



Summary :

The theme of Cherson was founded around 840, in order to become a stronghold of the Byzantine Empire at the Taurian peninsula. Contrary to other Byzantine themes, it kept a relative autonomy in relation to the central authority. Initially its territories were confined to the SW Crimea, but at the beginnings of the 11th century the Byzantine rule temporarily expanded eastwards. In the 13th century a part of the theme's territories passed under the control of the Empire of Trebizond.

Other Names

Klimata / theme of Klimata

Geographical Location

Crimea promontory, Ukraine

Historical Region

Tauric Chersonesus

Geographical Coordinates

Byzantine empire

1. The establishment of the theme of Cherson

From the end of the 7th century until the first decades of the 9th century, the city of [Cherson](#) and the neighbouring territories (known by the term "klimata")¹ were at loose terms with Constantinople. Typically they constituted part of the Byzantine Empire, but what actually prevailed was a regime of relative autonomy, and power at various cities under Byzantine control was in the hands of local notables. For example, the highest authority at the city of Cherson was the [proteuon](#) and the so-called [patres civitatis](#) who were locally elected, although they were usually receiving imperial titles.²

The enrollment of Cherson and of SW [Crimea](#) into the system of the [theme organization](#) at Byzantium was the result of a series of events starting in 839,³ when the [Khazars](#), old allies of Byzantium, sent an embassy to Constantinople, asking Emperor Theophilus (829-842) to help them build a [fortress](#) upon the lower course of the river Don, aiming to prevent the invasions of the [Rus'](#).⁴ Theophilus responded to the appeal by sending a group of mechanics under the [spatharokandidatos](#) Petronas Kamateros. After the successful conclusion of the mission, the officer at head reported to the emperor that it would be in the Empire's best interests to put Cherson (through which the mission had passed) and its region under the direct administration of Byzantium. Agreeing with the estimations of his envoy, Theophilus decided a little later (around 840)⁵ to organize Cherson and the adjacent territories to a theme; Petronas Kamateros was appointed first [strategos](#) there, since we was already acquainted with the issues of the region.⁶

As it appears from certain written sources and some sigillographic evidence, the original name of the new administrative district was "theme of Klimata".⁷ However, since the capital of the theme and the most important city of the region was Cherson, soon enough the name "theme of Cherson" was officially established, already by 860, if not earlier.⁸

2. The organization of the theme of Cherson

We have little information as regards the size of the territories and the internal organization of the new theme. Obviously, the men of the Byzantine administration were residing at the cities of southern Crimea and they were controlling the nearby regions, the so-called "klimata". From a seal dated at the end of the 10th or the beginnings of the 11th century we are informed about the existence of a [tourmarches](#) Gothias.⁹ This testimony leads to the conclusion that the organization of the theme of Cherson did not differ from that of other Byzantine themes. In addition, it reveals that at least since the beginnings of the 11th century, if not earlier, the Byzantine dominion had expanded to the SW Crimea. Besides the local notables and the military office-holders of the theme, within the region is attested (mainly from sigillographic evidence) the existence of officers of the financial administration, the so-called [kommerkiarioi](#).¹⁰

It is worth mentioning, however, that, besides the fact that power was exercised thereafter by a military commander appointed from Constantinople, and besides the presence of officers of the central administration at Cherson, the cities of the theme preserved at a high degree their autonomy, judging from the presence of local notables at Cherson after 840,¹¹ as well as from the continuance of the function of the [city mint](#).¹² From the testimony of [Constantine Porphyrogenetos](#) (middle of 10th c.) we are informed that during that period the central administration paid to the local authorities of Cherson an annual grant of 10 liters of gold and two more liters as [paktion](#). The danger of rebellion was always visible, as we know that happened around 896-897, when the inhabitants of Cherson revolted and murdered [strategos](#) Symeon. Constantine Porphyrogenetos in his *De Administrando imperii* cited a series of measures that must be taken in such an occasion and advised the [strategos](#) of the theme to cut off the payment of the annual granting, to abandon Cherson and to settle at some of the other cities of the theme.¹³

3. The strategic role of the theme of Cherson (9th – 10th c.)

In spite of the enrollment of Cherson and other cities of Crimea into the system of theme organization of Byzantium, the Byzantine military presence in the region was not a strong one: from the attestation of the sources it appears that the forces of the theme were mainly manned by locally recruited men, who were under the control of the local notables, that means a kind of state guard.¹⁴ In other words, the orientation of the theme was clearly defensive, based on the fortified cities of the region, as it appears from the fact that from the middle of the 9th century and thereafter the [fortresses of Cherson](#) were systematically reinforced. In addition, with the treaties of the years 944 and 971 the Rus' took the responsibility not to interfere in the theme of Cherson and to protect it against the invasions of the [Bulgarians](#) of Volga river.¹⁵

Since Byzantium could not rely on its military force in the region of Crimea, the strategic role of Cherson became even more important, as Constantine Porphyrogenetos recognize in many parts of his work. The theme of Cherson essentially formed a stronghold of the Byzantine power and the center of the diplomatic activity of Constantinople in relation to the nations of the region. Its creation was bound to the diplomatic contacts with the Khazars, whereas in the 10th c., after the collapse of the state of the latter ones, their place was taken by the [Pechenegs](#) and the Rus'.¹⁶ Quite characteristic for the strategic importance of the theme was the activity of the local generals ([strategoï](#)) within the framework of the wars against the Bulgarians: in 914 the general of Cherson John Bogas, as the representative of Constantinople, made an alliance with the Pechenegs against the Bulgarians, whereas around 967 Kalokyres Delphinus, probably the son of a local notable of Cherson, was sent for the same reason to a diplomatic mission towards the Rus'. The role of Cherson was important as well during the negotiations with the Rus' under Basil II that finally led to the [conversion](#) of the former ones to Christianity around 988.

4. The theme of Cherson from the 11th to the 13th c.

The occupation of Cherson by the Rus' in 988, although temporary, caused the partial dissolution of the theme. Nevertheless, the region recovered soon enough, judging from the archaeological evidence: at the end of the 10th or the beginnings of the 11th century new walls were constructed at the harbor of Cherson,¹⁷ whereas an inscription of 1059 witness the renovation of the gateways of the fortified circuit and of the governor's house of the city. The inscription is very important for another reason as well: it mentions the [strategos](#) of Cherson and [Sougdaia](#), showing that in the middle of the 11th century the dominion of the theme had been expanded eastwards.¹⁸ We do not know with any certainty the time of the annexation of the SW Crimea (Sougdaia and adjacent territories), but it is considered probable that it was an outcome of the defeat of the Khazars by the Byzantines in 1016. A few years later it seems that changes occurred in the organization of theme, since around 1066 a Russian chronicle mentions the military commander of the city as the one bearing the title of [katepano](#).¹⁹ At the end of the 11th century the eastern provinces of the theme passed under the control of the [Cumans](#). During the same period the fortifications of the harbor of Cherson were renovated.

About the history of the theme of Cherson in the 12th century we know almost nothing. From the silence of the sources we draw the conclusion that there were no important changes in its structure and strategic



role. The last report in a Byzantine source about the theme of Cherson and the old Byzantine territories of Crimea is related to the attack of the Seljuks around 1222 and indicates that after 1204 the region of the old theme of Cherson belonged into the sphere of influence of the Empire of Trebizond.²⁰

- 1. For the meaning of the term "klimata" in relation to the regions of SW Crimea, see Zuckerman, C., "Two notes on the early history of the thema of Cherson", Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 21 (1997), pp. 217-220.
2. Moravcsik Gy. - Jenkins R. J. H. (ed.), Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio...
3. The sources date the embassy of Khazars a year after the ascension of John Grammatikos to the patriarchal throne...
4. Constantine Porphyrogenetos gives an account of the events in relation to the embassy of Khazars and the construction of the fortress of Sarkel...
5. Treadgold W. T., The Byzantine Revival 780-842 (Stanford 1988), pp. 313-317 dates the embassy of Khazars...
6. Bekker I. (ed.), Theophanes Continuatus (Bonn 1838) p. 123, 14-124, 3.
7. The first mention of the theme of Klimata is on a list of the dioceses of the Empire dated around 842...
8. This opinion had been supported by Zuckerman C., "Two notes on the early history of the thema of Cherson"...
9. Aleksénko, N. A., "Un tourmarque de Gothie sur un sceau inédit de Cherson", Revue des Études Byzantines 54 (1996), pp. 271-275.
10. Alekseyenko, M., "La douane du thème de Cherson au IXe et au Xe siècle: les sceaux des commerciaires"...
11. Nesbitt, J. W. - Oikonomides, N., Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks...
12. The autonomous issues of the local mint are dated from around 860 (reign of Michael III) until the reign of Basil II...
13. Moravcsik Gy. - Jenkins R. J. H. (ed.), Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio...
14. Treadgold W. T., The Byzantine Revival 780-842 (Stanford 1988), pp. 315-317, without being based on any contemporary source...
15. Smedley, J., "Archaeology and the History of Cherson: A Survey of Some Results and Problems", Αρχαίολογία 35 (1978)...
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18. Latyšev, V., Sbornik grečeskich nadpisej christianskich vremen iz Južnoj Rossii (St. Petersburg 1896), no. 8.
19. Minns, H. E., Scythians and Greeks (Cambridge 1913), p. 539. Cf. Honigmann, E., "Studies in Slavic Church History", Byzantion 17 (1944-1945)...
20. Joseph Lazaropoulos, Ἐπι σύννομης τῶν τοῦ ἁγίου θωαμάτων μερικῆ ἐκ τῶν πλείστον, Papadopoulos-Kerameus A. (ed.), Fontes Historiae Imperii Trapezuntini 1 (Amsterdam 1965), pp. 117, 10-118, 3.

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Glossary :

	katapano (from "epano", "above") Governor of a katapania. Title that from the end of the 10th century characterized the commanders of large provinces as Italy or Mesopotamia and from the 11th century, it was used also in the regions of Bulgaria, Antioch etc.
	kommerkiarios (commerciarius) An official of the fiscal service in charge of the levying of the tax called commercion (δέκτριον, 10%), that was imposed over the portage and the selling of articles. The jurisdiction of each commerciarus was exercised either over specific urban centers with vivid commercial activity or over particular widespread territories of the empire. Since the official had been appointed by the emperor himself he used to be called "royal commerciarus". In the Late Byzantine era the commerciarus acted also as an individual entrepreneur who used to merchandise silk for his own interest.
	pakton From lat. <i>pactum</i> . A term of Byzantine diplomacy, designating the treaty between two states or peoples, and also the sum of money that was paid as tribute.
	pater civitatis (lat., mean. the Father of the City). An office dating to the Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine years. It was an office of local civil administration and designates a magistrate whose responsibility was the restoration and maintenance of the city.
	proteuon, protos Known in the West already in Antiquity (lat. <i>principalis</i>), the title designated local city officials. In the East it emerges in the late 3rd C. and it disappears from the sources by the early 7th C. It was ascribed to the <i>curiales</i> of the cities.
	spatharokandidatos A lesser title in the Byzantine court hierarchy. The title first emerges in 645 and probably designates the <i>kandidatoi</i> who were also granted the title of <i>spatharios</i> .
	strategos ("general") During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.
	tourmarch Civilian and military commander of a <i>tourma</i> , subdivision of a <i>theme</i> .

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Quotations

A Byzantine writer of the 10th century describes the status of Cherson before the creation of the theme:

Ἡ δὲ Χερσῶν τὸ παλαιὸν οὐκ ἦν εἰς ὄνομα θέματος, οὐδὲ ἐν μητροπόλεως σχήματι· ἀλλ' οἱ τοῦ Βοσπόρου κρατοῦντες ἐκράτουν καὶ Χερσῶνας αὐτῆς καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν κλιμάτων, ὥστε καὶ βασιλεὺς τοὺς ἐν τῷ Βοσπόρῳ κατοικοῦντας λέγειται.

Pertusi, A. (ed.), *Constantino Porfirogenito, De Thematibus* (Studi e Testi 160, Città del Vaticano 1952), 98.1-4.

The establishment of the theme of Cherson in the 9th century, as it is described by a later Byzantine chronographer:

ἐδίδου δὲ καὶ περὶ τοῦ Χερσῶνος τῷ βασιλεὶ γνῶμην τε καὶ βουλὴν, οἷς εἰς πείραν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἦλθεν καὶ τῶν τόπων ὁμοί, καὶ «οὐκ ἄλλως ἀρξείς τῆς χώρας καὶ τῶν τόπων ὁλοσχερῶς ἢ στρατηγὸν προχειρισμένον ἴδιον, ἀλλ' οὐ τοῖς ἐκείνων ἀρχουσί τε καὶ πρωτεύουσι καταπιστευτῶν σαυτὸν». οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδ' ἡμέτερός πω τῆς ἐκείνων προνοούμενος ἐξαπεστέλλετο στρατηγός, ἀλλ' ὁ λεγόμενος πρωτεύων μετὰ καὶ τῶν πατέρων τῆς πόλεως τὰ πάντα ἦν διοικῶν. ἐπὶ τούτῳ ὁ βασιλεὺς Θεόφιλος οὐκ ἄλλον ἀλλὰ τὸν εἰρημένον Πετρῶναν, ὡς ἐμπειρὸν κρίνας τοῦ τόπου, πρωτοσπαθαρίον τε ἐτίμησεν καὶ στρατηγὸν ἐξαπέστειλεν, τὸν τε πρωτεύοντα καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους θεσπίσας ὑπέκρινε ἀνευδοιάτως αὐτῷ· ἐξ ὅτου περ καὶ μέχρι ἡμῶν ἐκράτησεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐντευθεν εἰς Χερσῶνα προβάλλεσθαι στρατηγούς.

Bekker, I. (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (Bonn 1838), 123.14-124.3.

Revolt of the inhabitants of the theme of Cherson around 896-897:

ἐπὶ τούτου ἐσφαζαν καὶ ἐν Χερσῶνι οἱ τοῦ κάστρου τὸν στρατηγὸν αὐτῶν Συμεῶνα, τὸν υἱὸν Ἰωνᾶ.

Wahlgren, S. (ed.), *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 44/1, Berlin – New York 2006), 277.138-139.

Inscription of April 1059 which dedicated Leo Aliates, *strategos* of Cherson and Sougdaia:

+Εγένοντο αἱ πόρται τοῦ πραιτωρίου σιδηραῖ, ἐνεκαινίσθησαν καὶ αἱ λοιπαὶ τοῦ κάστρου ἐπὶ Ἰσაკίου μεγάλου βασιλέ(ως) καὶ αὐτοκράτορ(ος)· Ῥωμαί(ων) τοῦ Κομνηνοῦ κ(αί) Αικατερίνης τῆς εὐσεβεστάτης Ἀγούστης διὰ Λέοντ(ος) π(ατ)ρ(ικ)οῦ κ(αί) στρατηγ(οῦ) Χερσῶνον(ος) κ(αί) Σουγδ(αί)α(ς) τοῦ Ἀλιάτ(ου), μ(η)ν(ος) Ἀπρ(ι)οῦ, ινδ(ικτιώνω)ς ιβ', ἐτ(ος), ϞϞξζ+

Latyšev, V. (ed.), *Sbornik grečeskich nadpisej christianskich vremen iz Južnoj Rossii* (St. Petersburg 1896), no. 8, 1-8.

Later writer describes the administrative subjugation of part of the former theme of Cherson to the Empire of Trepizond in 1222:

ναὺς τις πεφορτισμένη μετὰ τῶν δημοσιακῶν τελεσμάτων τῆς Χερσῶνος καὶ τῶν ἐκείσε κλιμάτων Γοτθίας καὶ δημοσιακοῦ ἀρχοντος Ἀλεξίου τοῦ Πακτιάρη καὶ ἀρχόντων τινῶν Χερσονησιῶν, ἐρχομένη ἐνταῦθα συγκομίσει τῷ βασιλεὶ Γίδῳ τὰ ἐπέτεια τέλη, κυμαινομένης τῆς θαλάττης, εἰς Σινώπην προσώκειλε· καὶ ὁ ῥηθεὶς δὲ Ῥαΐσης τὸ πλοῖον τοῦτο καὶ τὰ χροῖματα καὶ τοὺς ἐντός ἀπαντας σὺν τοῖς ναύταις καταπορήσας ἀφέιλε, καὶ κατάφρακτα μετὰ ταῦτα πλοῖα κατὰ Χερσῶνος ἀπέστειλε καὶ καθείλον τὰς χώρας αὐτῆς ἄκρω. τοῦτο μαθόντων τῶν Τραπεζουνησιῶν, ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς συμφροδῶν τῶν Βαρθάρων καὶ τῶν συνθηκῶν τοῦ σουλτάνου τὴν κατάλυσιν, ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ ὁ τῆς Σινώπης ἀρχὼν τοιαύτην ἐπήγαγεν. ὅθεν καὶ στόλον ἀγείρουσι κατὰ Σινώπης καὶ στέλλουσι ἐκεῖ πανοπλίαν, καὶ εὐθέως εἰς Κάφρουσαν προσωομίσθησαν καὶ ἐλήσαντο τὰς αὐτόθι χώρας ἀπάσας, αἱ παρῆκιντο ἀχρὶ καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐμπορίου Σινώπης. καὶ αὐτὰς δὲ τὰς ναῦς, ἅς ἐν τῷ λιμένι εἶδον, εἶλον καὶ πολλοὺς ἀπέκτειναν ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἠχμαλώτισαν. οἱ δὲ γε τούτους προσήκοντες καὶ οἱ τῶν πλοίων ναυηγοὶ ἐπανεστῆσαν τῷ Ῥαΐσῃ καὶ λειδοφορὸν γλώτταν ἠκόνθησαν κατ' αὐτοῦ. στέλλει τίνων τῶν τριηράρχων μὴ μελήσας ὁ Ῥαΐσης πρόσβειε διαλλαγήναι ζητῶν. καὶ μετὰ πολλὰ τὸν Πακτιάρη καὶ τὸ Σέριον, τὴν ναὺν ἐκείνην, μετὰ τῶν χρημάτων εἰς ἀχμαλώτους μόνους ἀμείψαντες οἱ τριηράρχαι οἰκαδὲ ἐπανεῖσαν χαίροντες μετὰ πολλῶν χρημάτων. ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἐκ τῶν κλιμάτων Χερσῶνος ἐκείνοι ἐλήσαντο, οὗτοι καὶ ταῦτα ἐκομίσαντο.

Joseph Lazaropoulos, *Ετι σύνοψις των του αγίου θαυμάτων μερική εκ των πλείστων*, Papadopoulos-Kerameus, A. (ed.), *Fontes Historiae Imperii Trapezuntini 1* (Amsterdam 1965), 117.10-118.3.

Chronological Table

Around 840: Annexation of Cherson and the adjacent territories to the system of the theme organization of Byzantium: Creation of the theme of Klimata

Around 860: Change of name from theme of Klimata to theme of Cherson

Around 896-897: Revolt of the inhabitants of Cherson. Assassination of *strategos* Symeon

914: *Strategos* of Cherson John Bogas as representative of Constantinople, made an alliance with the Pechenegs against the Bulgarians

Around 967: Kalokyres Delphinias, probably the son of a local notable of Cherson, was sent to a diplomatic mission towards the Rus'

988-989: Vladimir, prince of the Rus' of Kiev, captured, temporarily, Cherson and its region

End of 10th – beginnings of 11th c.: Gradual restoration of the Byzantine power upon the theme of Cherson. Construction of new fortifications

Between 1016-1059: Expansion of the lands of the theme of Cherson eastwards after the defeat of the Khazars. Temporary annexation of Sougdaia and of the adjacent territories.

Around 1066: Reference to the katepano of Cherson

End of 11th c.: Loss of the eastern regions of the theme, which passed under the control of the Cumans. Renovation of the fortifications of Cherson.

After 1204: The region of the theme of Cherson passed under the control of the Empire of Trepizond