

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

THE PECHENECS – RELIGION

OVERVIEW

There is very little information about the Pechenegs' beliefs. According to the Byzantine authors the Pechenegs were pagans. One Byzantine monk and writer, Michael Psellos, claimed that the Pechenegs were godless people:

“Taken in the mass, this is a nation to be feared, and a treacherous one. Treaties of friendship exercise no restraining influence over these barbarians, and even oaths sworn over their sacrifices are not respected, for they reverence no deity at all, not to speak of God. To them all things are the result of chance, and death they believe to be the end of everything”.

THE PECHENECS:

Historians claimed that the Pechenegs were never followers of one single world religion. Other religions like Christianity and Manichaeism that existed in the area. According to some researchers, a type of Manichaeism was practiced by the Pechenegs.

Russian historian Vasily Vasilievsky emphasizes the early influences of Manicheanism among the peoples residing in north of the Aral Sea, including the Pechenegs.

St. Bruno of Querfurt, who began his Christian missionary activity in the Pecheneg territory in 1008. Kiev was a good place to start his mission to the Pechenegs since he found some political support for his journey during the reign of Vladimir I (the Great). In *The Letter to King Henry II* he commented about his journey to the Pechenegs and their faith:

“Indeed, the days and months have already filled a whole year since when, as we were sitting in vain, we left Hungary and with enthusiasm set off on our way to the Pechenegs, the cruelest of all pagans”.

When they invaded the Black Sea steppe, they had intensive contact with neighboring states like the Byzantines that were either Christian or would soon be Christianized.

Byzantine sources recorded a mass conversion of the Pechenegs in the mid-11th century. Pecheneg leader Kegenes, perhaps due to his conflict with the majority of the Pechenegs, and his followers were the first baptized by the monk Euthymios on the banks of the Danube.

The Arab writer al-Bakri, in his book *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* written in 1086, talked about the Muslim missionaries who converted a large portion of the Pechenegs to Islam in a short time around 400 years after the Hijrah. He also mentioned their earlier religion was the practice of the *Magi* (Zoroastrians).

Discussion/Questions

1- Why did the Pechenegs not convert in large numbers to any major religion until late in their history?

Readings

1- Pritsak, O., “The Pečenegs, A Case of Social and Economic Transformation, in Lisse The Peter De Ridder Press, 1976.

2- Paroń, A., *The Pechenegs: Nomads in the Political and Cultural Landscape of Medieval Europe*, translated by Thomas Anessiin East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450, edited by Florin Curta and Dušan Zupka, Brill, 2017.

- 3- Васильевский, В.Г. и Голубовский П.В., *Печенеги*, Ломоносов, 2013.
- 4- Menges, K.H., "Etymological Notes on Some Păčănăg Names", *Byzantion*, 1944-1945, Vol. 17, 1944-1945, pp. 256-280
- 5- Comnena, A., *The Alexiad*, Translated by E. R. A. Sewter, Penguin Books, 2003.
- 6- Golden, P., *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*, Otto Harrassowitz, 1992.
- 7- Васильевский В.Г., *Византия и печенеги*, Издательство "Лань", 2013.
- 8- Kollinger, K., "St Bruno of Querfurt and His Account of a Mission to the Pechenegs", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360156449_St_Bruno_of_Querfurt_and_His_Account_of_a_Mission_to_the_Pechenegs
- 9- Al-Bakri, *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms (Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik)*, (in Arabic), Vol.2., Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiya, 2003.
- 10- *Mission to the Volga*, translated by James E. Montgomery, New York University Press, 2017.