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THE DRISTRA BATTLE (1087)

Abstract: One of the most significant events during the second half of the 11th century is the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos' campaign against the Pechenegs in 1087. The military event ended with a shattering defeat in the vicinity of medieval Drastar. Despite being unsuccessful for Byzantium, this campaign sets the beginning of the end of the Pecheneg threat – an end that comes after the battle of Levounion – April, 29th 1091. The question about where the battle took place remains unanswered. Still no suggestions about the location of the battle have been made. The analysis of the events preceding and following the battle gives extra clarification on where the battle took place and probably this is a territory close to Drastar. It is important to analyse why the Byzantine army suffered such defeat. The reasons are many. There were many mistakes made during the preparation for the campaign and also during its implementation. The Byzantine army set out not well enough prepared; several times during the campaign the Byzantine soldiers scattered in search for fodder and fell into Pecheneg ambushes. Emperor Alexios I Komnenos never listened to the advice of his experienced officers to not cross the Balkan mountain and afterwards did not accept the offer to retreat to Great Preslav and decided to launch an attack against the Pechenegs. The battle itself was unsuccessfully carried out for the Byzantines who in my opinion did not dispose of heavy cavalry and practically had no serious military advantage over the Pechenegs. Of course if we assume that Alexios disposed of heavy armored horse detachments after all, then they were weak in number and could not seriously counteract to the manoeuvres and the numerous light nomadic cavalries. The unexpected appearance of the 36 000 Pechenegs who jumped out of nowhere from an ambush is also disturbing. The moving of such big military formation can hardly remain unnoticed since the Byzantine strategists should both before and during a battle reconnoitre the enemy, its strength, position and manner of battle formation.

Keywords: battle, byzantines, military.

One of the most significant events during the second half of the 11th century is the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus campaign against the Pechenegs in 1087. The military event ended with a shattering defeat in the vicinity of medieval Dristra. Despite being unsuccessful for Byzantium, this campaign sets the beginning of the end of the Pecheneg threat – an end that comes after the battle of Levounion – April, 29th 1091.

The sources about the campaign and the battle in particular are only Byzantine. On the first place is “Alexiad” by Anna Comnena (1083-1148) – daughter of emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118), who describes her father’s

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deeds (Comnena 1928; Комнина 1996). Of great significance among the other sources are the coin hoards. Some questions about the battle can be clarified by comparing the methods of military action described in the Byzantine military treatises from the 10th century (Фока 2005; Кучма 2001; Кучма 2002).

Although many authors have taken notice of the campaign (Dieter 1894; Chalandon 1900; Diaconu 1970, 117–118; Stephenson 2000, 102; Madgearu 2007, 114; Васильевский 1908; Аврамов 1929; Златарски 1994, 190-195; Любарский 1966; Литаврин 1987, 320; Божилов 2004, 158-159; Йотов, Николов 2008), only two scientists describe the last battle. V. Zlatarski makes a short analysis (Златарски 1994, 193-194). A more detailed one is written by J. Birkenmeier in his studies about the development of the Byzantine army during the Comnenian reign (Birkenmeier 2002, 72-74).

Alexius I Comnenus military campaign against the Pechenegs inhabiting the lands between the Balkan mountain and the Danube River took place during the summer of 1087. After the army took a quick march to Dristra the Byzantines failed at their attempts to quickly take possession of the town and Alexius laid down the siege, retreated from the town and set up camp at a small river near the Danube and started considering another eventual attack on the Pechenegs (Comnena 1928, 172-173).

Two of the emperor's military commanders George Palaeologus and Gregory Mavrocatalon advised the emperor to take the army and to retreat to Great Preslav where they would be well covered and will be able to attack the Pechenegs. The two generals said that the Byzantines should retreat in full battle armaments and formation and thus the Pechenegs would not dare attack them (Comnena 1928, 173). Later on Anna Comnena places Great Preslav at the Danube. Most writers think that Anna Comnena confuses Great Preslav with Preslavets at the Danube. This conclusion is perfectly logical but still it is interesting what advice the adherents of Gregory Mavrocatalon give: „...and harass the Scythians by daily skirmishes, we shall be punishing them the whole time and not allowing them to come out of their own camp at all either to forage or to fetch any other necessaries” (Comnena 1928, 174).

A slight contradiction appears here. How could the Byzantines possibly attack the Pechenegs located in or around Drastar every day when the distance between Great Preslav and Drastar is over 100 kilometers (Йотов, Николов 2008). The Romanian scientist P. Nasturel localizes Preslavets at the Danube by the fortress Păcuiul lui Soare, and according to P. Diaconu Anna Comnena was speaking about Great Preslav – the capital of The First Bulgarian Kingdom (Nasturel 1965, 17-36; Diaconu 1965, 50-53). On the contrary, J. Birkenmeier interprets the historical source freely by saying that the emperor turned south to Great Preslav where the main Pecheneg army had set up camp (Birkenmeier 2002, 72; Йотов, Николов 2008).

The emperor, however, driven by the young sons of the former emperor Roman IV Diogenes (Nicephorus and Leo), and also as Anna Komnena states that he naturally strove for battles, he rejected the advice of those who were restraining him from battle and decided to take field (Comnena 1928, 174; Златарски 1994, 193-194). Meanwhile he entrusted the royal tent and the whole military transport to George Kucomit and sent him to Vetrin. He ordered the army to not light a fire in the evening and “to keep the horses ready and watch till sunrise” (Comnena 1928, 174). It is thought that Vetrin is the fortress close to today’s village Vetren, on the bank of the Danube River, west from Dristra. Another thesis is that Vetren should be identified with ancient Marcianopolis next to Devnya (Златарски 1994, 193-194; Атанасов, Йорданов 1994).

On the next morning Alexius built the phalanxes in battle formation and galloping performed a military inspection (Comnena 1928, 174). For their part, the Pechenegs, even though they were not familiar with the classic military art, as Anna Comnena notes: “But the Scythians too had arranged a plan of battle, for the science of warfare and of ordering troops is inbred in them; they set ambushes and connected their ranks in close-ordered array, and built towers, as it were, of their covered wagons, and advanced against the Emperor in squadrons, and hurled missiles from afar” (Comnena 1928, 174)

Despite being insufficient, Anna Comnena’s writings about the formation of the army allow us to compare the Byzantine battle behavior with examples of Byzantine military treatise (fig.1).

In the crucial battle the army was drawn up as phalanx when the emperor was standing in the center of the battle array, together with his brother Adrian who was commanding the “Latins”. The left flank was under the command of the Caesar Nicephorus Melissenus, and the right one by Kastamonites and Tatikius. It is still unclear what the role of the allies „sauromatians” (in this case – Ouzes) Ouza and Karadja was. The text allows us to infer that in the middle of the battle array were most probably located the infantrymen carrying heavy armor, called by Anna Comnena „hoplites” and also “Latins” = Franks (Comnena 1928, 174; Birkenmeier 2002, 72-73).

In a later source again in a battle with the Pechenegs emperor John II Comnenos (1118-1143) ordered his axemen (who were British) to step up to the carts and break them (Cinnamus 1836, 8). Overcoming this Pecheneg military approach (the carts built in a circle) by the cavalry cannot be accomplished independently – a heavy armored infantry also needs to take part (Birkenmeier 2002, 72).

The described military approach is almost the same as the one in the battle at Dristra – the actions of the “Latins” under the command of the emperor’s brother were the following: „And Adrian the Emperor's brother, who had been entrusted with command over the Latins, seeing that the Scythians' onset was proving irresistible, gave his horse his head and charged right up to the wagons and after

fighting magnificently returned with only seven comrades, all the rest had been either slain or captured by the Scythians.” (Comnena 1928, 175)

J. Birkenmeier makes the following interesting ratiocination: there were both infantry and cavalry carrying out combined operations along the Byzantine battle formation – something completely opposite to the usual way of forming the Byzantine army and namely that is cavalry by the flanks and infantry in the center (J. Birkenmeier 2002, 73).

The emperor’s personal Guards (most of them were most probably Varangians, commanded by the Varangian’s Guard leader – Nambites) were located where he was, which is the center of the battle array (Comnena 1928, 175).

There were horse detachments placed most probably at the two wings where Nicephorus Melissenus, Kastamonites, Tatikius and the Ouzes allies were located. For good reasons we can say that the mentioned in the text „sauromatians” = Ouzes (Златарски 1994, 193) were cavalry with light armor, whose functions were more likely secondary (Birkenmeier 2002, 73). At the left and the right wing was also located cavalry with light armor which cannot be defined as kataphraktos (i.e. heavy-armored cavalry). On one hand the reason for this is that during the preparation for the campaign to Dristra Alexius I Comnenus did not have time to man the army with heavy cavalry – the pronoiia system was not developed well enough and also according to scientists studying the Byzantines military skills kataphraktos disappear as a military unit on the Balkans in the beginning of the 11th century (Фока 2005, 67, note № 80).

According to the description in “Alexiad” the Pecheneg army on its part consisted of bow shooters, infantry (“three Scythian foot-soldiers” attacked Alexios), light cavalry, carts used for setting up temporary camps where the Pechenegs were taking refuge together with their wives and children (Comnena 1928, 174-175).

The battle lasted during the whole day. Both sides suffered many casualties. As Anna Komnena tells, the battle was bitter and still not decided when 36 000 Pechenegs (a number most likely too exaggerated) suddenly appeared which determined the end of the battle (Comnena 1928, 175; Златарски, 194). The Byzantine army retreated in chaotic rout: „...Seeing the uncontrolled flight of the troops (for the lines had long since been broken up, as all fled promiscuously), the Protostrator said...” (Comnena 1928, 175-176). Even the life of the emperor whose feats are described in details by Anna Komnena was at risk (Comnena 1928, 175-177).

During the night Alexios very quickly reached Goloe. On the next day the emperor went to Beroe where he settled intending to redeem the captives. The Pecheneg leaders wanted to kill them but the people who took part in the summoned meeting wanted to liberate them for a ransom. The emperor, after receiving enough money, managed to free the captives (Comnena 1928, 177-178).

The question about where the battle took place remains unanswered. Still no suggestions about the location of the battle have been made. The only one is J. Birkenmeier's, who claims several times, that the battle occurred at Great Preslav (Birkenmeier 2002, 46, 72, 81).

From the narrative and the archaeological sources can certainly be assumed that the last battle between the Byzantine army and the Pechenegs took place in the territories surrounding the medieval Dristra.

Firstly, because deserting the region of Dristra and the Danube territories by the Byzantine army has not been described in "Alexiad". The following was said: „But the Emperor, hitting upon the right plan, abandoned the siege of the citadels (for it was an arduous and lengthy task), left the town (i.e Dristra) and entrenched himself near a stream, not far from the Ister, and deliberated whether it would be wise to attack the Scythians" (Comnena 1928, 173).

When the Byzantine military commanders advised the emperor how to continue the campaign after the siege of Dristra, Alexius did not accept the advices of the trained officers to retreat to Great Preslav and was convinced by the young officers to take field: "During the bandying of arguments the two young sons of Diogenes, Nicephorus and Leo, who were inexperienced in the difficulties of warfare, slipped off their horses and took off their bridles, gave them a slap and drove them into a field of millet with the remark, "Do not be afraid, Emperor, we will cut them to pieces with our swords." The Emperor who was very adventurous and liked to be the first to start a battle, did not take into consideration the arguments of those who protested against fighting..." (Comnena 1928, 174).

The other important piece of information is about the return of the Pecheneg leader Tatus who left to try to draw the Cumans in as allies: „At that time Tatus returned to the Ister with the Coumans he had won over; directly they saw the amount of booty, and of captives..." (Comnena 1928, 178). Again the described region is around the Danube River.

The analysis of the events preceding the battle gives extra clarification on where the battle took place and maybe this is the location of the temporary Byzantine camps around Dristra during the town's siege.

Not one attempt has been made to clarify the topography of the biggest on the lower Danube town during the Middle Ages – Dristra. Making a detailed analysis of some questions in this respect P. Georgiev locates Alexius Comnenus' camp on the ancient vicus Durostorum's place (Георгиев, 70-71) which is mentioned in "Alexiad". Here we can add one more reason. In the military treatise „De castrametatione" - dated around the end of the 10th century (as in other tactics before that) again dedicated mainly to the questions about the structure of the field camp – is mentioned that such should not be organized close to mountain or forest, but the camp should be organized on the hard passing river places, which could guarantee safety on one of the camp's sides (Кучма 2002, 285-286, 323). Therefore, thus the Byzantine camp was set up by a river Vichina = Kamchia, after

the crossing of the Balkan mountain (Comnena 1928, 172; Златарски 1994, 192). The distance indicated by Anna Komnena is 24 stades from the Dristra fortress (Comnena 1928, 172), i.e. distance of about 4.5 km, corresponds entirely to Alexios' camp location where the ancient vicus was (Георгиев 2002, 70).

The most important information is considered to the Alexius' flight to Goloe, and to this occasion the citizens of Constantinople would say ironically: „From Dristra to Goloe is a fine feat even for an unwounded man, Comnenus” (Comnena 1928, 177). The described region where the Alexius' flight begun is Dristra which gives more reasons to accept, that the battle place was near to the medieval Dristra.

The coin hoards are other source of information. There are many coin hoards, which could be connected to the Alexius I Comnenus military campaign to Dristra in 1087 (Пенчев 1990; Атанасов, Йорданов 1994; Йотов, Николов 2008). Here is important to be mentioned only the hoards, which can be connected to the retreat of the Byzantine army after the defeat (fig. 2).

Three of the hoards consist of gold coins (nomismes). The first one was founded near to the village of Prof. Ishirkovo (Jordanov 1987, 207; Custurea 2000, 163; Mănucu-Adameşteanu 2001, 163; Герасимов 1966, 215; Йорданов 1981, 64; Георгиева, Бъчваров 1994, 5; Йотов, Николов 2008), which is located 15 km southwest from Silistra town. The other gold coin hoard was found in the village of Gurgendjik, present day Поп Кралево (Йорданов 1981; Jordanov 1987, 207; Mănucu-Adameşteanu 2001, 162; ИБАД, II - 1912, 281; Йотов, Николов 2008). The village is located 15 km southeast from Silistra town, and 15 km eastern from Prof. Ishirkovo village. Another coin hoard was found in the village of Kirkovo, Shumen district (Йорданов 1981, 64; Йотов, Николов 2008).

There are also some gold coin hoards, which are keeping in private collections. The hoards are usually found along the old roads, district Silistra. They consist of “stamenon nomismes” and “electron nomismes” to Constantine IX Monomachus, Romanus IV Diogenes, Michael VII Ducas, Alexius I Comnenus. Their number usually is from about 6, 12, 36, 40 coins. Close to the hoards were not found other archaeological artifacts – pottery, weapons and equipment (Йотов, Николов 2008).

The coins in these hoards, especially the Alexius I Comnenus coins, are preserved very well, which show that they were given at the same time and they were not in money circulation. It is not known such coin hoards to be found in medieval villages and cities. It is possible, these coin hoards to be soldier salaries.

The next group of coin hoards is of bronze and anonym follises. Very important are four coin hoards, which are found in municipality of Dulovo, Silistra district (Йотов, Николов 2008). Other coin hoard is from the region of the Balkan mountain passes – Varbishki pass or Rishki pass (Yotov 2004, 445-460; Йотов, Николов 2008).

The coin hoards show the route of retreat and flight of the Byzantine army. The shown by the coin hoards route is the same, described in “Alexiad” emperor's

flight to Goloe and Beroe. This route probably follows the old main road Dristra - Pliska (for the medieval road Pliska- Dristra see: Рашев 1988, 117-132), which was also used by the Byzantine army during the first part of the campaign. According to the coin hoards could be accepted, that the place of battle was north of these coin findings, namely the territories around medieval Dristra.

It is important to analyse why the Byzantine army suffered such defeat. The reasons are many. There were many mistakes made during the preparation for the campaign and also during its implementation. The Byzantine army set out not well enough prepared; several times during the campaign the Byzantine soldiers scattered in search for fodder and fell into Pecheneg ambushes (Comnena 1928, 172). Emperor Alexius I Comnenus never listened to the advice of his experienced officers to not cross the Balkan mountain and afterwards did not accept the offer to retreat to Great Preslav and decided to launch an attack against the Pechenegs.

The battle itself was unsuccessfully carried out for the Byzantines who in my opinion did not dispose of heavy cavalry and practically had no serious military advantage over the Pechenegs. Of course if we assume that Alexius disposed of heavy armored horse detachments after all, then they were weak in number and could not seriously counteract to the manoeuvres and the numerous light nomadic cavalries.

The Byzantines had not light infantry – archers, which were destroyed during a Pecheneg raid against one of the temporary Byzantine camps around Dristra (Comnena 1928, 172). According to the Byzantine military treatise, the light infantry included mainly archers (Фока 2005, 48, see note № 30).

The unexpected appearance of the 36 000 Pechenegs who jumped out of nowhere from an ambush is also disturbing. The moving of such big military formation can hardly remain unnoticed since the Byzantine strategists should both before and during a battle reconnoitre the enemy, its strength, position and manner of battle formation (Кучма 2001, 375, 381).

It could be presumed, that in the Dristra battle was finally destroyed the “classical” Varangian guard. After the Alexius I Comnenus military campaign to Dristra in 1087, in “Alexiad” the Varangian corpus as military unit is not more mentioned (Комнина 1996, 685). The ethnonym “Varangian” is also not more used in Byzantine narrative sources in 12th century, instead of that is used the ethnonym “British”.

The defeat of the Byzantines at Dristra is one of the most significant military events at the lower Danube at the end of the 11th century. It should not be forgotten that the restoration (which is the most discussed) of the empire's shaky positions barely happened after the battle of Levounion (1091). However, the success there is mainly due to another nomadic army – the cuman one.

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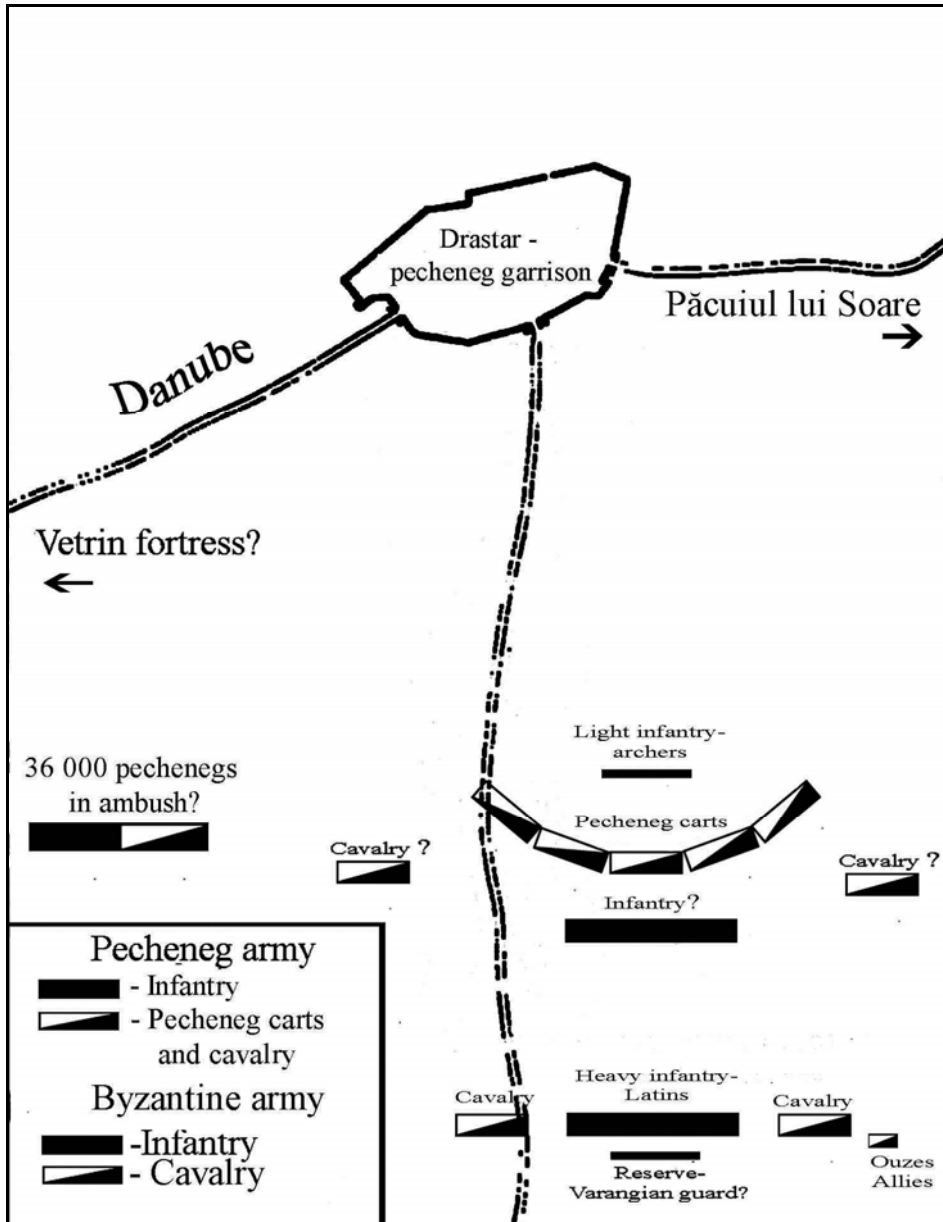


Fig. 1: The Dristra battle (1087) map.

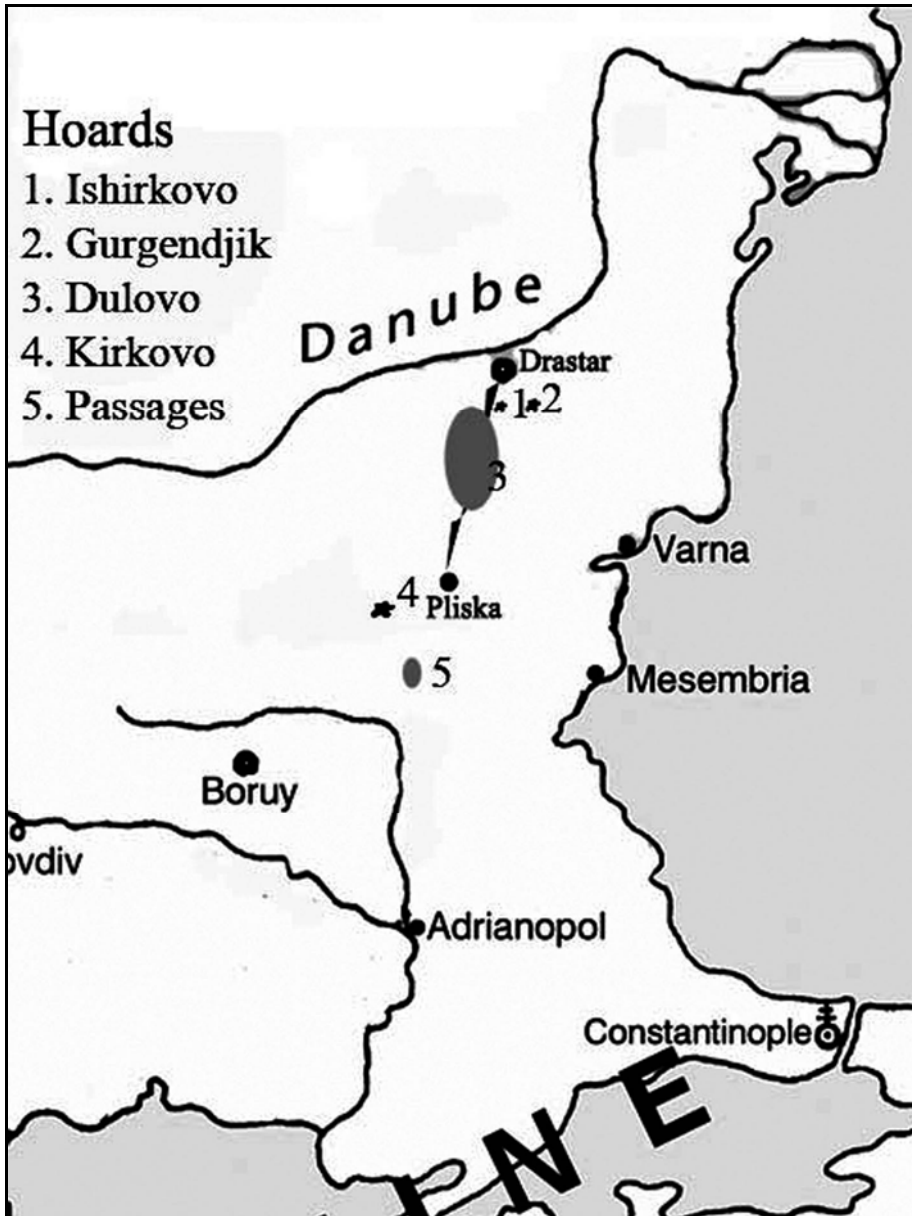


Fig. 2: Coin hoards which could be connected to retreat of the Byzantine army.

