NO-01 Steppe confederations: the kurultai, the Yassa and the decimal army

The permanent loss of industrial supply chains and state infrastructure necessitates an examination of how human populations organize, scale, and govern themselves under extreme material constraints. The Eurasian steppe provides an unparalleled historical laboratory for this inquiry. For over two millennia, nomadic pastoralists occupying the arid expanses from Manchuria to the Hungarian plains operated in an environment where agricultural surplus was impossible and mobility was the primary mechanism of survival. Despite operating under a decentralized, kin-based governance structure at the local level, these populations periodically coalesced into the largest contiguous land empires in human history.

This analysis evaluates the political technology of steppe confederations, spanning from the Xiongnu Empire (209 BC) to the Kazakh Khanate (1465–1847 AD). By deconstructing five specific arrangements of steppe governance—segmentary lineage, the decimal military reorganization, the kurultai electoral assembly, bloody tanistry, and the evolution of customary law—the historical record reveals distinct thresholds where self-governance scales, where it fractures, and where it is inevitably captured by individuals exhibiting narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The steppe model demonstrates that while local nomadic governance was highly resilient and adaptive, the scaling mechanisms required to build an empire inherently guaranteed its violent collapse within three generations.

The Foundation of Nomadic Governance: Segmentary Lineage

Prior to imperial consolidation, the baseline governance structure of the Eurasian steppe was the segmentary lineage system. The ecological realities of nomadic pastoralism dictated low population densities; herders required vast territories to sustain grass-grazing livestock, making urbanization impossible[1]. Consequently, as documented extensively in Anatoly Khazanov's *Nomads and the Outside World* (1984), steppe populations organized themselves into nested patrilineal kinship units. The foundational economic unit was the household tent (the *ger* or yurt), which clustered into mobile encampments known as the *aul*, typically consisting of five to ten related families[2]. These encampments aggregated into lineages, clans, and eventually tribes.

This system was fundamentally fluid, functioning as an adaptive mechanism for a high-risk environment. During periods of ecological stress, such as severe droughts or the devastating ice storms known as the *zhut*, large groups would fission into smaller, dispersed bands to maximize grazing efficiency[3]. Conversely, when defending territory, resolving disputes, or raiding sedentary neighbors, these smaller units would fuse along perceived bloodlines to form a formidable tribal militia. Identity was defined entirely by relation; an individual without a clan was effectively dead in the steppe ecosystem. However, this structure possessed a hard upper limit regarding scale. As the population expanded beyond the district or watershed level, horizontal kinship ties became too diluted to enforce mutual defense or economic cooperation,

resulting in endemic blood feuds and the splintering of the polity[1].
The romanticization of this system as an egalitarian brotherhood is a severe misrepresentation of the historical reality. While nomads lacked the rigid class structures of sedentary agrarian states, their societies were intensely patriarchal and stratified. The accumulation of massive herds by successful chieftains led to the emergence of deeply entrenched aristocracies, while poorer nomads (the *zhataq*) and captured slaves were forced into subservient roles, managing livestock without possessing any formal political rights[4]. Anthropologist David Sneath, in *The Headless State* (2007), provides the most rigorous critique of the segmentary lineage model, arguing that the notion of an egalitarian, kin-based society is largely an ethnographic projection. Sneath contends that the steppe was always administered by decentralized, headless aristocratic orders that utilized spatial administration and wealth accumulation to control dependents, rather than relying strictly on egalitarian blood-kin assemblies[6].

Analysis Parameter	Evaluation
What the people said it did	Maintained an unbroken, sacred chain of bloodline descent from heroic ancestors, dictating that all men within the tribe were brothers bound by sacred duty and mutual defense.
What the record shows it did	Functioned as a highly malleable political fiction. Defeated populations were routinely absorbed and assigned fabricated lineages. Fictitious kinship and blood-brotherhood (*anda*) allowed chieftains to rapidly expand their demographic base after military victories.
What modern scholarship infers	Operated as an ecological survival adaptation, allowing nomadic populations to predictably fission during periods of resource scarcity and fuse during periods of military opportunity[1].

Scale Ledger	Feasibility and Mechanics
Household (4 to 10 people)	Operated flawlessly. The fundamental unit of pastoral economic survival, bound by

	immediate familial necessity.
Hamlet or Band (30 to 50 people)	Operated perfectly. The *aul* managed seasonal migrations, protected herds from predators, and shared basic resources.
Village (150 to 500 people)	Operated effectively. Clans maintained inter-band marriages, negotiated localized grazing rights, and exacted blood revenge for murdered members.
Parish or District (1,500 to 5,000 people)	Operated moderately. Required a charismatic chieftain or shared totemic rituals to prevent the group from splintering along sub-lineage fault lines.
Town or Watershed (15,000 to 50,000 people)	Failed or severely degraded. Horizontal kinship ties became too distant to enforce unity, resulting in chronic factionalism and inter-clan raiding.
Region to Planet (0.5 Million to 8 Billion)	Completely unviable without transitioning into a rigid, top-down military hierarchy.

Capture Test	Resistance and Vulnerability
Vulnerability to Dark-Triad Traits	High. A Machiavellian chieftain could easily capture a segmentary lineage by orchestrating the assassination of rival patriarchs and exploiting the fluidity of fictitious kinship to forcefully assimilate their dependents.
Historical Cases	Genghis Khan's rise involved the systematic annihilation of the aristocratic lineages of the Tatar, Merkit, and Naiman tribes. He executed the rival elites and distributed the

	surviving commoners among his own extended power base[7].
Resistance Features	The extreme physical mobility of the population. If a leader exhibited overly abusive traits, households would simply dismantle their camps and migrate to join a rival chieftain, depriving the abuser of military and economic capital.

The Decimal Army: The Eradication of Clan Aristocracy

To scale governance from the level of a parish to that of a continental empire, steppe leaders were forced to actively dismantle the segmentary lineage system. The technological solution to this barrier was the decimal army—a bureaucratic structure that aggressively severed horizontal tribal loyalties and replaced them with vertical, mathematically standardized military allegiance.

The origin of this system is attributed to Modu Chanyu, the founder of the Xiongnu Empire, who orchestrated a brutal centralization of power around 209 BC[8]. To break the independence of tribal chiefs, Modu introduced the concept of absolute, unthinking obedience, famously enforced via a "whistling arrow." He decreed that his troops must immediately fire upon whatever target his whistling arrow struck. To enforce this, he sequentially targeted his own prized horse, his favorite wife, and finally his father, the reigning Chanyu Touman. Any soldier who hesitated for even a moment was immediately executed[8]. Having purged the ranks of anyone capable of independent hesitation, Modu reorganized his surviving forces into strict units of tens, hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands (*tumen*). This meritocratic, highly mobile army subsequently encircled the forces of Han Emperor Gaozu at the Battle of Baideng in 200 BC, forcing the Chinese state into decades of humiliating tributary payments[9].

In 1206 AD, Genghis Khan perfected this decimal reorganization to build the Mongol Empire. After unifying the steppe, he deliberately fractured historically hostile tribes, scattering their warriors across different units of ten (*arban*) and a hundred (*jaghun*) to permanently destroy their previous ethnic and tribal identities[11]. The ultimate expression of this centralization was the *Keshig*, the elite imperial guard. According to section 224 of the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the *Keshig* initially consisted of 80 night-guards and 70 day-guards, but Genghis Khan rapidly expanded it to a standing force of 10,000 men[12]. The *Keshig* operated completely outside the traditional tribal structure. Its members were forcefully recruited as hostages from the families of the commanders of the thousands and hundreds[14]. This mechanism guaranteed the loyalty of the field generals while simultaneously functioning as an elite training academy for the empire's central bureaucracy and military administration[12].

Analysis Parameter	Evaluation
What the people said it did	Transformed a fractured, chaotic populace into an invincible, unified weapon guided by the divine mandate of Tengri (the Eternal Blue Sky).
What the record shows it did	Instituted a totalitarian level of population control. It liquidated the traditional clan aristocracy and instituted a system of collective punishment, where the desertion of a single soldier resulted in the execution of his entire unit of ten[10].
What modern scholarship infers	Functioned as an extreme mechanism of state formation driven by internal crisis. As noted by Nicola Di Cosmo, this reorganization allowed for total military mobilization, converting an entire civilian society into a self-sustaining standing army[6].

Scale Ledger	Feasibility and Mechanics
Household to Village (4 to 500 people)	Replaced entirely. The decimal system forcefully superseded these organic units, grouping individuals by military assignment rather than bloodline.
Parish to Town (1,500 to 50,000 people)	Operated flawlessly. Mingghans (1,000 men) and Tumens (10,000 men) functioned as self-sustaining logistical, administrative, and combat units.
Region to Continent (0.5 to 500 Million people)	Operated brilliantly but proved temporary. The system allowed the Mongol Empire to coordinate simultaneous, highly complex military campaigns from Eastern Europe to the borders of Vietnam[17].

Planet (8 Billion people)	Never attempted. Unlikely to succeed without ubiquitous industrial telecommunications, as maintaining absolute charismatic authority across planetary distances exceeds the limits of pre-industrial logistics.

Capture Test	Resistance and Vulnerability
Vulnerability to Dark-Triad Traits	Absolute. The decimal system is the ultimate vector for a Machiavellian or psychopathic autocrat. By atomizing the population into interchangeable units and mandating collective punishment, the system strips the populace of the organic kinship networks required to organize internal resistance.
Historical Cases	Modu Chanyu's patricide and systematic execution of hesitant followers[10]; Genghis Khan's systematic execution of childhood blood-brothers (such as Jamukha) to eliminate alternate centers of political gravity[11].
Resistance Features	Negligible. The only internal check on the ruler was the *Keshig* itself, which possessed the physical proximity required to assassinate an overly erratic Khagan, though such praetorian interventions rarely restored decentralized governance.

The Kurultai: Electoral Assembly and Elite Consensus

While the decimal army imposed strict top-down hierarchy upon the general populace, the selection of the supreme leader (Khagan) and the authorization of major military campaigns required horizontal consensus among the elite. This was achieved through an assembly known as the *kurultai*. The *kurultai* gathered the royal family, the top military commanders (*noyans*), and the leading shamans to deliberate, negotiate, and ultimately acclaim a new leader. Historically, executing a *kurultai* was a massive logistical undertaking that often paralyzed the empire. Tens of thousands of horses and leaders had to travel for months across the Eurasian

landmass to convene. The historical record indicates that the Mongol Empire held five primary imperial kurultais (1206, 1229, 1246, 1251, 1260). Of these, three were highly contested, and two directly resulted in massive lethal purges or continental civil war. In 1206, Temüjin was successfully acclaimed as Genghis Khan, solidifying his unification of the steppe[18]. However, the *kurultai* of 1246, which elected Güyük Khan, was heavily contested and delayed for years by intense political maneuvering and the refusal of regional warlords to attend[17].

The system's vulnerability to violent capture was definitively exposed during the *kurultai* of 1251. Möngke Khan, heavily backed by the military muscle of Batu Khan of the Golden Horde, utilized the assembly as a trap. Upon "discovering" a plot against his ascension, Möngke unleashed a devastating purge. He executed between 77 and 300 princes, commanders, and high officials belonging to the rival Ogedeid and Chagataid lineages, effectively breaking the old royal family to secure his absolute authority[19]. By 1260, following Möngke's death, the assembly system broke down completely. Kublai Khan held a hasty, geographically illegitimate *kurultai* in Shangdu, while his brother Ariq Böke held a traditional *kurultai* in the capital of Karakorum. This irreconcilable schism triggered the Toluid Civil War (1260–1264), permanently fracturing the unified Mongol Empire[22].

Analysis Parameter	Evaluation
What the people said it did	Channelled the sacred will of Heaven through the collective voice of the elite, guided by the spiritual authority of powerful shamans such as Teb Tenggeri[25].
What the record shows it did	Functioned as a high-stakes arena for political extortion, vote-buying, and the stark measurement of physical military strength. A leader was only acclaimed if he possessed enough armed supporters to physically intimidate his rivals into submission[21].
What modern scholarship infers	Operated as a fragile mechanism to align powerful stakeholders and distribute the spoils of conquest. Historian Peter Jackson notes that it was fundamentally anti-democratic; it was a performative ritual of submission to the strongest warlord, entirely reliant on the presence of an obvious military hegemon[26].

Scale Ledger	Feasibility and Mechanics
Household to Village (4 to 500 people)	Not applicable. Assemblies at this scale were handled by informal councils of elders.
Parish to Town (1,500 to 50,000 people)	Operated effectively. Key stakeholders could gather rapidly within a single geographic region to negotiate leadership transitions without causing administrative gridlock.
Region to Nation (0.5 to 50 Million people)	Frayed and ultimately failed. The sheer travel time required meant the empire sat in administrative paralysis for years after a Khagan's death. This logistical bottleneck directly caused the abandonment of the Mongol invasion of Europe in 1241 following the death of Ogedei Khan[17].
Continent to Planet (50 Million to 8 Billion)	Logistically impossible to execute as a physical gathering without modern aviation and instantaneous telecommunications.

Capture Test	Resistance and Vulnerability
Vulnerability to Dark-Triad Traits	Moderate to High. While a narcissist might demand a *kurultai*, the assembly required actual, physical consensus among highly armed, independent warlords, making it difficult for an unarmed manipulator to seize control.
Historical Cases	Möngke Khan's Machiavellian orchestration of the 1251 *kurultai*, utilizing Batu's armed forces to intimidate voters and subsequently executing his political rivals en masse[19].
Resistance Features	The absolute requirement for unanimous

	acclamation and the physical presence of heavily armed constituents meant that a candidate lacking genuine, overwhelming military backing would simply be ignored, deposed, or killed.

Lateral Succession and Shadow Empires

Understanding why steppe confederations universally failed within a few generations requires analyzing the intersection of their geopolitical economic models and their lethal mechanisms of succession. The historian Joseph Fletcher (1986) coined the term "bloody tanistry" to describe the Turco-Mongol system of royal succession[27]. Unlike Western European primogeniture, where the eldest son automatically inherited the throne, steppe tradition dictated that the mandate to rule belonged to the royal clan as a whole. However, the specific individual who occupied the throne had to be the most competent, capable, and ruthless male relative available[30].

This algorithm of succession functioned as a brutal evolutionary filter. It guaranteed that weak, incompetent, or overly compassionate rulers rarely took the throne, effectively preventing the dynastic decay that plagued sedentary empires[31]. However, the cost of this extreme meritocracy was perpetual state instability. It virtually guaranteed a massive civil war upon the death of every ruler, as brothers, uncles, and nephews fought to the death to prove their supremacy. The victor subsequently executed the losers and absorbed their surviving troops[30].

The instability of bloody tanistry was compounded by the economic realities of nomadic life. Anthropologist Thomas Barfield, in *The Perilous Frontier* (1989), posited that nomadic empires did not scale based on internal economic productivity. Instead, they functioned as "shadow empires" explicitly designed to extort agricultural neighbors, particularly imperial China[32]. Because the arid steppe produced virtually no agricultural surplus or manufactured goods, a Khagan maintained his coalition by distributing luxury goods—silk, grain, and metals—to his subordinate warlords. To acquire these goods, nomads utilized their overwhelming military mobility to terrorize China into paying massive annual tributes[8]. Nicola Di Cosmo challenges the exclusivity of this extortion thesis, demonstrating that state formation on the steppe was also driven by internal ecological crises, military mobilization, and sophisticated internal economies, but the reliance on external surplus remained a critical factor[6].

Because these confederations relied heavily on extorting a stable host, they fragmented when the host collapsed or when the nomads succeeded in conquering the host entirely. The historical lifespans of these confederations are remarkably consistent in their brevity:

- **Xiongnu Empire:** Lasted approximately 250 years (209 BC to 48 AD), surviving by methodically extorting the unified Han Dynasty[9].
- **Göktürk Khaganate:** Lasted approximately 50 years before fracturing (552 to 603 AD) into the Tolis (eastern) and Tardush (western) divisions[34].
- **Mongol Empire:** Lasted approximately 54 years as a unified entity (1206 to 1260), irreversibly fracturing into the Yuan Dynasty, Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate, and Golden

Horde once they physically conquered their host nations and abandoned the unified steppe[22].

- **Kazakh Khanate:** Maintained peak unity for approximately 38 years under Tauke Khan (1680–1718), before fracturing under severe military pressure from the Dzungars[37].

Analysis Parameter	Evaluation
What the people said it did	Ensured that the tribe was perpetually led by the strongest, most capable wolf in the pack, an absolute necessity for survival in the unforgiving steppe environment.
What the record shows it did	Guaranteed a devastating civil war upon the death of almost every major ruler, resulting in the regular execution of the royal family's collateral branches[30].
What modern scholarship infers	Operated as an institutionalized filter selecting for extreme military competence and ruthlessness, preventing dynastic decay but ensuring that the empire could rarely survive past the third generation without fracturing[31].

Scale Ledger	Feasibility and Mechanics
Household to Town (4 to 50,000 people)	Failed. At local scales, bloody tanistry merely presents as a continuous, destructive blood feud that drains the population of its prime-age males.
Region to Continent (0.5 to 500 Million people)	Operated successfully but temporarily. Bloody tanistry consistently produced apex military commanders capable of executing continental conquests, but the structural mandate for fratricidal civil war guaranteed the empire's eventual fragmentation.

Capture Test	Resistance and Vulnerability
Vulnerability to Dark-Triad Traits	Total. Bloody tanistry is an institutional framework that explicitly *selects* for psychopathy and Machiavellianism. The system disproportionately rewards individuals willing to murder their own brothers and nephews to secure political dominance.
Historical Cases	The Toluid Civil War (1260) between Kublai Khan and Ariq Böke[22]; the endless fratricidal wars of the Golden Horde and the Timurid succession struggles[11].
Resistance Features	Nonexistent. The system is architecturally designed to be captured by the most violent and cunning actor available.

Customary Law: The Yassa and the Zheti Zhargy

The implementation of the rule of law on the steppe has been subject to immense historical mythology. For centuries, both contemporaries and later historians believed that Genghis Khan had written a rigid, immutable constitution called the *Great Yassa*, which was locked away in the royal treasury and consulted to keep the Mongols culturally pure.

Modern scholarship, led by David Morgan (1986) and David Ayalon, has definitively exploded this myth. The historical record indicates that no physical document constituting a "Great Yassa" ever existed. Instead, the *jasaq* was a highly fluid, evolving body of customary law, ad-hoc military decrees, and specific judgments passed down entirely through oral tradition[39].

However, genuine, highly structured legal codes did emerge later as tools to stabilize fragmenting confederations. The most successful iteration was the *Zheti Zhargy* (Seven Charters), promulgated by the Kazakh ruler Tauke Khan (1680–1718)[4]. Facing devastating existential invasions from the Dzungar Khanate, Tauke Khan urgently needed to suppress internal raiding and unify the Kazakh tribes. To achieve this, he elevated the *Biys*—traditional clan judges chosen for their wisdom, memory, and oratorical skill rather than strict bloodline—to administer a unified justice system[5].

The *Zheti Zhargy* was a masterpiece of survival economics. It aggressively replaced the tradition of bloody retaliation with material restitution. If a man was murdered, his surviving family retained the theoretical right to demand physical execution, but the law overwhelmingly incentivized accepting a "kun" (blood money, typically paid in livestock). By converting capital punishment into economic transfers, the code preserved the scarce human capital required to fight the Dzungars. It also established firm property rights, codified rules for diplomatic

immunity, and provided rudimentary protections for religious observance[43].
Despite its stabilizing effects, Virginia Martin's analysis in *Law and Custom in the Steppe* (2001) notes that this customary law (*adat*) deeply entrenched prevailing hierarchies. The poor (*zhataq*) and slaves had severely limited legal standing, and women were largely treated as the property of the patriarchal household in matters of marriage and inheritance[4].

Analysis Parameter	Evaluation
What the people said it did	The *Yassa* was the divine, unalterable will of Genghis Khan. The *Zheti Zhargy* represented the infallible wisdom of the ancestors, ensuring justice, unity, and tribal harmony.
What the record shows it did	Provided a highly flexible, decentralized framework for dispute resolution. By utilizing *Biys* (judges such as Tole Bi and Kazybek Bi)[45], customary law mediated tribal conflicts effectively without requiring the Khan to intervene directly in every local blood feud.
What modern scholarship infers	Legal codes on the steppe were sophisticated tools of statecraft utilized to transition a society from pure raiding to administrative consolidation, standardizing taxation and minimizing the demographic attrition caused by internal feuding.

Scale Ledger	Feasibility and Mechanics
Household to Village (4 to 500 people)	Operated perfectly. *Biys* and local elders mediated disputes rapidly and effectively based on shared cultural precedents.
Parish to Region (1,500 to 5 Million people)	Operated moderately. The system functioned well but relied heavily on the personal charisma and military authority of the reigning Khan to enforce the rulings of

	the *Biys* upon powerful, recalcitrant warlords.
Nation to Continent (50 Million+ people)	Failed. Oral customary law could not scale to manage the complexities of administering sedentary agrarian and urban populations. This limitation forced the Mongols to eventually abandon the *jasaq* and adopt Islamic Sharia in Persia or Confucian bureaucracy in China[47].

Capture Test	Resistance and Vulnerability
Vulnerability to Dark-Triad Traits	Low to Moderate.
Historical Cases	Genghis Khan frequently bent the oral *jasaq* to execute political rivals while sparing useful allies, interpreting the "law" as whatever served his immediate military centralization.
Resistance Features	The *Zheti Zhargy* effectively resisted capture because its administration was fundamentally decentralized. A Khan could not easily control the *Biys*, whose authority was derived entirely from their reputation for fairness among the populace, not from military force. Furthermore, the structural emphasis on restitution over execution de-escalated cycles of violence, denying tyrants the ability to legally execute rivals[43].

Conclusions and Post-Collapse Synthesis

The analysis of steppe confederations yields several robust findings. First, segmentary lineage systems are highly resilient for economic survival at small scales but structurally fail to unify large populations without the presence of a charismatic warlord or a severe external threat. Second, the decimal military organization remains the most brutally effective historical mechanism for rapidly dissolving horizontal ethnic ties and centralizing absolute vertical power. Third, nomadic empires did not collapse due to military inferiority, but due to internal structural flaws—specifically "bloody tanistry," which guaranteed debilitating civil wars upon succession.

Fourth, the *kurultai* was rarely a democratic parliament, functioning instead as an oligarchic mechanism for measuring the physical military strength of rival factions. Finally, stateless legal systems optimize for demographic survival by substituting physical retaliation with material restitution, as seen in the *Zheti Zhargy*.

Contested or Open Questions

The historical record leaves several vital questions unresolved. The exact catalyst of nomadic state formation remains debated: did empires arise primarily to extort a unified China (Thomas Barfield's shadow empire thesis), or were they driven by internal ecological crises that forced military centralization (Nicola Di Cosmo's thesis)? Furthermore, to what degree did the decimal system actually eradicate the old tribal aristocracies, versus simply driving them underground to reemerge as factions within the *Keshig*? Finally, the exact political agency of shamans remains opaque—were figures like Teb Tenggeri political masterminds manipulating the *kurultai*, or merely spiritual rubber-stamps validating the strongest warlord? To explore these nuances further, researchers should consult the foundational literature directly, particularly Barfield's *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (1989), Di Cosmo's *Ancient China and its Enemies* (2002), Khazanov's *Nomads and the Outside World* (1984), Sneath's *The Headless State* (2007), and Martin's *Law and Custom in the Steppe* (2001).

Implementability after the Fall

If industrial supply chains and state infrastructure permanently collapse, surviving populations will inherently revert to segmentary lineage dynamics at the local level. The steppe model provides a blueprint for managing this reality.

- **Minimum Viable Version - Household (4 to 10 people):** Adopts the *aul* structure. Absolute survival relies on strict division of labor and extreme physical mobility. Decision-making becomes autocratic during immediate crises, but reverts to consensus in peace. Requires only physical proximity and shared provisions.
- **Minimum Viable Version - Village (300 people):** Implements a proto-*Zheti Zhargy*. Resolves disputes entirely through appointed *Biys* (respected elders chosen for wisdom, not force) using material restitution (e.g., transferring stored grain, tools, or livestock for theft or assault) rather than incarceration or execution. Requires a culturally recognized meeting place and a shared oral tradition of precedents.
- **Minimum Viable Version - District (3,000 people):** Implements a proto-decimal system and a localized *kurultai*. The district population is forcefully reorganized into cross-neighborhood units of 10 and 100 for defense and resource pooling, deliberately breaking pre-Fall prejudices and local fiefdoms. Leadership is chosen via a physical gathering of unit commanders. Requires a shared calendar to synchronize the *kurultai*, physical records (such as tally sticks) to track the decimal units, and strict enforcement of militia duties.

What it needs to start: Literacy is not required; these complex systems operated entirely orally for centuries. Initiation requires a synchronized calendar to coordinate gatherings, a culturally recognized neutral meeting place for the assembly, and a baseline economic surplus (stored rations) to allow commanders to debate for days without starving.

The first failure to expect: *Bloody Tanistry*. Within one generation, the original charismatic

founder of the district will die. Because there is no external state to enforce a peaceful transition of power, the most aggressive unit commanders will likely fracture the decimal militia, turning the units against each other in a violent struggle to claim absolute control of the district.

Principles

- A governance system that relies on lateral succession and extreme meritocracy will reliably produce highly competent military leaders and inevitable civil war.
- A decimal military organization dissolves horizontal kinship and ethnic ties in favor of absolute vertical allegiance to the state.
- An assembly of armed stakeholders functions as a mechanism for consensus only when a clear hegemon is present to intimidate holdouts; otherwise, it formalizes schisms.
- Stateless legal systems optimize for demographic survival by substituting physical retaliation with material restitution.
- Highly mobile confederations scale their internal complexity not by producing domestic surplus, but by organizing to extract surplus from sedentary neighbors.

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