

TURKIC MILITARY

Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

Overview Although much of what is known about the military organization, weapons and tactics of the Gök Türk and the Uighur indicates that they closely resembled those of other pastoral peoples of the Eurasian steppes. Nonetheless, there are some features of these peoples' militaries that are unique.

Gök Türk Contemporary historical sources almost always refer to cavalry and/or mounted archery in reference to Turkic military strength, and describe the use of typical tactics of the steppe – hit-and-run attacks to wear down the enemy; feigned retreats that were turned into an assault after drawing part of an enemy force away from the main body of the army, or led the pursuing force into an ambush; and swarming. These tactics all made the best use of the lightly armed mounted nomads' mobility (Gök Türk riders traveled with three or four extra mounts allowing them to ride for long periods with few stops) and flexibility, and were intended to reduce the enemy's strength to the point that the cavalry was certain that it could close with and destroy the enemy force. This regular cavalry was made up free tribesmen referred to as *erler* (singular *er*, 'man, warrior'). However, there are indications that the Gök Türk armies were more complex than simply a force consisting of large numbers of mounted archers.

First, there are mentions of heavy, armored cavalry units similar to the Sarmatian cataphracts. These units, called "wolves", wore armor and were mounted on larger horses than the regular cavalry. Presumably the "wolves" performed the same functions as cataphracts and later European mounted knights, acting as shock troops that broke enemy formations allowing the regular cavalry to more easily destroy the enemy.

Finally, the Tonyuquq inscription from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire describes their army as consisting of two-thirds cavalry and one-third infantry. Unfortunately, the inscription does not provide any further information such as the ethnic composition of the infantry, or whether this military organization was a recent development or had been in use for a long period of time.

As for weapons, the main weapon was the compact, powerful compound bow with its distinctive recurved shape and made from wood, bone, horn and sometimes other materials. In addition, swords and spears were used to finish off an enemy at close quarters. The heavy cavalry presumably carried lances in their function as shock troops, and other weapons for close combat. As for the infantry described in the Gök Türk inscriptions, there is no information about their weapons or whether they wore any type of armor.

Uighur Like the earlier Gök Türk armies, information on the armies of the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho is limited, and almost entirely from non-Uighurs. Nonetheless, considering that the Uighur Empire was in many aspects a continuation of the Gök Türk states, and the close linguistic and cultural links between the two peoples, it is highly likely that their army was much like that of the Gök Türks.

There is information that the units in the Uighur Empire's cavalry were organized on a tribal basis. According to the Arab traveler Tamim ibn Bahr who visited the Uighurs around 821, approximately 12,000 Uighur soldiers surrounded the tent of the Uighur *kaghan*. In the vicinity there were also seventeen tribal chieftains who each commanded 13,000 men. However, cavalry units from the subjugated Karluk and Basmil tribes were not among the *kaghan's* troops, but were put in the more dangerous and less prestigious forward guard of the Uighur army.

The most unique feature of the Uighur Empire's army is the presence of cavalry units that consisted of female warriors. These women were said to be skillful riders and archers, and were among the troops that the Uighur provided to the T'ang dynasty. However, the exact function of these women's units is unknown.

Functions of the Gök Türk and Uighur Armies The armies of both the Gök Türks and the Uighurs were used in all the expected roles for armies of their time – territorial expansion, subjugation of

neighboring peoples, maintaining control over the conquered territories and peoples, as a threat in diplomatic relations with other states, and border defense. However, in addition to all of these functions the Turkic armies were important element in their states' commercial relations *vis a vis* China. Like the earlier Hsiung-nu, both the Gök Türk and the Uighur sought to maintain the flow of Chinese luxury goods, and silk in particular, into their empires either for redistribution as gifts for the higher levels of society, or for foreign trade. The use of military force in varying degrees from cross border booty raids to large scale invasions, or sometimes the mere threat of military force, was one way to guarantee access to these highly-desired Chinese products.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What were the unique features of the Gök Türk and Uighur militaries in comparison to other steppe peoples?
2. Why did both the Gök Türk and the Uighur need the threat of credible military force in their dealings with China?