

BYZANTIUM'S  
BALKAN FRONTIER

*A Political Study of the  
Northern Balkans, 900–1204*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Bulgaria and beyond: the Northern Balkans* (c. 900–963)

For most of the tenth century Byzantium was the second power in the Balkans. The Bulgarian empire reached its fullest extent during the reign of Tsar Symeon (894–927), when its borders ran within miles of Thessalonica, in this period Byzantium's second city, and Dyrrachium (modern Durrës), the Adriatic port and gateway to the great land route called the Via Egnatia. Byzantine authority in the Balkans was restricted to Greece, Thrace, and a strip of land between the Rhodope mountains and the Aegean coast, including the administrative district (*thema*) of Macedonia. The border of Symeon's empire was marked by the erection of inscribed boundary stones.<sup>1</sup> This frontier, as a line of political demarcation, was recognized by both Bulgaria and Byzantium in bilateral treaties.<sup>2</sup>

### SYMEON'S BULGARIA, 894–927

It has generally been maintained, not least in the excellent histories written in English of tenth-century Byzantium and Bulgaria,<sup>3</sup> that for most of his reign, and certainly from 913, Symeon was intent on establishing himself in Constantinople, from which he would rule a combined empire as emperor of the Romans and Bulgarians. However, his efforts to establish a new capital at Preslav, and the extensive and expensive building projects therein, suggest that his principal interests lay north of the Haemus (Balkan) mountains. Distancing himself from the former Bulgarian capital, Pliska, and its pagan past, Symeon expanded the stone walls of his fortress at Preslav and constructed within a palace

<sup>1</sup> Beshevliev 1963: 215–19, nr. 46 a-b, for the inscribed boundary stones discovered 22 km north of Thessalonica dated 904. See also Shepard 1989 [1994]: 12.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*: 65.129–30.

<sup>3</sup> The classic political history is by Steven Runciman 1963 [1929]. English speakers also have fine studies by Obolensky 1971; Browning 1975 and Fine 1983. The latest important scholarship in English is by Jonathan Shepard.

complex surrounded by stone residences for his nobles (*boyars*) arranged along straight limestone-paved streets. He ensured a fresh water supply reached the citadel with the construction of a limestone aqueduct, and placed massive gate towers beside the apertures in the crenellated ramparts. The town's outlying suburbs grew markedly, and there were developments beyond the walls.<sup>4</sup> The development, its churches and tall palaces 'remarkably richly decorated with stone, wood, and colours', was celebrated by John the Exarch, who urged visitors to witness for themselves the wonders of Preslav, and to contrast the wonders with their own 'wretched straw huts'.<sup>5</sup>

The rich colours upon which John remarks were polychrome wall and floor tiles, produced in monasteries in the vicinity of Preslav from the later ninth century.<sup>6</sup> Excavations at the monasteries of Tuzlal'ka and Patleina have uncovered many fragments of polychrome tiles, and, most importantly, the workshops where they were made. The tiles at Tuzlal'ka were fashioned from rich white clay scooped from a local deposit, and clumps have been discovered within the workshop which still bear the impression of the fingers of a tenth-century artisan. Eight tiles have been discovered in a nearby debris pit. Each tile, measuring 16×15.5 cm, is painted with an icon and an identifying legend written in Greek. Other fragments from other sites bear Cyrillic letters. At Patleina the most remarkable find has been the unique composite icon of St Theodore, fashioned from twenty-one terracotta tiles, three of which bear his name in Greek letters.<sup>7</sup> More than 2,000 whole or fragmented painted tiles have been discovered at the royal monastery in Preslav, mostly produced from locally available white clay and of various shapes and sizes bearing numerous designs. Most common are zoomorphic or vegetal motifs, but around fifty bear painted icons of the highest quality.<sup>8</sup> Such abundant production at numerous workshops must have served to line walls and floors in the monasteries themselves, and the many public and private buildings constructed during Symeon's reign.

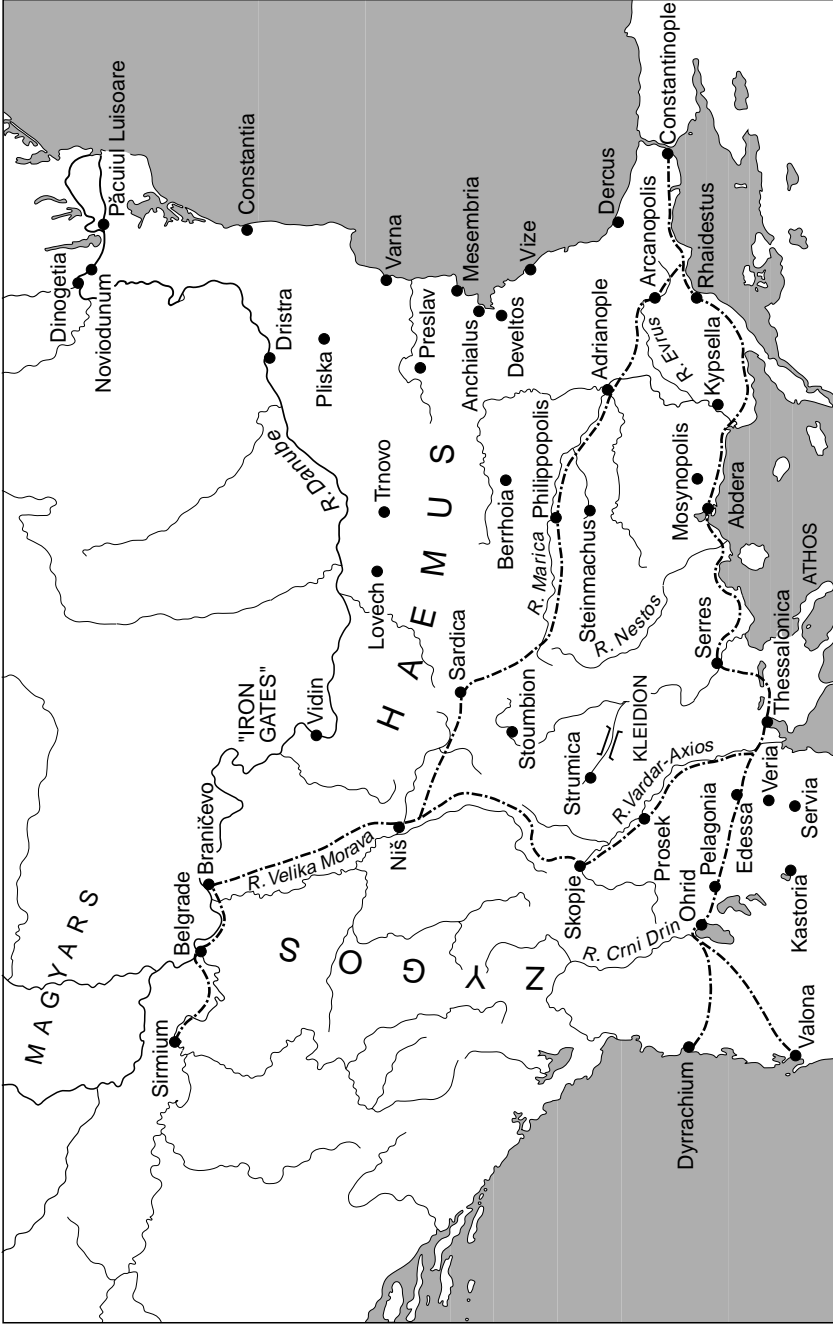
In expending such effort creating his own Constantinople north of the Haemus, Symeon gave no indication that his true desire was to move his court wholesale to the city on the Bosphorus. In fact, Symeon sought

<sup>4</sup> Shepard 1999a: 573.

<sup>5</sup> John the Exarch: vi, 3–5; Obolensky 1971: 144.

<sup>6</sup> For an illustrated introduction in English see now Alchermes 1997: 320–35. For comparison with tile production in Constantinople and its hinterland see Mason and Mango 1995: 313–31.

<sup>7</sup> Totev 1979: 65–73; Schwartz 1982: 45–50; Alchermes 1997: 329–31. The latest research by R. Kostova (for her Ph.D. dissertation at the Central European University, Budapest) questions whether Patleina and Tuzlal'ka were monasteries at all, and suggests that they were secular complexes. <sup>8</sup> Totev 1987: 65–80; Vogt and Bouquillon 1996: 105–16.



1.1 The northern Balkans

three things from Byzantium: trade, tribute, and recognition of his imperial title. The first time Symeon went to war with Byzantium, in 894, was in response to the capricious decision to transfer the designated commercial centre where Bulgarian traders met with Byzantines from Constantinople to Thessalonica, and to impose a customs levy. The trade routes, by land and sea, from the lower Danube to the capital of East Rome, passed through the centre of Symeon's realm, whereas Thessalonica lay at the south-western fringe of Bulgaria, far from the heartland around Pliska and Preslav. It is not surprising that the new ruler, seeking to consolidate his hold on power, should react strongly to the arbitrary Byzantine decision, and the subsequent curt dismissal of his protests.<sup>9</sup> Symeon's actions saw trade diverted back to Constantinople. Moreover, in a treaty negotiated by the envoy of Leo VI (886–912), Leo Choerosphactes, probably in 897, the Byzantine emperor undertook to pay Symeon annual tribute.<sup>10</sup> Many prisoners were ransomed, although probably not the 120,000 Choerosphactes claimed in a letter written years later when seeking to return from exile.<sup>11</sup>

After 897 Bulgarian relations with Byzantium were generally peaceful. Thus, in Philotheus' *Kleterologion*, produced in 899, much is made of the reception of a Bulgarian embassy in Constantinople.<sup>12</sup> Symeon advanced into Byzantine lands only once in the 900s, inspired by the depredations of Arab pirates along the coast of Thessaly and the Peloponnese, and their remarkable, cataclysmic sack of Thessalonica in 904. Shortly afterwards a second mission by Leo Choerosphactes secured Byzantine control over thirty fortresses in the *thema* of Dyrrachium.<sup>13</sup> The tribute payments continued. Then, in 912 the Byzantine emperor Leo VI died. His brother and successor Alexander determined to end the tribute payments to Bulgaria, and dismissed an embassy from Symeon that came seeking to continue the peace that had endured under Leo.<sup>14</sup> There is no justification for Runciman's claim that Symeon would have been well pleased with the rebuke.<sup>15</sup> It seems clear that the tribute was essential to Symeon as a symbol of his prestige, but also as a means of acquiring cash for his own coffers and to distribute as

<sup>9</sup> Theophanes Continuatus: 357.

<sup>10</sup> Fine 1983: 139–40. Tougher 1997: 179–80, prefers the date 896.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Choerosphactes: 112–13; Shepard 1989 [1994]: 11–12; Fine 1983: 140. Tougher 1997: 180, posits 25,000 ransomed prisoners.

<sup>12</sup> *Listes de préséance*: 163, 167, 169, 177, 181, 203, 207. See also Tougher 1997: 180.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Choerosphactes: 113; Shepard 1989 [1994]: 11–12; Tougher 1997: 181, dates this mission to 902–3. On the fortresses of Dyrrachium see below at pp. 160–4.

<sup>14</sup> Theophanes Continuatus: 380. <sup>15</sup> Runciman 1963 [1929]: 46.



largesse to his *boyars*. Despite the increased political stability of his reign, and the flourishing of trade in and through his realm, Symeon struck no coinage of his own. Therefore, in 913 he prepared for war. But by the time he appeared before the walls of Constantinople Alexander had died, and the patriarch Nicholas I Mysticus had secured for himself the role of regent for the seven-year-old emperor, the *porphyrogennetos* ('born in the purple chamber' in the imperial palace; that is, born to a ruling emperor) Constantine VII (913–59).

What followed has been obscured by the deliberate rewriting of the episode by Byzantine historians. It seems certain that in a meeting at the Hebdomon outside the City the patriarch agreed to the restoration of tribute payments. He also performed a ceremony involving a crown (*stephos*) and a public acclamation (*anarresis*), and arranged for the emperor Constantine to marry Symeon's daughter.<sup>16</sup> Thereafter, Symeon withdrew his forces and began to use the title 'emperor of the Bulgarians'. It seems likely that the patriarch had crowned him thus, and he departed from Constantinople believing that he had secured recognition of his status from the highest authorities in the Orthodox world: the emperor and the patriarch. Moreover, he had the promise of an enduring bond between Constantinople and Preslav through the union of his daughter and the son and heir of Leo VI, the *porphyrogennetos* Constantine. To mark both achievements Symeon changed his seals to include the acclamation he had received in Constantinople. Henceforth they read 'Symeon, *eirenopoios basileus po[l]la [e]t [e]*, 'Symeon, peacemaking emperor, [may you reign for] many years'.<sup>17</sup>

The continued recognition of Symeon's imperial title and the fulfilment of the marriage agreement depended entirely on the continued ascendancy of Nicholas Mysticus and his regency council. As early as 914 this was threatened, and Symeon returned in force to Thrace. The Byzantine stronghold of Adrianople (modern Edirne) was opened to him, but he satisfied himself with devastating the rich cultivated lands which supplied Constantinople before returning to Preslav. Clearly, he had secured the concessions he required from the new regent, Constantine's mother Zoe. There are no reported incidents of hostilities before the unprovoked Byzantine assault of 917, which resulted in a

<sup>16</sup> Jenkins 1966a: 291, 295.

<sup>17</sup> Gerasimov 1960: 67–70; Beshevliev 1963: 331–2, nr. 90; Bozhilov 1986: 81; Shepard 1989 [1994]: 32–3, 47, n. 205; Shepard 1999a: 574. Symeon's claiming the title 'emperor of the Romans' was condemned by Romanus I's secretary, Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*: 56–85. See Jenkins 1966a: 291, 295. For the acclamation see *De Cerimoniis*: 373.

great Bulgarian victory at Anchialus. Letters exchanged between Nicholas Mysticus and Symeon present the background to the events of 917, and the patriarch acknowledges that the Byzantine attack had been unjustified. Clearly, Symeon was greatly aggrieved by the episode, and when next he met the patriarch he rode the warhorse which bore a scar inflicted at Anchialus seven years before.<sup>18</sup>

Symeon's hopes for continued Byzantine recognition of his imperial title, and for the fulfilment of the marriage agreement of 913 were dashed by the usurpation of Romanus I Lecapenus (920–44). The new emperor sealed his coup by marrying his own daughter to the *porphyrogennetos*. Symeon returned to the offensive, invading Serbia and penetrating Greece as far as the Gulf of Corinth, before he returned in full force to Thrace in 920. He installed garrisons in Bizye (modern Vize) and other Thracian towns, and for the following four years his forces ravaged as far as the suburbs of Constantinople. He twice, unsuccessfully, attempted to secure naval assistance to effect a blockade. But his regular appearances before the city's walls did not result in Symeon entering Constantinople in triumph. Instead, the tsar was forced to accept Lecapenus' accession, and to renegotiate the agreement of 913.

At a reception outside Constantinople in 924, Symeon received the recognition of his imperial title by Romanus I, and the further concession that he would be regarded as Lecapenus' imperial brother, that is his equal, and no longer his son (see below at pp. 37–8). The continued annual payment of tribute is also alluded to in letters to the tsar drafted by the imperial secretary Theodore Daphnopates (*Correspondance*: 56–85). However, Symeon had failed to engineer the imperial marriage he had once desired, and satisfied himself thereafter with hollow claims. Thus, soon after 924 he began to style himself 'emperor of the Bulgarians and Romans', and his seals depicted him for the first time in full imperial dress with the accompanying inscription *basileus Romaion*.<sup>19</sup>

#### PETER'S BULGARIA, 927–967

Symeon died on 27 May 927, and his successor Peter (d. 967) immediately launched a major invasion of the Byzantine administrative district of Macedonia. As one of four sons such a show of strength would have been necessary to secure the support of his father's *boyars*. However, the

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Mysticus, *Letters*: 74–6, 96–8, 122–6, 208–10; Shepard 1989 [1994]: 25–8.

<sup>19</sup> Gerasimov 1934: 350–1; Beshevliev 1963: 330–1, nr. 89; Shepard 1989 [1994]: 22–4; Shepard 1999: 574.

Bulgarian troops withdrew swiftly, at the same time razing the fortresses that they had held until then in Thrace, and this early performance was not repeated. Instead, it heralded forty years of harmony and cooperation between the two major powers in the northern Balkans. The reason for the withdrawal, and the centrepiece of the enduring Bulgarian-Byzantine accord, was the marriage in 927 of Peter to Maria Lecapena, granddaughter of the (senior) ruling emperor Romanus I Lecapenus.

As we have already noted, the Lecapeni were usurpers, exploiting the youth and weakness of the legitimate emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. They were anxious to portray the Bulgarian marriage in the best possible light, and to use it to further their own interests. Our knowledge of the stage-managed event and its consequences derives mostly from sources sympathetic to, or commissioned by the usurping family. The account provided by the author of the continuation of Theophanes' chronicle (Theophanes Continuatus) is very much the official version. It seeks to portray the marriage as an achievement rather than a dreadful necessity provoked by the invasion of Macedonia, and fits with a series of contemporary sources that stress the benefits of peace brought about by Romanus' actions.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Theophanes Continuatus (414) maintains that 'the Bulgarians vehemently insisted that Christopher should be acclaimed first, that is before Constantine; the emperor acceded to their request'. In this way the author seeks to attribute to the Bulgarians the initiative for having Romanus' son Christopher recognized as the heir to the imperial throne before Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

Given the bias of the Byzantine sources we should be wary of placing faith in the notion that the marriage immediately cemented good relations between the two courts. However, it has recently been argued that Maria may have come to wield a degree of authority in Preslav. Indeed, Peter's imperial seal depicted the married couple together in a manner identical to the contemporary Byzantine method of representing joint rulership, and it seems impossible that the Bulgarian ruler would have been unfamiliar with both the iconography and the relationship it implied.<sup>21</sup> Still, we must not leap from this observation to the conclusion that Byzantium had nothing more to fear from Bulgaria.

Just as Symeon has been portrayed (falsely) as desiring more than anything to become emperor in Constantinople, so Peter has generally been held to have presided over the dramatic decline of Bulgaria. Thus

<sup>20</sup> Shepard 1995a: 128–33.

<sup>21</sup> Gerasimov 1938: 359–64; Shepard 1995a: 142–7.

Browning (1975: 194–5) concludes his stimulating comparative study with the observation ‘the grandiose dreams of . . . Symeon ended in the dreary reality of Peter’s long reign, when Bulgaria became a harmless Byzantine protectorate’. Such interpretations focus on Bulgaria’s military prowess, comparing Symeon’s successes with his son’s inactivity, and draw heavily on Byzantine narrative sources. If we examine the material evidence the indications are entirely different, suggesting a period of political consolidation and economic expansion under Peter.<sup>22</sup> Once again Preslav may serve as an indicator. The north wall of the citadel was demolished to create space for further construction; new churches were built. Large new private structures bear witness to the wealth of Peter’s *boyars*.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE *DE ADMINISTRANDO IMPERIO*

Byzantine sources, as much by their silences as their occasional references to the tsar’s irenic disposition, bear testimony to the relative peace, if not the prosperity of Peter’s reign and his good relations with Constantinople. This is not to suggest that Bulgaria was no longer considered a potential threat in Constantinople, for as we will see shortly many other peoples were considered suitable allies against Peter. Nevertheless, in the mid-tenth century the productive hinterland of Constantinople was no longer trampled under the boots of Bulgarian troops. Perhaps the most significant indication of the new *status quo* is the absence of any substantive chapter on the Bulgarians in the treatise known as the *De Administrando Imperio* (*DAI*). Compiled on the instruction of Constantine VII, to whom it is generally attributed, it comprises fifty-three chapters of advice addressed to his son and heir Romanus II (959–63). Some chapters are culled directly from earlier histories to provide antiquarian information on peoples and places of contemporary concern to the imperial court. However, the chapters of greatest interest are those based on dossiers of information on the empire’s neighbours compiled in the century before the work was completed *c.* 952–4.<sup>24</sup> Virtually all that we know of Byzantine diplomatic procedure is based on the *DAI*, and it is possible to construct a detailed picture of imperial policy in the Balkans and beyond from a close examination of

<sup>22</sup> The revisionist view was first proposed by Fine 1978: 88–95; reprised in Fine 1983: 160–71. For proof that the new interpretation has been incorporated into broader literature, see Whitton 1996: 292–4.

<sup>23</sup> Shepard 1999a: 572.

<sup>24</sup> Lemerle 1986: 320–1; *ODB*: i, 593.

the text. It is worth dwelling awhile on the *DAI* for the light it sheds on early tenth-century history, and on peoples and themes that will be central to the following chapters.

First, Constantine directly refutes the testimony of our principal written source for the period of his minority. In chapter thirteen (72.147–53) Constantine addresses the matter of Maria Lecapena's marriage, hoping thereby to rewrite the official history of that union. "How then", he asks "did the lord Romanus, the emperor, ally himself in marriage with the Bulgarians . . .?" This must be the defence: "The lord Romanus, the emperor, was a common, illiterate fellow, and not from among those who have been bred up in the palace . . . nor was he of imperial and noble stock, and for this reason in most of his actions he was too arrogant and despotic". He concludes that the union was 'contrary to the canon, and ecclesiastical tradition and the ordinance and commandment of the great and holy emperor Constantine [the Great, d. 337]' (74.167–9). We are fortunate indeed to have this commentary to place against the account in Theophanes Continuatus (see above at p. 24). We are reminded that the sources on which we base our interpretations of Byzantine and Balkan history in this period are far from objective statements of fact, and this is a theme to which we will return frequently.

#### BEYOND BULGARIA: THE SERBS

Although it fails to treat Bulgaria fully, the *DAI* contains much information on the schemes and strategies that might be employed against the empire's nearest neighbour. We can discern in its pages the growing importance of the peoples beyond Bulgaria: the sedentary southern Slavs within the Balkans, and the nomads and warrior-merchants of the south Russian steppe whose activities would, within thirty years of the *DAI*'s completion, both allow and oblige Byzantium to occupy Bulgaria.

We know from the *DAI* that it was established Byzantine practice to buy the loyalty and services of the peoples beyond Bulgaria. Chapter thirty-two dwells at some length on Bulgarian relations with the Serbs. It is apparent that in 917 the Byzantine commander of Dyrrachium, Leo Rhabduchus, was charged with securing Serbian assistance for the assault on Bulgaria. The ruler of the Serbs, Peter son of Goinikos, was persuaded to march against Symeon, taking with him the *Tourkoi*. (The *Tourkoi* can only have been the Magyars, to whom we will return at length below.) However, Symeon's generals, Marmain and Sigritzes

Theodore, persuaded him otherwise, ‘tricked him into coming out to them, and then on the instant bound him and carried him off to Bulgaria, where he died in captivity’ (156.97–158.99). Paul, a Serbian princeling whom Peter had blinded, was put in charge of Serbia for three years until he too was bought by the Byzantine emperor. When Marmaim and Sigritzes Theodore returned to Serbia, Paul defeated them and ‘sent their heads and their armour from the battle to the emperor of the Romans as tokens of his victory’ (158.112–14).

The cycle was then repeated. Bulgarian generals arrived in Serbia with a princeling, Zacharias (also known as Zaharije, son of Prvoslav), whom, once he had replaced Paul, was bought by the Byzantines. Despairing of this inevitable pattern of war, bribery and defection, Symeon sent his final candidate to the border of Serbia: a certain Tzeeslav (Chaslav) whose father had been a Serbian prince, but who had been born in Bulgaria of a Bulgarian mother.

The Bulgarians sent a message to the *zoupanoi* [*župans*, regional leaders] that they should come to them and should receive Tzeeslav as their ruler; and having tricked them by an oath and brought them out as far as the first village, they instantly bound them, and entered Serbia and took away with them the entire population, both old and young, and carried them into Bulgaria, though a few escaped and entered Croatia; and the country was left deserted. (*DAI*: 158.120–6)

Only after Symeon’s death could Tzeeslav leave Preslav and return to the depopulated region. He secured Byzantine support, and ‘the emperor of the Romans continually benefited him, so that the Serbs living in Croatia and Bulgaria and the rest of the lands whom Symeon had scattered, rallied to him when they heard of it. Moreover, many had escaped from Bulgaria and entered Constantinople, and these the emperor of the Romans clad and comforted and sent to Tzeeslav. And from the rich gifts of the emperor of the Romans he organized and populated the country’ (160.135–41).

The chapter is of enormous interest for all it reveals about early Serbian history, Byzantine diplomacy, and Bulgarian policy towards her Balkan neighbours. The problems encountered in dealing with recalcitrant regional rulers in the lands of the southern Slavs would persist throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, when the *DAI* was written the matter of greatest import was the conclusion that, despite Symeon’s pretensions, ‘the ruler of Serbia has from the beginning, that is ever since the reign of Heraclius the emperor, been in servitude and subjection to the emperor of the Romans, and was never subject to the ruler of

Bulgaria.' (160.146–8). This sentiment is repeated in chapter thirty-one, which deals with the Croats. Indeed, exactly the same words are used, substituting only the *archon Chrobatias* (ruler of the Croatians) for *archon Serblias*.

#### THE CROATS AND ROMANI

Chapters twenty-nine, thirty and thirty-one of the *DAI* provide unique information on the early history of the Croats. Great pains are taken to distinguish the Slav peoples (*ethne Sklabike*) from the inhabitants of the maritime cities in Dalmatia, who are known as *Romani* (not *Rhomaioi*, as the Byzantine called themselves). Romans had been settled in Dalmatia since the days of the Republic. Zadar was an attractive site for Roman emigrants as early as the first century BC, and before 27 BC colonies of army veterans were settled at Salona (Solin) near Split, Narona on the river Neretva, and Epidaurum near Dubrovnik. The emperor Diocletian settled many more families at Split and Dioclea (near modern Podgorica).<sup>25</sup> Then, in the reign of Heraclius, Avars invaded and took possession of Salona, from which 'they began to make plundering raids and destroyed the *Romani* who dwelt in the plains and on the higher ground'. Thus 'the remnant of the *Romani* escaped to the cities of the coast and possess them still, namely Kotor, Dubrovnik, Split, Trogir, Zadar, Rab, Krk and Osor' (*DAI*: 124.44–52).

According to the *DAI* the fundamental division of Dalmatia was between mountainous uplands settled by the Slavs and the narrow coastal plain studded with cities occupied principally by 'Romans' (see below at pp. 117–23). This distinction was recognized a century earlier in Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* (trans. Thorpe: 69), where we are told that Charles conquered 'both provinces of Pannonia, the part of Dacia which is beyond the Danube, Istria, Liburnia and Dalmatia, with the exception of the maritime cities which he allowed the emperor of Constantinople to keep in view of his friendship with him and the treaty that he had made.' The coastal mountain ranges afforded the maritime cities some protection from Slavic incursions, and their access to the sea and Italy beyond ensured that they survived through the 'Dark Ages'. The production of elaborately carved sarcophagi and pilasters in the eighth and ninth centuries supports the contention that city life recovered swiftly after the turmoil of the seventh century, and indicates that a certain level of prosperity was restored.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkes 1969: 207, 220–6, 245–54.

We will see in later chapters that the maritime cities remained distinct from the Slav hinterland well into the twelfth century, although much immigration took place, and Croatian magnates became significant patrons within the cities. The interchange, or symbiosis between cities and hinterland must have been a powerful factor in the acceptance by the Croats of Latin Christianity. By the later eleventh century more than forty Benedictine monasteries had been founded in Dalmatia, with the oldest possibly dating from 839.<sup>26</sup> However, political arrangements were also made to ensure the *status quo*. During the reign of Basil I (867–86), the cities of Dalmatia paid an annual sum to a Byzantine governor (*strategos*) of Dalmatia. Among the governor's principal tasks was to arrange for the cities to pay a substantially larger annual tribute to the Croats. The arrangement was essentially practical: for a nominal sum, as recognition of Byzantine suzerainty, the *strategos* coordinated relations between the numerous autonomous cities and their equally fragmented Slav neighbours. Several lead seals have survived which confirm the existence of rulers (*archontes*), who were natives of the cities with Byzantine titles carrying out duties in Dalmatia in the mid- to late ninth century.<sup>27</sup> However, the Croats did not strike such seals. A single, weakly impressed seal from the Fogg Collection is the only evidence that Byzantine authority was ever exercised in Croatia, and that is very likely to have been struck by a native lord who recognized Basil II.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, as we have already seen, Constantine VII was adamant that the whole of Dalmatia, and therefore the peoples settled there, was subject to the emperor in Constantinople and not the tsar of Bulgaria. Therefore, the Croats were potential allies against the Bulgarians. The major drawback, to which Constantine VII draws his son's attention, was that the 'baptized Croats will not leave their own lands to make war on others' (*DAI*: 148.31–2). Other peoples would.

#### THE PECHENEGS

The river Danube was no barrier to imperial diplomacy, and agents often sought to acquire the services of the Pechenegs, fierce steppe nomads who occupied the grasslands of southern Russia either side of the river Dnieper. Marvazi, an Arabic author of the twelfth century who preserved passages from earlier accounts, described the Pechenegs as 'a

<sup>26</sup> Ostojić 1973: ii, 583–4.      <sup>27</sup> Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991: i, 46–8.

<sup>28</sup> Nesbitt and Oikonomides 1991: i, 48–9. See below at pp. 74–5.



wandering people following the rainfalls and pasturage', and noted that they were 'a wealthy people', grown rich by controlling the trade routes across the region they dominated, and from selling goods such as hides and wax, and also slaves. Marvazi also provided details of the location and extent of their lands in the ninth century.

Their territory extends a distance of thirty days, and they are bordered on all sides by many people . . . between the Pechenegs and [their neighbours, a people known as the] Chazars there is a distance of ten days, the country being steppes and forest. There is no beaten track between the two territories, and they travel over the distance by means of the stars, landmarks, or at random. (Marvazi, ed. & trans. Minorsky 1942: 20–1, 32–3)

The Pechenegs' desire for large tracts of suitable pasturage for their livestock, and their ability to move rapidly across vast tracts by day or night would later prove a considerable menace to Byzantine lands. However, in the mid-tenth century their nomadic inclinations were a considerable asset to the empire. All nomadic peoples display a keen sense of monetary wealth and commodity circulation 'because all their worldly goods consist of movable objects and are therefore directly alienable; and because their mode of life, by continually bringing them into contact with foreign communities, solicits the exchange of products' (Marx, *Capital*: i, 88).<sup>29</sup> Their greed for Byzantine gold and prestige wares made the Pechenegs ideal allies, and once secured their martial skills could be turned against any potential enemy. Moreover, their social structure was typical for a nomadic people, being a confederation of clans arranged hierarchically but free, for the most part, to operate independently. This enabled interested parties to strike deals with the leaders of smaller independent bands of nomads without having to deal directly with the highest ranking chieftain.

The *DAI* begins with eight chapters dedicated to the Pechenegs, and in chapter five Constantine observes:

To the Bulgarians the emperor of the Romans will appear more formidable, and can impose on them the need for tranquility, if he is at peace with the Pechenegs, because the said Pechenegs are neighbours to these Bulgarians also, and when they wish, either for private gain or to do a favour to the emperor of the Romans, they can easily march against Bulgaria, and with their preponderating multitude and their strength overwhelm and defeat them. And so the Bulgarians also continually struggle and strive to maintain peace and harmony with the Pechenegs. For from having frequently been crushingly defeated by

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Anderson 1974: 223.

them, they have learned by experience the value of being always at peace with them. (*DAI*: 52.3–13)

The reference to nomads attacking Bulgaria as ‘a favour to the emperor’ is telling. In 917 the Pechenegs had been incited to do just that, but were prevented when the Byzantine *droungarios* (admiral of the fleet) Romanus Lecapenus (the future emperor) failed to transport them across the river Danube.<sup>30</sup> In 924 Nicholas Mysticus wrote to Symeon warning him that a grand alliance of northern peoples including ‘Pechenegs, Alans and many other Scythians’ was being constructed. In a contemporary letter to Prince George of Abasgia, a region in the northern Caucasus, Nicholas answered George’s enquiry regarding the Bulgarian war, and reminded him to ‘be steadfast in your readiness to fight with us’.<sup>31</sup>

The methods by which the Pechenegs’ services were acquired are also detailed in the *DAI*. They must be won over by ‘letters and gifts’ (chapter four; 50.10). They must also be offered the opportunity to avail themselves of the luxury goods produced within the empire. The groups living nearest to Cherson, a city to the north of the Black Sea that recognized Byzantine authority, would be encouraged to provide their services in exchange for ‘a prearranged remuneration . . . in the form of pieces of purple cloth, ribbons, loosely woven cloths, gold brocade, pepper, scarlet or “Parthian” leather, and other commodities that they desire, according to a contract each Chersonite may make or agree with an individual Pecheneg’ (chapter six; 53.6–11). The Pechenegs were thus encouraged to acquire by peaceful means what they might otherwise have taken by force, and their services, once bought, could be directed against the empire’s enemies.

Besides ‘struggling and striving to maintain peace and harmony with the Pechenegs’, the Bulgarians could also use the nomads as a threat to Byzantium. Symeon was intent upon reaching a lasting agreement with the Pechenegs, spurring Nicholas Mysticus to write that the Byzantines were aware of his diplomatic exchanges ‘not just once or twice, but again and again’, even proposing a marriage alliance.<sup>32</sup> However, Bulgaria itself sat between Byzantium and the steppe lands of southern Russia, so the tsar would have been disinclined to allow nomads through his territory to strike at Byzantine lands beyond.

<sup>30</sup> Theophanes Continuatus: 389–90; Scylitzes: 201. The incident is also recorded in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* under the year 915 (*PVL*: 31; trans.: 71).

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Mysticus, *Letters*: 160–1, 486–7. <sup>32</sup> Nicholas Mysticus, *Letters*: 59.

## THE RUS

The Rus, like the Pechenegs, were warrior-merchants, whose power rested on their ability to dominate their neighbours. But the Rus were not nomads. Instead, they established permanent settlements beside the great rivers that flowed into the Black and Caspian seas. From around 800 they had transported goods from the Russian forest belt along the Don and Volga to the markets of Chazaria and the Muslim lands beyond. Numismatic evidence suggests that this trade was peculiarly lucrative for the first part of the ninth century, but that after *c.* 870 it slowed considerably. By this time the Abbāsīd Caliphate was in decline, and while mint output continued at similar levels, Arab coins (dirhams) no longer reached Russia. The traditional route, always hazardous, had become far less profitable. The Rus began to look for alternative markets for their wares. Their preferred eastern market became the Samanid realm in Transoxania, whence significant volumes of dirhams arrived after *c.* 870.<sup>33</sup> The Rus also looked south to Byzantium as a further market. It has recently been demonstrated that from 911, if not 907, the Rus made annual journeys to Constantinople. The volume of trade on this route had increased dramatically by 944, when a detailed trade agreement specified various restrictions absent from earlier arrangements. There is evidence for the rapid development at this time of a riverside development at Podol in Kiev, where abundant finds attest to an intensification of economic activity.<sup>34</sup>

It has been suggested that the Rus specialized in the slave trade, and that human cargo was especially suited to the arduous journey along the river Dnieper to Constantinople, since they could not only propel the boats, but also carry them at the numerous portages *en route*.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, slaves are the only 'commodity' specifically mentioned in the account of the Russians' journey to Constantinople contained in the *DAI* (60.50–6), although there are allusions to other unspecified goods (*loipa pragmata*: 58.32). (This clearly parallels Byzantium's earliest dealings with the Magyars at Kerch, to which we will turn shortly.) The intensification of trade in the first part of the tenth century must be interpreted in the light of the increased threat the Rus posed to Byzantium. As Shepard (1995b: 259) has maintained, the explanation 'lies less in the realm of trade or the provisioning of Constantinople than in Byzantine diplomacy'.

<sup>33</sup> Noonan 1985: 179–204.

<sup>34</sup> Shepard 1995b: 243–60; Franklin and Shepard 1996: 91–111, 117–20.

<sup>35</sup> Shepard 1995b: 255–7.

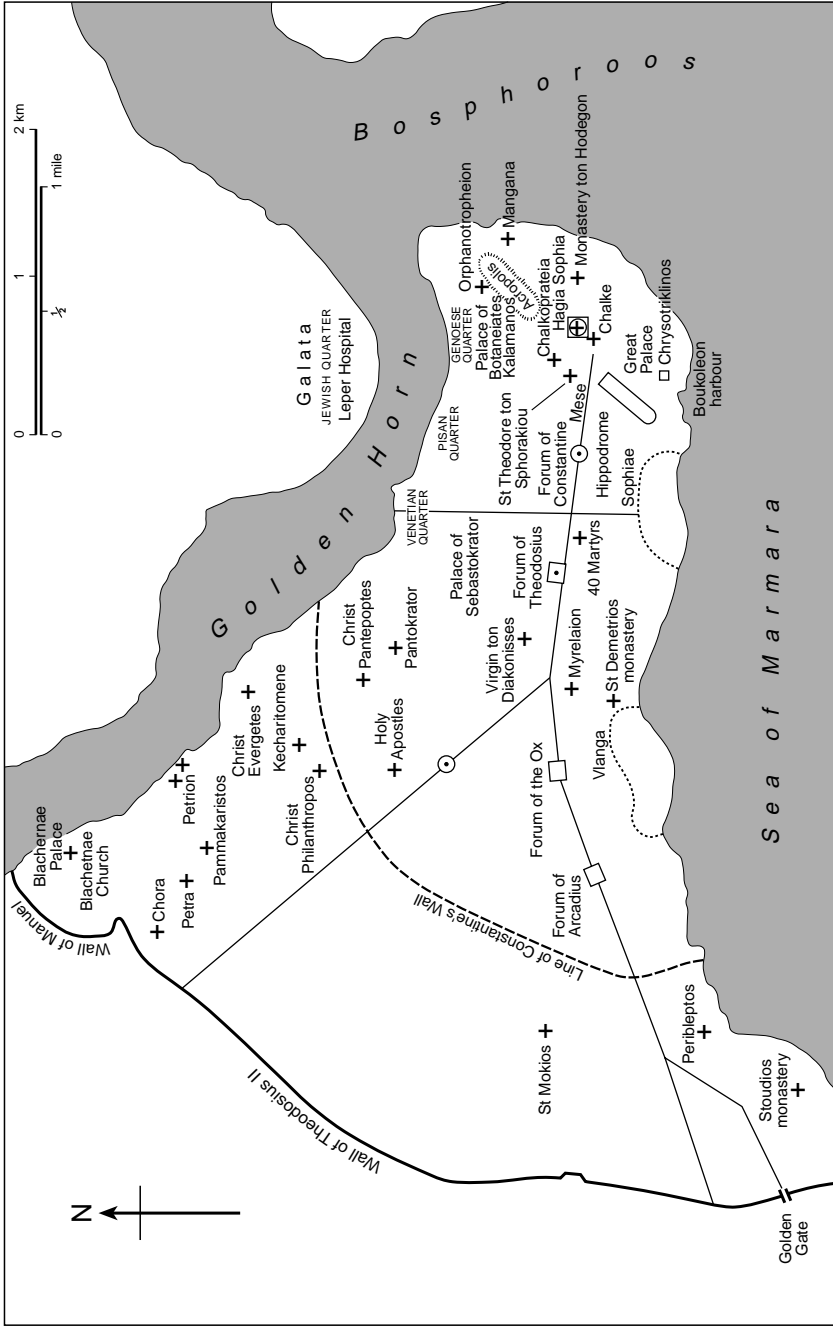
THE *DE CERIMONIIS*: TAXIS AND HIERARCHY

The *DAI*, therefore, provides invaluable information on numerous peoples in and beyond the northern Balkans, and outlines pragmatic methods for influencing their behaviour. Overall, the world beyond Constantinople is portrayed as unstable, even turbulent, and the peoples threatening. In this light it is worth emphasizing that the *DAI* was a work of the greatest secrecy, intended only for the eyes of the emperors Constantine VII and Romanus II, and their closest advisors. A quite different view of the empire and its neighbours is given by a second contemporary work of compilation, also attributed to the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus: the *De Cerimoniis*.

The *De Cerimoniis* is a compilation of religious and secular ceremonial procedures which took place in Constantinople, and other matters of concern insofar as they affected the rhythm of life in the city. The attention paid in the *De Cerimoniis* to foreign affairs is minimal, and to some extent this can be explained by the existence of a distinct treatise devoted to such matters. Nevertheless, it most clearly reflects the fact that domestic matters, and particularly affairs in and between the Great Palace and St Sophia, dominated imperial thought in the mid-tenth century. Since the retrenchment of the seventh century Constantinople had played an increasingly large role in the articulation of the imperial ideology. Olster (1996: 100) has noted that 'as the borders ceased to define the extent of Roman authority [from the seventh century], the *oikoumene* was reduced to a central point from which Romanity radiated', and imperial rhetoric focused largely on the 'head', which, so long as it survived, would keep the body alive. Thus pseudo-Methodius asked 'what other place could be named the navel of the world except the city where God has set the imperial residence of the Christians, and that he has created by its central location even that it might serve as the intermediary between east and west?'<sup>36</sup>

Foreign affairs, therefore, played a limited role in Byzantine imperial thought and ceremony between the seventh and tenth centuries, and chapters in the *De Cerimoniis* are devoted to such matters only where they affected life in the city, such as the reception and treatment of ambassadors from various lands in Constantinople. Moreover, much of this tiny percentage of the large compilation is of purely antiquarian interest: for example the four chapters (Book I, chapters eighty-seven to ninety; ed.

<sup>36</sup> Cited with translation by Olster 1996: 101.



1.2 Constantinople, reproduced from Magdalino 1993

Reiske: 393–410) devoted to the reception of envoys from Persia and of ambassadors announcing the promotion of an Ostrogothic emperor in Rome are copied from a sixth-century text by Peter the Patrician. Nevertheless, the information on other peoples contained in the *De Cerimoniis* has been of concern for those seeking to reconstruct the Byzantine world view, for the manuscript has been transmitted with a separate document, incorporated as chapters forty-six to forty-eight of the second book, which lists the correct protocols to be observed in despatches from the emperor to foreign rulers.<sup>37</sup> The central theme in this document, as it is of the whole compilation, is *taxis*.

*Taxis*, or correct order, within Byzantine society produced the ‘harmonious hierarchy of institutions that constituted the state’.<sup>38</sup> *Taxis* in human society mirrored that of heaven, and systems of precedence mirrored the divine hierarchy. Thus the Byzantine empire was rigidly structured, and the opposite of the world beyond the empire, the barbarian world where *ataxia* (disorder) reigned. However, the late antique concept of universality had been reinstated as a principal component of imperial ideology before the tenth century, and this required that the empire introduce order to other human societies, to correct *ataxia*. (In this context we might understand the ideological rationale behind the missions to the Slavs in the ninth century, which saw the extension of the spiritual frontiers of Orthodoxy even as the political frontiers of the Orthodox empire were in abeyance.)

The extension of order to the non-Byzantine world led to the creation of what has been dubbed ‘the hierarchy of states’.<sup>39</sup> At the top of the hierarchy, after Byzantium, came the Sassanian Persians, then the Arabs and later the sultan of Egypt, with whom the emperor negotiated on terms of quasi-equality. Next came the chagan of the Chazars, and after this various western potentates, including the king of the Franks.<sup>40</sup> The order of precedence is illustrated in the *De Cerimoniis*, which contains protocols for letters despatched to the rulers of independent peoples, and also those deemed to be subject to the emperor. Independent rulers received letters (*grammata*), subject peoples received commands (*keleusis*). Each was sealed with a golden sealing, or bull, with a specified value in Byzantine *solidi*. Thus the ‘Emir of the Faithful’ received a letter with a golden bull of four *solidi*, while the ‘Pope of Rome’ received either a one-*solidus* or two-*solidi* bull. The peoples in and

<sup>37</sup> *De Cerimoniis*: 679–92. On the ‘diplomatic style sheet’, see Bury 1907: 223, 227; *ODB*: i, 597.

<sup>38</sup> *ODB*: iii, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Ostrogorsky 1956: 1–14; *ODB*: iii, 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Brehier 1949: 282–6; *ODB*: i, 634–5.

beyond the northern Balkans were integral to this system, and the protocols for correspondence are recorded in the *De Cerimoniis*:

To the *archontes* of the Pechenegs, a golden bull of two *solidi*: 'Letter (*grammata*) of the Christ-loving emperors Constantine and Romanus to the *archontes* of the Pechenegs.' To the *archon* of the Croats; to the *archon* of the Serbs; to the archon of [the people of] Zahumlje; to the *archon* of Kanali; to the *archon* of [the people of] Travunija; to the *archon* of Duklja; to the *archon* of Moravia. The protocol for them: 'Command (*keleusis*) from the Christ-loving despots to that person *archon* of there.' A golden bull of two *solidi*. (*De Cerimoniis*: 691.4–13)

The treatment of the Pechenegs is in agreement with that outlined in the *DAI*; there is no single *archon*, but the leaders of distinct confederate groups each receive the same honour. Moreover, each is accorded the status of an independent ruler, who receives a letter from the emperors. In contrast, and also in accordance with the claims advanced in the *DAI* – where as we have seen it is stated that the Croats and Serbs have never been subject to the ruler of the Bulgarians – the *archontes* of the Croats and the Serbs are considered dependent peoples of the empire, and are issued with imperial commands. So are the rulers of the Slavic regions of Zahumlje, Kanali, Travunija, Duklja and Moravia. We will consider each of these regions (except Moravia) in greater detail in chapter four (below at pp. 117–55).

The inclusion of Moravia suggests that the protocols for the Balkan peoples, as they have been preserved, date from before the Magyars arrived in the Carpathian Basin in *c.* 895. Bury (1907: 223), suggests the Isaurian period (i.e. before 802), but the later ninth century seems more likely. Received opinion holds that Moravia fell to the Magyars before *c.* 906, although if we believe recent attempts to relocate Moravia we might accept an earlier date. However, the impossibility of identifying the date of the protocol precisely is not a hindrance to our understanding of the *De Cerimoniis*; rather it reveals to us the essence of the document, for although much of the information it contains is clearly antiquarian, and many of the ceremonies redundant, they are included to bolster the image of continuity and immutability that is central to the notion of *taxis*, and to impose a framework of idealized relations within the overarching hierarchy which has persisted from antiquity to the present. And in its accumulation of principles and precedents from the pool of Roman and Late Antique ideology, the *De Cerimoniis* was dynamic because it facilitated the invention of traditions suited to conditions in the mid-tenth century, and gave them solid pseudo-historical roots.

Averil Cameron (1987) has noted that the vulnerability of emperors in the century preceding Constantine VII contradicts the image of strength and continuity in the imperial office as it is enshrined in the *De Cerimoniis*. Usurpation was a constant threat: Constantine's grandfather, Basil I, had seized power from a murdered predecessor, and Constantine's own ascendancy had been interrupted by the accession of Romanus Lecapenus and his promotion of his sons over the *porphyrogenetos*. As Cameron states: 'This is exactly the kind of situation which the [*De Cerimoniis*] entirely conceals, in its bland assumption that all is well if only the due forms are preserved' (124). The same can be said of imperial foreign and frontier policy, where continuous development drove the need for an image of solidity. From the *De Cerimoniis* we might believe that the Byzantines considered the world around them was stable and that it could be controlled merely by the observance of appropriate protocols in Constantinople. Fortunately we have the *DAI* which demonstrates that the emperor and his functionaries were well aware of the turbulence beyond the walls of Constantinople, and were willing and able to engage with it. However, such activity could not be seen to interfere with the slow and apparently changeless world of ritual, where emphasis was placed on hieratic calm.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the fluidity and dynamism of foreign affairs have left marks in the *De Cerimoniis*. For example, ambiguity and confusion is evident in the various entries which record the correct form of address for the ruler of the Bulgarians. The first form given in the *De Cerimoniis* considers the Bulgarian ruler as *archon* and spiritual grandson of the emperor, but it is noted that this changed 'when the name [of the *archon*] was changed and he entered into sonship'.<sup>42</sup> However, we also know that for a period Tsar Symeon had been acknowledged as a spiritual brother, and therefore an equal to the emperor. In several letters to Symeon drafted by his secretary Theodore Daphnopates, Romanus I addresses the tsar as his spiritual brother (*pneumatikos adelphos*).<sup>43</sup> He even warns the tsar that '[when] you freed yourself of spiritual sonship, and at the same time of your natural subordination, you turned order (*taxis*) on its head and brought trouble on our two peoples' (Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*: 73.55-7). Order was restored when Peter once again acknowledged Romanus I as his spiritual father.

<sup>41</sup> Cameron 1987: 107-8, on the virtue of hieratic calm (Gr. *galene*, L. *tranquilitas*).

<sup>42</sup> *De Cerimoniis*: 681-2.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*: 57.3, 59.38, 61.51, 69.2, 81.9-10. See also Westerink's index entry *adelphos: pneumatikos*.