

Elites in the Türk and Uyghur Empires

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Abstract

The Türks and Uyghurs formed empires that dominated Inner Asia from the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the ninth. These empires' ruling super-elites represented specific families/clans that asserted their legitimacy in a number of ways, including claims to divine support. Any male from these families/clans had the right to compete – often violently – for the position of supreme ruler (*qaghan*). Nevertheless, there is some evidence for the existence of a body of leaders (perhaps akin to the Mongol *quriltai*), most likely regional elites, which could also influence the imperial succession.

The Türk and Uyghur empires created strong distinctions between the “charismatic” super-elites and other elites, and maintained a specific demarcation between elites and common people (*qara bodun*). The *qaghan* appointed members of his family to assist him in governing various regions of the empire. At the same time, regional elites from other tribes were often allowed to remain in traditional positions of leadership after they were absorbed into the empire. New elites were also brought into this system; the most obvious example is that of Sogdians who sometimes enjoyed great authority within these empires.

The elites who served the *qaghan* had titles indicating their ranks and functions. Although data are limited, it seems likely that their loyalty was strengthened through various acts of imperial favor including the granting of prestige goods, titles, and political marriages. Nevertheless, regional elites were at times able to exercise a significant level of political autonomy. Maintaining control over far-flung regional elites who enjoyed not only autonomy but also a high level of mobility was one of the greatest challenges of nomadic empires.