

THE PECHENECS – Government

OVERVIEW

The Pechenegs did not create a state or kingdom in their territory. Instead, the Pechenegs acted as the overlords of a territory with unstable borders divided into semi-autonomous regions administered by numerous hereditary tribal chieftains.



Victory of the Rus' over the Pechenegs (Radzivillovskaya letopis', 15th century)

The Pechenegs of the 10th century were organized on the lines of a confederation which was composed of both nomadic tribes and chiefdoms. These tribes and chiefdoms remained semi-autonomous vassals who acknowledged the authority of a supreme chief. It was this Pecheneg confederation that served as a buffer between Byzantium and Kievan Rus'.

The status of social structure of the nomadic Pechenegs was described in Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio*.

The Pechenegs' social structure was composed of eight divisions headed by the chiefs. Each division was divided into five clans, and the chiefs of these clans were subordinated to the highest chief.

The supreme power within the clans was hereditary based on the well-known nomadic system of succession, and the chiefs of the clans were elected from candidates within the clans.

GOVERNMENT

The Pechenegs did not establish a unified centralized state. The Pecheneg tribes were independent from one another and governed by separate chiefs who came from different families.

The Pechenegs were also a heterogeneous society in the sense that they had mixed with Eastern-Iranian and Turkic tribes in the Middle Asia area before their migration towards Eastern Europe.

According to the *Chronicle* of John Skylitzes, the Pechenegs were divided into thirteen tribes, and each tribe has its own proper name taken from its own ancestor and chieftain.

The Pecheneg tribes included eight large socio-political units led by chiefs and two wing system (western and eastern) that were ruled by separate rulers. Both wings were composed of four provinces (themas), that were subdivided into five districts (meros) ruled by a minor chief. These units were broken down into forty smaller units.

There was also a hierarchy among the provinces. The western wing included the *Kangars* - Chabouxyngyla, labdiertim and Kouartzitzour tribes- who lived in the highest ranking provinces situated on the west bank of the Dnieper river and bordering on the Eastern Slavic tribes tributary to Rus'. It also included the Ulichians, Derevljanians and Poljanians; whose ruler carried the imperial title *Khagan*. The eastern wing included Kouartzitzour, Syrukoulpei, Borotalmat, and Boulatzopon who had the lower ranking.

The supreme power within the clans was hereditary, and the chiefs of the clans were elected from candidates within the clans. There were small and large clans. When a chief died in a larger clan, power transferred to his cousins, not to his sons or brothers, and was never transferred to outside of the tribe. All matters concerning the whole community were solved in an egalitarian manner by a general council.

One of the roles of the chiefs was the extortion of presents, such as precious silk clothes, purple colored clothes, bands and shawls etc., from Byzantium to distribute among their followers, close allies and relatives and to raise their prestige.

Russian prince Svyatoslav enters Bulgaria with Pecheneg allies (the Constantine Manasses Chronicle)



Discussions/Questions:

1. What factors prevented the Pechenegs from establishing a centralized state?
2. How was the Pecheneg government structured?

Readings:

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- 11- Vasjutin, S.A., "Typology of Pre-States and Statehood Systems of Nomads", In *Nomadic Pathways in Social Evolution*, Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies, Moscow, 2003