlightened the reasons which urge Anna Komnene to denominate the Turkic populations from the North Pontic steppes in order to avoid any confusion. Although theoretically, the Pechenegs, Uzes, and Cumans could be defined with the common word 'Scythians', respecting the criteria of the definition mechanism[23] (they were barbarian groups, nomadic populations, located in the North-Pontic steppes, having a nomadic lifestyle), the Byzantine princess is very careful in differentiating these populations, which is

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[19] Comnenae 2001, 160: '*who was named after his race*'.
[20] Meško 2014, 57.
[21] Comnenae 2001, 294-295.
[22] Comnenae 2001, 211.
[23] Kozlov 2014, 92.

why she interchanged archaic names with modern ones and tried to maintain clear boundaries between these three ethnic groups.

The preference for archaic names was explained in the past by the idea that those would have a pejorative burden transferred by the author to the newcomers who were seen as hostiles and frequently begin conflicts with the Byzantine administration. This is a common explication applicable for the archaization of the name used for Pechenegs with whom, indeed, the Byzantines have conflictual and warlike contact during the youth of Anna Komnene. But the argument becomes invalid when we consider the race of the Uzes, with whom the empire had already managed the problems in the seven-eighth decades of the eleventh century. Furthermore, as the author also states, the members of the Uzes ethnic group were, at that time, in the service of the empire, so the tendency to call them by an archaizing name with a pejorative load becomes incomprehensible. The same argument loses its credibility when we bring into discussion the relations between Byzantium and the Cumans, relations that had a conflictual-warlike nature during the Komnenian era,[24] a fact that should exhort Anna Komnene to use an ancient word to designate them, rather than the actual one. Therefore, it can be said that the historicity of the presence of the Cumans was recorded in this way by Anna Komnene due to their recent appearance on the political radar of Byzantium. More than that, the relations between Cumans and the empire are overlapping with the life of the Byzantine princess, which transforms this ethnic group into an element of topicality and contemporaneity, unlike the Uzes and the Pechenegs who were already a part of Byzantine history.

We reach the point where the oscillation between *Σκύθαι* and *Πατζινάκοι*, a phenomenon found in books seven and eight of the *Alexiad*, could only be explained by a triumph of the contemporary influence would have had over the archaizing style of Anna Komnene. In the current situation, small alternations could be identified between the different sources of information used by the princess. Naturally, throughout the work, Anna Komnene's archaistic style is imposed, with numerous Hellenistic-classicizing influences, a fact that explains the predominance of the use of the term *Σκύθαι* to the detriment of the modern one of *Πατζινάκοι*. Nevertheless, in books seven and eight, where the term *Πατζινάκοι* appears sporadically, one can observe a flow of details that is characterized by precision and especially numerous quotations of lines belonging to characters who were directly involved in the events. In contrast to these particular aspects, throughout the *Alexiad*, the descriptions of the Scythians are quite plastic and impartial, seen with a critical eye from an objective narrative perspective.

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[24] Năsturel 1969, 167-186. Kovács 2014, 174-189.

The way the passages relating to the Pechenegs in books seven and eight are constructed could suggest that Anna Komnene accessed some information from a source directly involved or familiar with the political realities of the time, a source that would have left an imprint much deeper on the mechanism of the construction of the stories, significantly diminishing the author's archaizing tendencies.

As we have established previously, from the perspective of Byzantine literature, there are two ways to denominate the Eurasian barbarian populations: an archaizing and classicizing one, deeply influenced by the values of Hellenistic literature, respectively a modern one that denotes substantial knowledge of contemporary realities. Thus, the appearance of the term 'Pecheneg'in the mentioned places could be attributed to the direct influence of the source of information used by the author, a source who was participating in the events or was very close to them, who can give an extensive account of the events that took place and can also reproduce fine details like the replicas of those involved, which Anna Komnene would later quote in her own writing. Due to these direct contacts, there is also a disposition to usher the modern term 'Pecheneg' into the discussion, which comes to equiponderate the presence of the term 'Scythians'.

We have to lead our attention toward the source that could possibly be considered culpable for this terminological fluctuation which represents the subject of this paper. Anna Komnene states in his writings that the sources she used in making the *Alexiad* represent her own observations that were made and gathered at the Byzantine court, and sometimes even witnessing conversations between Alexios I Komnenos and different members of the army. In addition to these, she used several writings or chronicles accessible to her.[25] Basically, Anna Komnene is writing her *Alexiad* in a manner borrowed from Thucydides, which means that his writings are the result of direct observation of the events. She proposes a very careful exegesis of the written sources and seeks to verify the information obtained with at least one other source. Thus, Anna Komnene displayed a critical attitude towards the materials she collected and constantly sought to compare the information she possessed with other contemporary works she could access.[26]

One of the sources that represent the base of Anna Komnene's writing is the materials collected and compiled by her husband, Nikephoros Bryennios. Historians have advanced the hypothesis that Anna Komnene not only turned and used the work of Bryennios[27] but also

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[25] Comnenae 2001, 451-453.
[26] Sinclair 2014, 151.
[27] Kriaras 1971, 261.

sought to improve his style by rearranging the material and by raising the quality of the writing, capitalizing on the classic elements.[28] However, the *History* of Bryennios cannot be held responsible for the terminological variation in the *Alexiad*, as the author exclusively uses the archaizing designation of "Σκύθαι" to name the Pechenegs.[29]

In the warlike events between the Pechenegs and the Byzantines described in books seven and eight of *Alexiad*, a key character who was directly involved in confrontations was Georgios Palaeologus, an important dignitary from the court of Alexios I Komnenos.[30] In the confession that Anna Komnene makes regarding the sources used in the construction of the *Alexiad*, the Byzantine princess remember the conversations held frequently by his father with Georgios Palaeologus.[31] It happens that she heard often what Alexios I Komnenos discusses with his subjects and the information collected constituted the essence of her writings. Coincidentally, Anna Komnene listens to the conversations between Alexios I and Georgios Palaeologus, which is the same character who confronts the Pechenegs in the events described in books seven and eight, the only ones in which could be identified the terminological variation in question.

Indeed, it is difficult to believe that Anna Komnene gathered her information from witnesses who participated in the events, at least in the vicinity of the time when she wrote her work, a time when already many of those who were part of the administrative and military system of Byzantium under the reign of Alexios I Komnenos had probably already been dead. The historiographical literature advanced the idea that Anna Komnene would have collected the materials for her work even before the death of Emperor Alexios I (1118) or that she would have written down information from the conversations held by her father and the Byzantine dignitaries.[32]

If we take these assumptions into account, then the argumentation can be directed in a much clearer direction: the history of relations between the Byzantines and the Pechenegs is recorded in the *Alexiad*, and the mechanisms for constructing the presentation was based on pieces of information gathered by the princess, starting from the unwritten accounts and continuing with other types of sources accessible for her. Hence, from here comes the detachment shown by Anna Komnene along with her inclination to leave a clear and deeply archaic presentation, a fact observable in most books of *Alexiad*. The exception, in the present

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[28] Sinclair 2014, 177.
[29] Bryennio 1975, 144, 208, 236; Neville 2012, 84-85.
[30] Skoulatos 1980, 99-105.
[31] Comnenae 2001, 451-453.
[32] Sinclair 2014, 157-159; Kambylis 2020, 480-483.

case, comes from books seven and eight, where the introductions are much more extensive, and the details include quotations of the lines of the characters involved. Also, in this part of *Alexiad*, the archaic style of the author was a little tempered, which allows the appearance of a modern, contemporary word, to designate the Pecheneg ethnic group. Apparently, Anna Komnene's uncle, Georgios Palaeologus, an important figure at the court of Alexios I Komnenos, was involved in the events described. In this story, he had a double role: on the one hand, he directly participated in the conflicts waged against the Pechenegs who reached the Byzantine territories south of the Danube and, on the other hand, he was the messenger who reported the course of events to Alexios I Komnenos. The Byzantine princess must also have attended the discussions between the two, as she herself reports, which may explain the extent of the details to which she had access and which she was able to reproduce. Now the only aspect shrouded in uncertainty is related to the mechanism of preserving the information. But whether Anna Komnene relied on her own memory or wrote down that information, it is certain that the final product of her writing is enhanced with that variation in the sources used to describe the relations with the Pechenegs in books seven and eight, compared to the rest of the *Alexiad*. The usage of various sources, maybe even the stories of Georgios Palaeologos, for books seven and eight could explain the quantitative differences between these two and the rest of the work, and can also justify the terminological inconsistency identified.

Therefore, it can be considered that the descriptions of the Pechenegs, which we find in the work *Alexiad*, and here we consider exclusively those in which the nomads are nominated by the archaizing term *Σκύθαι*, represent a deep manifestation of the classicizing and impregnated style with elements of the Hellenistic culture of the author, who processed the information obtained through direct observation using an archaizing perspective, which also led to the transformation of nominal concepts. Coming back to the way of obtaining information, direct observation (consultation of information sources and processing of overheard discussions) allowed Anna Komnene to intervene on the information and pass it, when it was used in the construction of the *Alexiad*, through her own archaizing filters. On the contrary, the descriptions of the Pechenegs found in books seven and eight must be substantiated on the basis of sources that show a much greater degree of involvement in the events described, a fact demonstrated by the accuracy of the information and even the numerous quotations belonging to the characters present. Due to this involvement, familiarization with the direct political reality succeeds in blurring Anna Komnene's archaizing tendencies by introducing modern terminology as a way of referring to the Pecheneg ethnic group.

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