

Report by J. Shepard (Examiner), on the PhD thesis of Martina Čechová, ‘The importance of the Northern Black Sea for the Byzantine Empire in the 6th-10th centuries. Economic and Military importance of Cherson’

This thesis aims to evaluate the significance of Cherson to Byzantium from Late Antiquity until the 10th century. As Martina Čechová (henceforth = Č.) states, there are obstacles to such an evaluation – not merely the dearth of literary sources but also the complexity of conditions in the Southern Crimea, where different cultures converged. This means that a rare item of detailed literary evidence may relate only to a short period, rather than allowing one to characterize conditions for a whole era. Still more seriously, few of our written sources actually come from the Crimea, as Č.’s careful review shows. Archaeological materials may fill the gap but, as Č. acknowledges, only in recent years have excavations been conducted scientifically, and questions of stratigraphy and typology of amphorae and other pottery remain contentious. Equally frustratingly, many of the materials are inaccessible, and it is to Č.’s credit that she has managed to participate in expeditions carried out by the Taras Shevchenko University. Personal experience of the Cherson region has benefited the thesis, enabling Č. to paint a clear picture of Cherson’s natural environment, as also of its hinterland and nearby stretches of the Black Sea. She casts back to the Greeks’ foundation of Cherson, noting the defensive rationale behind their choice of site, and its close links from the start with the colony of Herakleia Pontike, on the Black Sea’s southern shore. Good photos and maps support these points, although a larger scale would have made it easier to follow the plans of the city and its churches (figs. 8, 11). The effect is to give the thesis a three-dimensional quality, integrating Cherson’s unique properties with topics recurrent throughout the work, notably the site’s significance to any polity seeking power north of the Black Sea, and the importance to Cherson’s livelihood of fish and salt. The wide range of Č.’s survey also enables her to answer the questions she raises: does the history of this city diverge from that of cities elsewhere in Byzantium and, if so, how and why? She concludes that Cherson’s development was very different from other cities’, particularly towards the end of the 7th century: the street plan, with basilicas and small churches fitting into them, persisted. Č. does not deny the massive changes undergone by cities in the Balkans and Asia Minor, or the problems posed by the cessation of agriculture in the middle Crimea. But her picture of basic continuity in the city’s elite and culture, and of underlying prosperity, is convincing, as is her Conclusion: the city’s ‘mutually complementary’ geographical, economic and strategic assets explain its survival, as also the special treatment its citizens received. Structurally, the thesis is coherent and firm.

Inevitably, questions arise, major and minor. I shall leave aside quibbles of presentation, such as mismatches between citations of works in footnotes and their form in the bibliography (e.g. ‘Mogaričev (2012)’ in n. 135 on p. 55, presumably a reference to the bibliography’s ‘Lives of bishops of Cherson’, on p. 149). Considering that Č. is not a native-speaker of English, she shows admirable command of disparate materials, while writing in clear academic English. I shall also set aside bibliographical desiderata: Č. uses recent publications on Cherson fruitfully, although one regrets the absence of N. Alekseyenko’s *L’administration byzantine de Cherson*, important for its publication of seals of

kommerkiarioi, churchmen, and others. Being published in 2012, it presumably came too late for proper treatment in the thesis. So here, in only loose relation to the thesis' order of contents, is a set of critical comments and questions:-

- i) The *Lives* of the early bishops of Cherson receive attention (p. 25), and Č. notes that the text probably originated between the late 8th and the mid-9th centuries (p. 55), the Iconoclast era when, as she notes, the church seemingly underwent reorganisation, the Goths having their own eparchy (p. 97). Presumably the reorganisation was under the Constantinopolitan patriarch's direction. Yet, as Č. stresses, southwest Crimea's monasteries were a haven for iconodoules, some persons travelling there voluntarily (pp. 96-7). Why did the Constantinopolitan authorities permit this? Is this another example of Cherson's *Sonderweg*? Or might one date the creation of the Gothic eparchy to the brief first restoration of icon-veneration?
- ii) The *Life* of Constantine-Cyril and related texts are discussed (pp. 27-8, 111-12), but without consideration of the reasons for the translation of St Clement's relics and the literary éclat this triggered. Should one ascribe this to Constantine-Cyril's personal initiative? To imperial policy – and if so, what? Or to the generally high level of godliness and good learning in Cherson, for which Constantine-Cyril was, in effect, catering? And might the celebration of the relics relate to a tightening of imperial supervision of Cherson around this time?
- iii) The *Rus Primary Chronicle* receives little discussion in the thesis' source-section, perhaps because its account of Vladimir's baptism is dismissed in 5. Č. follows eminent scholars here, but she might consider why so distant a town receives attention from the chroniclers – not just in the Russo-Byzantine treaties they incorporated, but in their assumption that the Chersonites would pass on information about the Rus to Constantinople (entry s.a. 6452), and in their subsequent record of a Chersonite revolt (s.a. 6574). Should we, then, be dismissive of the *RPC*'s straightforward account of Vladimir's attack on Cherson and use of it as a bargaining-counter to negotiate a marriage-tie from the emperor? The *RPC* gives precise topographical details about Cherson; and in striking at a time of when the emperor was distracted, Vladimir was acting in a Rus tradition – the 860 raid occurred when Michael III was heading for the eastern front; in 941 imperial forces were gearing up for offensives in the east. Moreover, work by Mogaričev and others has shown that a Slavonic translation of the *Lives* of early bishops was available to contributors to the *RPC* in the 11th century, possibly a sign of direct links with Cherson. So while elements in the *RPC*'s account of the baptism are obviously 'legendary' (p. 121), what exactly is implausible in it? Č. seemingly supposes (pp. 118-19) Kalokyros to have been knowledgeable about Rus and capable of influencing Sviatoslav (speaking in Slavonic?). So why not accept the *RPC*'s indication of pro-Rus sympathizers like Anastasii within Cherson? This, in turn, gives its account of the siege plausibility, and makes one wonder why Č. entertains seriously Romančuk's attempt to dissociate the destruction-layer of the strategically vital northern part of Cherson with

- Vladimir's sack implied by the *RPC* (in his threat to do to Constantinople what he had done to Cherson). Still on the subject of Cherson's place in Russo-Byzantine relations, why so little use of the *De administrando imperio* (esp. chs. 6, 9) or of the archaeological evidence of Chersonite anonymous coins? These attest frequent trafficking between Cherson and the Middle Dnieper by the mid-10th century – certainly explaining the *RPC*'s attention to Cherson, but why not also corroborating the outlines of its account of Vladimir's baptism?
- iv) Č. usefully reviews the archaeological data, and she notes that one-third of the surface-area has been excavated (p. 73). But that leaves two-thirds unexcavated, and Č. does not say how much of the surface-area was excavated scientifically. What difference does she think excavation of the entire area would make, and have the most important parts of the city been excavated? Č.'s thesis about the reasons for the infilling of fish-vats – need for more space caused by fresh building (pp. 70-1) – is plausible. But how does she reconcile this with her view that population-size increased by only a couple of thousands, from c.5,000 in the 6th century to 6,000-7,000 in the 10th (p. 93)? Were old sites simply left abandoned in the town while new houses or churches were built? Or what?
- v) A recurrent theme is the large number of basilicas within the walls, and 'in places important for the city life', such as the northern shoreline (p. 94). Presumably there may be yet more basilicas in the unexcavated parts of the town. Does Č. envisage these as functioning simultaneously and, if so, who were they catering for and how were they financed? Č. suggests a possible link with missionary work: could she elaborate on the role that basilicas might have played in this? Is it possible that some were attached to monasteries? And did smaller churches only appear later, or did they coexist with the basilicas?
- vi) Justinian looms large in the thesis, as a patron of building-works and of churches. Why, in Č.'s view, did he take so keen an interest in the northern Black Sea region? She implies (p. 51) that he was an innovator, with a definite northern policy involving 'divide-and-rule'. Some scholars have argued that to ascribe a 'grand strategy' to classical or early medieval emperors is anachronistic: what does Č. think? And which barbarians were so worrying to Justinian? The Huns were now more or less subdued, and the Utigurs and Cutrigurs were not particularly well-organised. So why all the elaborate fortifications to protect the Goths? And precisely what role does Č. suppose Cherson played in Justinian's calculations? Did his interest in safeguarding the Crimea spring solely from militaro-diplomatic apprehensions?
- vii) Č.'s discussion of the 'condominium' with the Khazars is valuable, but she needs to set out her position more clearly. Does she envisage a formal treaty, or unwritten understandings – and at what level, with the khagan, or with local 'commanders' of the sort encountered by Constantine-Cyril in 861? And how does she suppose the Byzantine authorities managed to contain Khazar-sponsored encroachments/pillaging – by reliance wholly on the walls of Cherson, or with the possibility of armed help from the Goths? Does she envisage constant fluctuations in the relative strengths of Byzantines and Khazars, or definite lines of

development? Can we be sure that the Khazars themselves occupied the Crimea in large numbers, or may the finds of Saltovo-Maiatskii type pottery found from the mid-8th century onwards (p. 85) merely indicate the arrival there of subject peoples of the Khazars? Anyway, this should surely be interpreted as a mark of Khazar expansionism rather than, as Č. seems to imply, weakness and ‘defeat’ at the Arabs’ hands. After all, the Khazars ultimately drove the Arabs back. And when does Č. think that Khazar dominion over the eastern Crimea ceased? Does she agree with C. Zuckerman that by the 10th century they no longer had an effective presence there? Surely not, for on her own evidence, the Khazars were still formidable c.940, and capable of sacking Crimean villages and attacking Cherson (p. 117). How might evidence from the *De administrando*, the anonymous Hebrew letter (cited by Č. p. 117, n. 433) and the issue of the location of the Black Bulgars (mentioned in the 944 treaty incorporated in the *Rus Primary Chronicle*) be relevant to this question?

- viii) The nature of the administration at Cherson is left murky by Č.. One learns of the existence of a ‘city archive’ postulated by Alekseeenko, of the similarity of the roles of the *kyros* and the *archon* and, subsequently, of the installation of a *strategos* ‘who became the new commandant of the territory’ (pp. 87-9, 92, 110). That the *strategos* exercised quite effective control is paradoxically indicated by the rebellion of 896 which, Č. notes, may have been triggered by his ‘eagerness for levying’ (p. 110). How does she suppose that the administration worked, i.e. what did *archontes* and *strategoï* actually do? Did they dispense justice? Collect taxes and, in the *strategos*’ case, supervise the *kommerkiarioi* and command troops? Č. states that he had ‘imperial troops that resided in Cherson’ (p. 110). But where were they stationed? Is there any archaeological evidence of barracks, or of an increase in weaponry found in Cherson from the mid-9th century onwards? Č. states that, perhaps as part of the condominium arrangement, ‘no army was allowed to be present in Crimea’ (p. 130). Can we even be sure that Cherson had a garrison after the installation of *strategoï*? Is it possible that the latter maintained a minimum staff (including troops), so as not to provoke the Chersonites by the cost and inconvenience of maintaining a sizable garrison? Presumably, the goodwill of the Chersonites towards the *archon/strategos* would anyway have been essential for defending the circuit of walls (a situation comparable with that of the citizens of Constantinople, whose garrison was likewise usually small)? Does Č. suppose that the *strategos* exercised authority over other towns along the coast, e.g. Sougdaia? What was his relationship with Gothia? And could Č. not offer more information about the diplomatic activities of the *strategos*, mentioned in the letters of Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, prescribed in the *De administrando*, and expounded authoritatively in, for example, the works of D. Obolensky?
- ix) Long-distance trade features fitfully in Č.’s discussion of Cherson’s economy: she should pay closer attention to this and to the question of high-value de luxe goods, especially when discussing the seals of *kommerkiarioi* and the prosperity of Cherson: it was this prosperity, after all, which financed many of the building-activities. Č. supposes fish products to have been the main exports, along with

salt, and she briefly notes furs and other goods brought from beyond the steppes. But are these sufficient to account for the activities of the *kommerkiarioi* which, on her own avowal, originally had something to do with the silk-trade (p. 103). Can we really be so sure that in the 9th century the *kommerkiarioi* at Cherson ‘were not engaged in the silk trade any more’ (p. 104)? And is it not possible that silks were being imported from Khazaria and beyond via Cherson, as well as exported? Č. briefly mentions trade-links with the steppes, and with the Khazars (p. 130). Could she not consider other indications of Khazar involvement with the silk trade – for example S. A. Pletneva’s 1996 book on Sarkel and ‘the silk route’? And might not Justinian’s interest in fortifying Cherson and its approaches have something to do with his well-known interest in fostering the silk-trade, by developing production at home whilst also trying to encourage trade-routes that circumvented the Sasanian Persians’ dominions? (See Item vi) in the set of comments and questions above). The interrelationship between Byzantium, Khazaria, Cherson and the silk-trade deserves further discussion.

These are quite difficult questions, and one realises that the evidence is problematic, open to widely differing interpretations. Č. addresses the source-problems systematically and thoughtfully, offering firm grounds for her conclusions. And, one must emphasise, Č. has performed very creditably in her bid to reconstruct a general picture of the political, diplomatic, economic and ecclesiastical developments at Cherson between the 6th and the 10th centuries. I have no hesitation in pronouncing a favourable ‘sentence’ on this work. In other words, I recommend that this dissertation should be awarded the degree of doctor of philosophy (PhD).

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