



THE ACTIVITY OF COUNCILS IN THE TURKIC KHAGANATE: THEIR ROLE IN THE POLITICAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

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Abstract. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the council (kurultai) as an important institution within the political governance system of the Turkic Khaganate. The study examines the composition of the council, its functions, decision-making mechanisms, and its role in state administration based on historical sources. Additionally, the research highlights how the council facilitated the participation of tribal elites in political processes and contributed to the legitimization of the khagan's authority. The findings indicate that the council served as a key institution in strengthening central authority and ensuring political stability in the Turkic Khaganate.

Keywords: Turkic Khaganate, council, kurultai, political system, governance, legitimacy, tribal elites, state authority

Introduction. The Turkic Khaganate, which emerged in the 6th–8th centuries across Central Asia and adjacent regions, was one of the most influential political entities of its time. Its system of governance was complex and multi-layered, combining centralized authority with elements of collective decision-making. One of the most significant institutions within this system was the council, known as the kurultai.

The tradition of councils dates back to early Turkic nomadic societies, where important issues were discussed collectively and decisions were made through consensus. In the Turkic Khaganate, this tradition evolved into a structured political institution that became an integral part of state governance.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that analyzing the council system provides deeper insight not only into the administrative structure of the Turkic Khaganate but also into the development of collective political culture and the concept of legitimate authority. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to examine the composition, functions, and political role of the council within the governance system of the Turkic Khaganate.

Methods. This study is based on the analysis of historical sources using a combination of methodological approaches. Primary sources such as the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, Chinese chronicles, and modern historical research were examined through comparative analysis.

A structural-functional approach was applied to identify the role of the council within the state system, its relationship with other political institutions, and its functional



responsibilities. In addition, a historical-comparative method was used to compare the council system of the Turkic Khaganate with similar institutions in other nomadic states.

The source-critical method also played an important role in evaluating the reliability of historical materials and ensuring a scientifically grounded interpretation of the data. This comprehensive methodological framework allowed for a systematic and well-founded analysis.

Results. The findings of the study demonstrate that the council in the Turkic Khaganate functioned as a central institution in the political governance system and operated in several key dimensions.

First, the composition of the council included representatives of the most influential segments of society. These consisted of tribal leaders (beks), military commanders, close relatives of the khagan, and trusted advisors. This composition indicates that the council functioned not only as a political body but also as a representative institution of the elite strata of society¹. The authority and prestige of its members ensured that its decisions carried significant weight.

Second, the council performed essential functions directly related to state governance. One of its primary responsibilities was the election or confirmation of a new khagan². This process was crucial for legitimizing the ruler's authority. Furthermore, the council played a decisive role in matters of war and peace, foreign policy, and military strategy.

Third, the decision-making process within the council was largely based on discussion and consensus. This suggests the presence of collective governance elements and a culture of compromise within the political system³. Such practices reflect certain democratic features inherent in nomadic societies.

Fourth, the relationship between the council and the khagan was characterized by interdependence and balance. Although the khagan was the supreme ruler, he could not ignore the council's decisions. At the same time, the council reinforced the authority of the khagan⁴. Thus, both institutions functioned as complementary elements within a stable political system.

Discussion. The analysis of the council's activity in the Turkic Khaganate reveals that it was not merely an advisory body but a significant political institution with real influence. Through the council, tribal elites actively participated in governance, which contributed to maintaining political stability.

A comparative perspective further highlights the importance of this institution. For example, in the Mongol Empire, a similar institution known as the kurultai also existed. However, the council system in the Turkic Khaganate emerged earlier and played a more consistently structured role in governance.

Moreover, the council was instrumental in legitimizing the authority of the khagan. The ruler's power was not based solely on force but also on recognition by the council, indicating the presence of elements of political consensus within the system⁵.

In addition, the council served as a mechanism for balancing the interests of different tribes. This helped reduce internal conflicts and contributed to the overall stability of the state.

¹ Bichurin N.Ya. Collection of Information on the Peoples of Central Asia – Moscow, 1950.

² Gumilev L.N. The Ancient Turks – Moscow, 1967.

³ Klyashtorny S.G. History of the Turkic Khaganates – St. Petersburg, 2003.

⁴ Golden P.B. An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples – 1992.

⁵ Sinor D. The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia – 1990.



Conclusion. The study concludes that the council in the Turkic Khaganate was a fundamental institution within the state governance system. It played a crucial role in political decision-making and in legitimizing the authority of the khagan.

Through the council, elements of collective governance were implemented, tribal elites were integrated into political processes, and internal stability was maintained. Therefore, the council system represents an important example of early Turkic political culture.

Overall, the council functioned as one of the key mechanisms ensuring the effectiveness and balance of the political system in the Turkic Khaganate.

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