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Význam severního Černomoří pro Byzantskou říši v  
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Hospodářský a vojenský význam města Cherson

The importance of the Black Sea for the Byzantine  
Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries

Economic and Military Importance of Cherson

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The dissertation is focused on the Crimean city of Cherson. The area of Cherson has been excavated very extensively and its state of preservation is amazing. The archaeological sources are therefore rich – even though only one third of the area has been excavated so far. On the other hand, written sources on Cherson are quite scarce, especially regarding the transitional period between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The research of the place during the 7<sup>th</sup> – mid-9<sup>th</sup> centuries is, therefore, difficult and it is necessary to consider both the written and the archaeological sources and to complement each other.

The territory of Crimea has been under excavation mainly by Russian or Ukrainian scholars and due to the difficult political situation, the area was not accessible to the Western countries' citizens till 1993. Therefore, most of the books or articles on Cherson were published in Russian and have not been spread among western scholars. Recently, though, several works on the new research in Cherson have been published in languages different from the traditional one. The prevalent majority of the publications, however, are invariably published in Russian or Ukrainian and they are not being usually translated into other languages. Therefore, the present situation does not differ much from the period before the year 1993: in the works of the “western” scholars, Cherson appears only sporadically, while the Russian and Ukrainian journals publish ample results of new research in Cherson regularly. This situation seems to be very interesting. What are the causes of omitting Cherson even from the key English publications? The distance and location just on the edge of the Classical world can be one of the causes: the western scholars have usually focused on the Mediterranean. The inaccessibility of Crimea before 1993 can also have played its role; without any doubt, the language barrier is a great obstacle.

However, in my opinion, it is just the location on the frontier that should draw the attention. As a city on the border with the Barbarian world, Cherson must have been an extremely important place for the Byzantine Empire. It is interesting that for example the situation on the Byzantine-Arab frontier is described in the western scientific literature thoroughly but to get knowledge of the northern border issue the scholar must either hunt for the few publications available in the west or to go and visit Russian or Ukrainian scientific libraries. In any case, the knowledge of the Ukrainian or Russian language is essential.

During the years of studying Cherson I realized that despite the distance from the Capital, Cherson belonged to the important cities of the Byzantine Empire. It therefore deserves greater attention among the western scholars dealing with the issues of Byzantium, especially

regarding international policy, trade and economy. Furthermore, Cherson is very suitable for studying the issue of development and transformation of cities in the period of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Besides a chapter on the *Primary sources*, the thesis consists of five other parts. The first two of them deal with the *Natural conditions and topography* (Chapter 1) of Crimea and of the territory of Cherson and with the *History of research on Cherson* (Chapter 2). The main body of the thesis is structured chronologically into three parts:

**Chapter 3 – Development of Cherson from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century**

**Chapter 4 – The Dark Ages of the Byzantine Empire (mid-7<sup>th</sup> – mid-9<sup>th</sup> centuries): decline, transformation, continuity?**

**Chapter 5 – The new era of prosperity (mid-9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

**The third chapter** will be devoted to the time when the era of Antiquity was slowly coming to its end and the development proceeded to the Middle Ages, in this case to the early Byzantine period. The fishing industry and fish processing will be discussed because these activities which had begun here already in the Roman times continued in the early and middle Byzantine period, too. Afterwards, the beginnings and spread of Christianity will be debated.

The outset of the early Byzantine period is usually connected with the reign of Justinian I. This Emperor made efforts to expand the Byzantine territory to match the size of the ancient Roman Empire. The development in the northern Pontic area is connected not only with this pursuit but also with the movements of the Barbarian tribes just on the northern border, on Crimea.

This chapter is closed in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century when Cherson was undergoing transformation into an early medieval town.

The following questions are dealt with in the third chapter, which focuses on the period of transformation between antiquity and the Middle Ages:

- 1) the beginnings and development of fish industry in the Roman times and its continuity, accompanied by fish products trade, in the early Byzantine period,
- 2) the beginnings of Christianity in Cherson,

3) the development activity in the era of Justinian I and its causes (relationships with the neighbouring Barbarian peoples),

**The fourth chapter** deals with the “Dark Ages”, i.e. the period from the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> to the mid-9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was the time of prosperity for Cherson; nevertheless, in the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab tribes appeared in the Mediterranean and with their arrival a decline in the whole Empire began. The decline caused a crisis of town life. Even the religious situation was not stable: iconoclasm was declared by the emperor Leo III in the first quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Opponents of the new regime were persecuted and often exiled. Not only iconodouloi came to Cherson: the Pope Martin was relegated here in the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century as well as the overthrown emperor Justinian II at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The situation began to improve and stabilize thanks to the creation and use of the theme system, which improved the defence ability of the Empire. The crisis was surmounted in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century and the Byzantine Empire could begin to prepare itself for a period of a new prosperity.

The following problems are dealt with in the fourth chapter, devoted to the “Dark Ages” period:

- 1) the continuity of the fish paste (*garum*) production and trade, changes in the trade contacts after the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century,
- 2) the problem of grain export from Crimea after the loss of Egypt,
- 3) the church development at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and Christianity in the Dark Ages,
- 4) the relationship between the Byzantine and Khazar Empires, the Khazars in Cherson, and the condominium issue,
- 5) the exiles in Cherson (Pope Martin and his letters, Emperor Justinian II, iconoclasm opponents),
- 6) the creation of the Cherson theme.

**The fifth chapter** covers the period from the mid-9<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even though the internal situation was set in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, fights with enemies continued. Thanks to its position on the northern border, Cherson was a meeting point with the Pechenegs and the Rus. Particularly the Rus affected Cherson in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

One more issue is studied in this chapter. In 860/861, St. Constantine (Cyril) spent a winter in Cherson, preparing himself for a mission to the Khazars. Later on, in 863, this saint came with his brother Methodius on request of the Prince Rastislav to Great Moravia where they contributed significantly to the cultural development, and their legacy continues to be alive in the Czech Republic.

The fifth part of the thesis focuses mainly on the external relations with the northern neighbours and, furthermore, on the problems discussed in the previous chapters, which means the trade and progress of the city in the period after the crisis. The questions for this part are as follows:

- 1) the trade connections in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> and in the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, fish paste production and transport till the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century,
- 2) the presence of St. Constantine (Cyril) in the city,
- 3) the role of Cherson in the relationships between the Byzantine Empire and the Rus, the Prince Vladimir I in Cherson, and the question of destruction of Cherson at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century,
- 4) trade and crafts in Cherson in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## *Methodology*

### *Fish Industry, Trade*

Both primary and secondary sources are available for the Late Roman Period. Among the primary sources, Ammianus Marcellinus can be named. He described the Northern Pontic area in connection with struggles of the Roman army. The fish paste production and trade is mentioned by Strabo, from later era there are the Pope Martin's letters dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, or the description of the area by Emperor Constantine VII from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The city of Cherson has been excavated, there is an extensive evidence of cisterns used for salting fish

there, and furthermore, transport amphoras have been excavated in Cherson and elsewhere (the typology of amphoras suitable for the transport of fish products was suggested by Andrei Opait for the Roman period). The continuity of transport in the Byzantine period – the types of transport amphoras, trading partners, fish industry development in the Dark Ages and thereafter – is the question that, together with the grain export problem, is dealt with using the archaeological evidence and primary sources.

### *Christianity in Cherson*

The archaeological excavations of the first Christian basilicas prove that Christianity spread very early in Cherson. The strong position of Christianity can be corroborated by the grandiose development of basilical churches, which continued to be constructed to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century at least. The lists of the Christian bishops, written at councils, constitute a very important source from the Dark Ages.

### *Relationships with neighbours, the development*

There is a primary source describing the construction activity in the 6<sup>th</sup> century: the *Buildings* by Prokopios. The bloom is also corroborated by the evidence of archaeological excavations. The causes of this activity remain a question; the town development is also connected with the question of the transformation of Cherson from the ancient to the medieval city.

Regarding the Dark Ages, it is possible to compare Cherson to other Byzantine cities, some of which are well excavated. There are also several written sources: the already mentioned Letters of Pope Martin and the lists of Church councils. Furthermore, there are later treatises by Theophanes and Nikephoros (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries) and reports from the religious refugees.

The relationship with the neighbours may be studied on the basis of the archaeological evidence from other parts of Crimea, where Barbarian peoples were in movement. The Khazar question is connected with the town development in the Dark Ages: thanks to both archaeological evidence and written sources it is possible to consider the problem of condominium as well as the stay of Emperor Justinian II in Cherson.

The significance of Cherson in the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the Rus can be seen in various written sources as well as from the archaeological evidence: in addition to the legend of the baptism of St. Vladimir, there is the question of destruction of Cherson at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Primary sources – literary and material*

The number of surviving narrative sources mentioning Cherson is not negligible. The exception is comprised by the sources from the period between the mid-7<sup>th</sup> and mid-9<sup>th</sup> centuries; the lack of written sources from this era was the cause of calling it “Dark Ages”.

The primary sources include writings of historians (chronicles), hagiographic texts and letters; furthermore lists of bishops (*Notitiae episcopatum ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*) and records from synods. Moreover, various other texts survived, as e. g. orations, Prokopios’ of Caesarea *De Aedificiis* or the books compiled at the command of or written by Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.

Cherson and its neighboring territory is an excellent place for archaeological excavations. The reason for that is simple: the city does not suffer from the problem of modern house building, which archeologists in other cities have been usually confronted with. Cherson has been excavated since 1827; therefore the material sources of all kinds are innumerable. First of all, the architectonic plan of the city was preserved; the house walls are still in existence approximately to the height of about one meter. Also several portion of the city walls remained well preserved. The architectural monuments indicate well the past glory of Cherson.

Among other archaeological finds, in particular seals and pottery meet the topic of my work. Seals belong to the most significant sources for learning about the Byzantine history and culture. The seals can help us to understand the role of the city within the Byzantine Empire, to research the cultural and trade connection both between the Byzantine cities and between Byzantium and other territories. Information that is given by seals includes the iconography of the depicted figures, the language of inscriptions and their style and also the names of owners of the seals, therefore sigillography is indispensable also for prosopography. Studying trade, special attention must be paid to *mollybdobouloi* or lead seals, which were used also to seal traded goods.

## *Conclusions*

Cherson was a highly developed city already in antiquity. The transformation into the medieval city was in its case smooth: the ancient agora remained the main city square, the ancient temples were rebuilt in churches, the ancient insulae were not obliterated by the medieval construction but the new buildings (e. g. basilicas or little churches building in almost every city quarter in the Middle Byzantine period) were incorporated into the orthogonal city plan. This applies for all the medieval building activities. Even the location of the pottery workshops beyond the city walls was respected as late as in the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Only the purely pagan buildings such as the theater or the *thermae* ceased to dominate the city.

The first great reconstruction, although began by Justinian I in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, came in the post-Justinian period and lasted to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. This period, though short as it was, is distinguished by the great architectural development in Cherson. Some old buildings were destructed so that the new basilicas could have been erected. Also the residential houses were being reconstructed, as were the walls. Such a remarkable activity was not usual at the time following the Justinianic period stigmatized by the plagues and earthquakes. On the contrary, the Mediterranean experienced a decline, which is well attested after the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. The Byzantine Empire was except for the natural disasters heavily struck also by the Persian and Arabian raids in the Asia Minor and by the raids of the Slavic tribes in the Balkans. The Byzantine Empire lost the wealthiest provinces of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, similarly as the inland territory of contemporary Greece. People were moving from the endangered areas into the better defensible locations; *kastra*, the walled hill-top settlements were being founded, while villages or even cities in the low lands diminished in size and population or were abandoned right away.

Compared to the Mediterranean, the development of Cherson was extremely different in particular by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of the decline, the city flourished. This must have been caused by several mutually complementary reasons, such as the geographical location, the economic strength or the strategic significance of Cherson.

The geographical location of Cherson favoured its development. The Black sea region was by no means influenced by the natural disasters as much as the Mediterranean. Although an earthquake hit Cherson in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, its impact was not disastrous for the city life. Furthermore, neither the Persians nor the Arabs came ever to the Black Sea region. This area,



however, suffered from the presence of other enemies, coming from the vast eastern steppes. Various Nomadic tribes were appearing ceaselessly both in the northern Black Sea steppes and Crimea. They damaged the fertile fields of Crimea and the agricultural hinterland of Cherson; as a consequence, Cherson was dependent on the food supplies coming from the Byzantine Empire. Nonetheless, none of the Nomadic groups was able to conquer Cherson, well protected behind its walls, because the Nomads lacked equipment needed to overcome the walls; probably only the armies of Justinian II were able to damage a part of the defensive walls of Cherson. The city therefore remained Byzantine throughout its existence, the Greek and Roman tradition was never interrupted.

The strategic importance of Cherson was also related to its geographical location. The Byzantine Empire was well aware of the position of Cherson at the border with the Barbarian tribes and always supported Cherson, in particular regarding food supplies. Cherson functioned as the Byzantine outpost, observing the movements of the Nomads and warning Constantinople if necessary. In the course of time, Cherson became the only definite Byzantine territory in the North, which even increased its strategic importance. The problem of the Byzantine Empire lay in the short distance between the northern Black sea and Constantinople. Potential enemies could arrive in Constantinople swiftly and without warning, therefore the Byzantine Empire needed to maintain the northern territory.

Undoubtedly, the Nomads that influenced Cherson most of all were the Khazars, though in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, they did not yet interfere in the developments in Crimea so much.

Another reason that enabled Cherson to reach such a high degree of development at that time was its advanced level of economy. Also this point is connected with the geographical location. Lying both at the sea and on the border and having excellent harbour facilities, Cherson was predestinated to become a trade crossroads, which came true already in antiquity, when Cherson exported all the grain harvested in the south-western and western part of Crimea. The fields had already been damaged in the early Byzantine period but the tradition of Cherson as the city where trade of all sorts was run remained true: then centre of trade did not close its gates to any merchant, Byzantine or Nomad. The lively trade with many other parts of the Byzantine Empire flourished until the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century and functioned by the end of it.

Cherson however did not live only on its role of the centre of trade. Cherson's workshops produced high-quality products; for example the metal objects made here were widely spread among the Barbarians of Crimea. The most significant product of Cherson was, however, *garum*. Here comes the advantage of the location of Cherson again: being at the sea, fishing was the natural means of obtaining food. Moreover, the river Dnieper flows into the Black Sea not very far from Cherson. Its estuary, where the river and the salty waters were mixing, created favourable conditions for fish life. The catch of the Cherson's fishermen must have been enormous, given the fish processing facilities – the salting vats – built in Cherson. Therefore, also the profit made by selling the *garum* must have been significant; this industry remained active in Cherson throughout the early and half of the middle Byzantine period.

Thus, the profit made by selling the fish products, the knowledge that Cherson was strategically important for the central government and the fact that the disastrous events that struck the eastern Mediterranean did not directly affected the northern Pontos could have been the causes of the development of Cherson at that time, in which other parts of Byzantium experienced rather decline.

The architectural development of Cherson is also the sign of its inhabitants' self-confidence. While other cities of Byzantium were reduced in size and the only building activity concerned the defensible structures like walls, *kastra* or little houses built without any architectural plan, in Cherson magnificent basilicas were built. The archaeological excavations proved that the constructions of Cherson were carefully planned within the city. All this indicates that the Chersonites must have been confident that their city would remain untouched by any enemy and that they had enough resources to afford such elaborate buildings. Undoubtedly, given their contacts, the inhabitants of Cherson were getting news about the unstable situation in the Mediterranean; in spite of that they might have believed that the crisis would not arrive into their homeland. Nevertheless, the crisis came, but at that time, the basilicas of Cherson had been finished. They attested the strong position of Christian Church in Cherson.

The crisis that Cherson experienced was not very similar to the one that hit the Mediterranean. At the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Cherson was the advanced city where trade and crafts flourished. The transformation of the ancient city was finished; Cherson had turned into a medieval city. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Cherson experienced a decline, concerning in particular the trade. The traditional trade connections with the eastern Mediterranean were interrupted, which was undoubtedly caused by the troubled situation of that region. The preserved contacts comprised

Constantinople, the southern Pontos and other parts of Crimea and of the northern steppes (in particular the Crimean Goths and the Khazars). Since Cherson had to be supplied with food from the Byzantine Empire, the contact with the cities of the southern Pontos was never interrupted, as was not the connection with Constantinople. Among the most important items that evidence this connection, the seal of the archon of the Blattion and the head kommerkiarios belongs. It comes from the period of 739-751. Since the archon of the Blattion was responsible for the production and sale of dyes (in particular purple) and also for the production of high quality (dyed) fabrics, mostly silk, this seal might evidence the trade with silk with the northernmost part of the Empire or beyond. Silk was a very important item in the Byzantine diplomacy and if it was intended as a gift to an ally guarding the northern border (the Khazar khagan?), the obvious and most suitable way how to get to the north led through Cherson.

Thus, Cherson served as the Byzantine northern border outpost and the last possible shelter before the world of the Barbarians. The self-confidence gained in the course of time was not forgotten even when the Byzantine Empire was in troubles. Cherson, separated from the Capital by the sea, could have considered itself as a distant territory, therefore deserving certain level of autonomy. The autonomous tendencies of Cherson were attested in the sources several times, which is a bit confusing. Cherson was revolting against the Byzantine Empire, although being dependent on the regular food-supply from it. On the other hand, the Byzantine Empire desperately needed to retain Cherson within its realm; this notion of the indispensability could have been another source of the self-assurance of the Cherson's inhabitants.

To retain the influence on the Crimean territory, the Byzantine Empire made the agreement about the status of this area with the locally far more powerful Khazars. Cherson then received the status of *condominium*, which meant that both Empires profited from the income derivable from the trade. For Cherson, however, the other presumed condition of the *condominium* agreement might have been more important: no army was allowed to be present in Crimea. The vicinity of Cherson was presumably peaceful most of the time, which meant that favourable conditions for trade also with the inland were preserved. Also this situation was weird: on the one hand, according to the written sources, the inhabitants of Cherson remained hidden behind the city walls because of their fear of the Barbarians, on the other hand, the Barbarians were their allies who protected the trade routes. It is more probable that the Chersonites were on friendly terms with the Khazars most of the time and they lived in a

mutual symbiosis. The inhabitants of Cherson were even not afraid to ask the Khazar khagan for military help, when they were being attacked by the Byzantine army of Justinian II in 711.

Despite the *condominium*, the administration of Cherson was most probably left in the hands of the Byzantines. Given the evidence of seals, Cherson became an *archontia*, led at first by a *kyros*, then by an *archon*. These representatives were appointed by the Emperor but chosen from the members of the Cherson's nobility; in that way, the Chersonites made efforts to be governed by the local government instead of the imperial one. Nonetheless, Byzantium tried hard not to allow Cherson to get loosened from the Byzantine administration. This situation is indicated by the finds of seals, belonging both to the representatives of the local administration and the imperial government. The tendency towards autonomy is felt here again; this never-dying trend seems to be the evergreen of the history of Cherson.

In 840s, a *thema* was established in Crimea. Its creation was caused on the one hand by the appearance of the new Nomadic tribes (the Magyars, the Pechenegs and also the Rus') in the territory of the northern Pontic steppes, on the other hand by the personal experience with the administration of Cherson, made by the imperial official Petronas Kamateros. Moreover, the political situation of the Byzantine Empire was much more stabilized by now and the Emperor had time and resources to take care of his northern outpost. Thus, the *condominium* came to its end and the *thema* was created instead. At that time, the power of the Khazars began to wane slowly, as they were troubled by the other Nomadic tribes mentioned above. For the inhabitants of Cherson, the main difference between the *condominium* and the *thema* lied in the fact that they were governed by the *strategos*, who was not a member of the Cherson's nobility but an imperial official sent from Constantinople together with the imperial military forces. Even such measures did not prevent Cherson from revolting.

In the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Cherson reestablished its prosperity in all respects. Its workshops were producing its goods, its political importance of the northernmost outpost watching the movements of the peoples passing over the northern Black Sea steppes might have even increased with the appearance of the Pechenegs and the Rus'. Cherson also regained its importance as trade centre and the meeting point of the merchants of various origins.

Hard times of Cherson came at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> or at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The archaeological excavations attested a destruction layer in a large area of the city coming from this period. Cherson was apparently struck by a catastrophe that caused its partial collapse

though it is not fully clear what kind of disaster it could have been. Since the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was the time when the Byzantine Empire was solving its inner policy issues with the help of Vladimir, the Prince of the Kievan Rus', the destruction layer of Cherson could be connected with the well-known action of Vladimir. Reportedly, Vladimir conquered Cherson either to make the Byzantine Emperor keep his promise regarding the Vladimir's marriage to the Byzantine princess or to fulfill the part of the treaty, which stated that in the case of a rebellion of Cherson against Byzantium, the ruler of the Rus' would intervene.

In any case, a disaster hit Cherson, which however did not mean its devastation. The archaeological excavations revealed that the city buildings were reconstructed during the 11<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and the city life continued. This revival was most likely possible thanks to the economic strength of Cherson; at that time, the city earned money mainly by exporting the salt. The fish industry, although slowly declining, was still working in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, the days of the greatest glory were already over.

From antiquity, Cherson profited in particular from its location at the border between the Roman and Barbarian worlds and developed naturally into the trade centre. Business and trade played the main role in the economy of Cherson, while farming could have not been maintained and lost its significance – this was also the consequence of the location, leading to the loss of the self-sufficiency regarding basic foodstuff. The importance of the city for the policy of the Empire however forced the central government to supply Cherson with food.

Thus, it seems that primarily the *location* was the main cause of the successful developments of Cherson during the centuries, together with the abilities of the Chersonites to make the maximum profit from the conditions they were living in. Although they had to live in uncertain times, the Chersonites always had not only enough strength to survive, but even enough self-consciousness to develop their city in any possible way. Today, we can only admire the advanced level of life of medieval Cherson.

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