

# HSIUNG-NU MILITARY HISTORY

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**Overview** – Throughout the history of the Hsiung-nu and their empire the army played a central role, not only as the means by which the empire was created, but also as a major element in the identity of the Hsiung-nu as a people.

**Training** - Like other nomadic peoples of central Eurasia the Hsiung-nu boys began to ride horses from an early age and learned the use of the bow and arrow on horseback. They sharpened these skills by hunting, and the Han Dynasty historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Sima Qian) in his work the *Shiji* claimed that all young men of the Hsiung-nu were able to act as armed cavalry in times of war.

**Weapons & Tactics** - Descriptions of Hsiung-nu weapons and tactics can be found in the *Shiji* and other Chinese chronicles; they state that the bow and arrow were used at long ranges, while swords and spears were used at close quarters. Hsiung-nu tactics were also typical of nomadic pastoralists and included feigned retreats, swarming, continual harassment to wear down the enemy, and surprise attacks. The Hsiung-nu only closed with an enemy when they were confident of victory, and would retreat if the course of the battle turned against them.

**Roles** - The Hsiung-nu army was used in a variety of roles throughout the history of the Hsiung-nu empire. It was obviously the main instrument in creating the empire by either conquering neighboring small states outright, or intimidating others to submit. Against the Chinese the Hsiung-nu's use of their army was more nuanced. In periods of Chinese weakness, such as the late Ch'in (Qin) Dynasty and early Han Dynasty, the Hsiung-nu army was able to conquer large areas of the Ordos region since it faced little or no Chinese resistance. Later, as the strength of the Han Dynasty grew, the Hsiung-nu army could be used defensively, to hold Hsiung-nu territory.

**Border Raids** - However, there were other ways to use Hsiung-nu military power. One was a booty raid, a quick attack, usually on border territories, generally for the purpose of gaining quick wealth. While such raids could be launched in any season and were potentially very profitable, the resulting destruction could seriously impact the border trade with China, a vital part of the Hsiung-nu economy. What limited, destructive border raids could be used for was as a means of persuasion. The threat of such raids was used to extract tribute from the Han on terms dictated by the Hsiung-nu. Similarly, the Han occasionally shut down markets in border towns that traded with the Hsiung-nu in an effort to strike the Hsiung-nu economically. Attacks against border fortifications and raids into Chinese territory along the border were used to force the Han to reopen the border town markets.

**Decline** - Such tactics were effective for the Hsiung-nu so long as the Han rulers believed that they were unable to match the Hsiung-nu army. However, beginning in 133 BCE, the Han conducted a series of military and diplomatic operations against the Hsiung-nu that continued for decades. On several occasions, when forced into a direct battle with Han armies, the Hsiung-nu suffered severe defeats. Despite their cost, the combination of military defeats, loss of allies and loss of tribute weakened the Hsiung-nu and in 60 BCE led to the first of what would be a series of civil wars over leadership of the Hsiung-nu, and a split into the southern Hsiung-nu who submitted to the Han, and the northern Hsiung-nu who attempted to remain independent. Neither group was ever able to revive the Hsiung-nu state or its military power, and the northern Hsiung-nu collapsed in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, while the last *shanyü* of the southern Hsiung-nu died around 220 CE.

## Readings

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. What were the characteristic tactics of the Hsiung-nu army and why were they difficult for Chinese armies to adapt?
2. What was the political function of Hsiung-nu military power in its relations with the Han Dynasty?