

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE PECHENECS – Social Structure

OVERVIEW

As in many tribal societies, among the Pechenegs the status of a tribe depended on its success in wars which were the result of either a competition for pasturelands or efforts to control access to trade routes. For the Pechenegs, looking for good pasturelands for their herds was a natural pursuit since they were unfamiliar with agriculture.

The political structure of the Pechenegs was clan-based. The Pechenegs were organized as a compound chiefdom. The Pecheneg tribes consisted of eight familial clans ruled by supreme chiefs. The eight clans were divided into forty sub-clans, each with a lesser chief ruling it.

In Pecheneg society power did not lay in one family's hands. The most prestigious and powerful family lines were equally divided between two major Pecheneg clans, the Kuertsitsur in the east, and the Havuksingila in the west.

Pecheneg society was egalitarian. The rulers were not succeeded by their sons or brothers, rather they were succeeded by their cousins whose selection was contingent on their success on the battlefield. Anyone of the military class who was successful in war could potentially rise to power.

The Pechenegs' society was comprised of two groups: the ruling stratum and the commoners. Slavery was not customary among the Pechenegs.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Pechenegs were a basically egalitarian society. The social differences among its members relatively minor, and all the chiefs had a similar level of power. This meant that the consent of almost all free members was needed when making a decision that would affect the entire community.

The social organization of the Pechenegs had large and small units, each with their own leaders. The position of a chieftain (Mihtar) was held by collateral branches of the tribe, rather than being held by only one branch. As a result, power remained with some part of the tribe and could not be legitimately taken by an outside tribe.

The Pechenegs had a hierarchy of tribes. The Pecheneg tribes consisted of eight clans headed by grand chiefs, which in turn were subdivided into forty clan groupings each ruled by a lesser chief.

The Pecheneg nobles *the Kangars* (Kaggars) belonged to and represented three tribes: the labdierti, Kouartzitzour and Chabouxyngyla. These local Pecheneg elites became part of the nobility over time. The clans that these nobles belonged to were closely linked to the ruling clan and held important positions within the political structures of the steppe empires.

In addition, in the 10th century permanent military retinues grouped around the tribal began to take shape.

Below the nobility, the Pecheneg social structure also included herders. The Pecheneg economy was heavily reliant on extensive herding, and animal husbandry was a natural way of life in the environment of the Black Sea steppe.

Craftsmen, primarily silversmiths and, to a lesser extent goldsmiths, were also a part of the Pechenegs' social strata.

The nomadic Pechenegs and the settled populations did not mix, but lived side by side. As a result of pressure from the nomadic herders, the agriculturalists sought safety by taking up residence in regions that were forested or had more difficult terrain.

Discussion/Question

1. What were the advantages of the Pechenegs' structure of government? What were the disadvantages?
2. What was the most important qualification for a ruler among the Pechenegs? Why was this qualification so important?

Reading

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