RUS', PECHENEGS, AND POLOVTSY: ECONOMIC INTERACTION ALONG THE STEPPE FRONTIER IN THE PRE-MONGOL ERA

The Pechenegs and Polovtsy are usually portrayed in most Rus' sources as wild, destructive nomads who ravaged the Rus' lands, wreaked havoc on their peoples, and helped bring about the disintegration of the Kievan state. This image is perhaps best exemplified by the eye-witness account of the Polovtsy siege of the Kievo-Pechersk Monastery in July of 1096:

On Thursday, the twentieth of this same month, Boniak, that godless mangy thief and bandit, came suddenly to Kiev for the second time. The Polovtsy almost entered the city, burned the suburbs about the town and then attacked the monastery. After burning the Monastery of Stephen and the villages of Germanus' Monastery, they came to the crypt monastery. They planted two standards before the monastery gates, and we fled, some of us behind the building of the monastery, and others to its various rooms. The godless sons of Ishmael slew the brethren in the monastery and wandered about among the cells, breaking down the doors, and they carried off whatever they could find in the various rooms. They set fire to the shrine of the Holy Virgin. Upon arriving before the church, they thus set fire to the south and north doors, and upon making their way into the chapel near the grave of Theodosius, they seized the eikons, burned the doors, and blasphemed against God and our faith. But God suffered their iniquities because their sins and their transgressions were not completed. Thus they said, "Where is their God? Let him come and deliver them," and they made other blasphemous remarks about the holy eikons, which they mocked, because they did not know that God punishes his servants by means of barbarous incursions that they may appear as gold which has been tried in the furnace. The Christians, by virtue of their sufferings and oppressions, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but these pagans and blasphemers,
who in this world enjoy happiness and increase, shall suffer torment at the hand of the devil since they are destined to everlasting fire.'

Or, who can forget the eloquent reproach of Vladimir Monomakh to the boyars of Sviatopolk: "Why do you not bear in mind that as soon as the peasant begins his plowing, the Polovcian will come, shoot him down with his bolt, seize his horse, ride on into his village, and carry off his wife, his children, and all his property?"

The portrait of the Pechenegs and Polovtsy as mangy thieves and bandits also forms a major theme in Russian historiography on Kievan Rus'. While the terminology is less hostile, and the perspective ostensibly neutral, the same picture emerges. Bernard Pares, in his well-known History of Russia, long a standard text, emphasized the annual Polovtsy raids into Rus' "killing the cultivators, burning their barns, and taking their wives and children away into captivity." He vividly describes the devastation of the southern Rus' lands by "these heathens" who constantly violated peace treaties.

The traditional, highly negative view of the Pechenegs and Polovtsy unquestionably distorts the far more complex reality of Rus'-nomad relations. The Polovtsy, Pechenegs, and other nomads often raided the Rus' lands as auxiliaries and allies of the Rus' princes. Internecine battles among the Rus' princes were often decided by whose "pagans," i.e., whose nomadic auxiliaries, fought better. Much of the nomadic devastation of the southern Rus' lands was thus a byproduct of the Rus' military-political system, a system in which nomads replaced Vikings as the mercenaries of choice. In addition, the Rus' princes brought far more destruction upon the Rus' people than the Polovtsy and Pechenegs. To cite just one example, after Kiev was seized in March 1169 by the Suzdalian prince Andrei Bogoliubskii, it was recorded that:

For two days they plundered the entire city, both the Podol and the Hill, and the monasteries, and the [churches of] St. Sophia and the Mother of God, the Tithe [Church]. And mercy came from nowhere to no one, while the churches were burning and the Christians being killed, the others being bound, the women being taken away into captivity, separated by force from their husbands. The children were crying, seeing

2. Ibid., s.a. 1103.