CHAPTER 2

The Pechenegs in Khazar History: The Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries

When historians cite the Pecheneg invasion as the reason for the weakening of the Khazar Khaganate, they usually mean the destruction of the Saltovo monuments and the demise of this culture. This, however, refers mainly to the Western lands of the khaganate—the steppe and forest-steppe zones of the Northern Black Sea region, the Crimean and the Taman Peninsulas. There is no evidence of any looting or destruction having affected the whole of Khazaria. On the other hand, a huge swath of land containing settlements of the Bulgar version of the Saltovo culture in the steppe zone and the Bulgaro-Alanian one in the forest-steppe one is considered to be completely ravaged. But no one knows whether all of the destruction was caused by the Pechenegs and when it happened exactly. The Don Region is usually regarded as an integral part of the Khazar Khaganate. The consequences of the Pecheneg invasion are important for the clarification of the Khazar influence there. Sources tell of the existence of a “Black Bulgaria” and “Black Bulgars” in the Don Region during the tenth century. It is therefore important to understand not only whether they were a part of the khaganate, but also why their contemporaries mentioned them as a significant political force, since the Bulgar settlements should have been overrun by the Pechenegs and their inhabitants should have fled, have been killed or have been subjected by them.

In the middle of the ninth century, the Pechenegs occupied the steppes between the Volga and Ural. The records about their conflicts with the Khazars and Magyars who occupied Levedia, the steppe zone between the Don and the Dnieper, date from that period. In 889, the Khazars, allied with the Oghuz, whose territory began at the Ural River in the east, managed to defeat the Pechenegs and push them westward, to the Black Sea region steppes.¹ According to the Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who is one of the major sources for these events, after the defeat some of the Pechenegs remained in their old lands, and those that did not submit to the Oghuz, defeated the Magyars. The Magyars were forced to migrate westward of the Dnieper and

¹ Artamonov 1962, 349; Pletneva 1976, 63; Gumilev 1997, 180; Pritsak 1981b, no. 10, 8–11; Golden 2003, no. 1, 63–66; see also Shusharin 1961.
the Pechenegs took over their lands, or in other words, the steppes between the Don and the Dnieper. At the same time, the Khazar Khaganate retained its influence over the Magyars. It can be assumed that the Pecheneg invasion was most devastating for the Magyars who dwelled in the steppe west from the Bulgar settlements and fortresses (the Don and the Severski Donets).

It is not known how the Pecheneg tribes moved through the lands of the Khazar Khaganate west of the Volga River. Perhaps this process was controlled to some extent by the Khazar rulers. The Bulgar-Alanian territory along the Severski Donets and the Lower Don river valleys did not have a typical steppe appearance. This land was hilly, cut through by river valleys, the slopes of which had significant forest vegetation for a steppe. Initially, it was of interest to the Pechenegs only in the extent in which it could provide them with the necessary agricultural products. The Saltovo settlements stood aside from the steppe territory inhabited by the Magyars. During their pursuit of the Magyars the Pechenegs could have simply passed through a territory inhabited by Bulgars, most probably along the lower reaches of the Don, without ravaging all of it. It is surmised that it was precisely then, at the end of the ninth century, that Phanagoria was destroyed (no relics from the tenth century have been found in the city). Archaeological excavations from the past few years however indicate that the city was abandoned at the beginning of the tenth century as a result of the silting up of the harbor and the flooding of the neighborhoods adjacent to the sea.

A significant consequence of the Pecheneg invasion is considered to be the beginning of the gradual migration of Bulgars from the steppe to the forest-steppe zone of the Donets and the Don rivers. At that time, a revival of the nomadic way of life began in the steppes. The Bulgar migration was, however, a lengthy process which lasted at least until the middle of the tenth century. At the time, the majority of the population in the steppes to the north of the

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4 This is something Howard-Johnston 2007, 188–190 particularly insists on.
5 Pletneva 1967, 48.
6 Sorochan 2004, 119. Today, the central part of Phanagoria, where the public and market centers were once situated (circa 15–17 hectares), is completely submerged under water (Sorochan 2004, 119). In her last works, S. Pletneva also finds such a proposition plausible, although she does not completely exclude the possibility that the city was abandoned due to the danger of some “external” attacks (Pletneva 2002, 111 and 2003, 183).
7 Mikheev 1985, 99; Pletneva, 1981a, 17.