

QARAKHANID HISTORY – Military

Information regarding the Qarakhanid army is extremely limited, and what information exists is generally indirect – explanations of military terms in the *Divan al-Lughat at-Turk*, military related comments in the *Kutadgu Bilig* (both Qarakhanid works), or accounts of Qarakhanid battles in outside historical sources. However, when combined with the Qarakhanid's general tendency to follow Turkic traditions known from other Turkic groups in many aspects of their society (such as government and economy), this information can be used to form a general picture of the Qarakhanid military.

The picture that emerges is of an army which relied heavily on the typical nomadic cavalry force employing mounted archery, but combined this with some infantry forces.

The soldiers who made up the Qarakhanid armies came from two main sources. The first was the *oglan* or *ghulām*, slave-soldiers (mostly Turkic) that were to become a prominent feature of medieval Islamic armies. How these slaves were acquired, either directly as prisoners taken in raids and wars with non-Muslim Turkic groups, or purchased from slave traders is not clear, but the existing sources imply that most of these slaves were purchased as boys. Afterwards, the boys were given an arduous education in both military skills as well as palace customs and protocol.

The second source was the various Turkic tribes that had been incorporated into the Qarakhanid forces. While several tribes are mentioned by name in the surviving sources, the most important appears to be the *Chighiller* (*Çiğiller*). These tribes had continued to follow their traditional nomadic lifestyle, and were therefore an important element in the Qarakhanid cavalries.

When the Qarakhanid rulers eventually settled and began to rule their lands from a permanent palace, a personal guard was established to ensure the ruler's safety as well as the security of the palace. This force was divided into two groups: the *turgak* which was responsible for security during the day, and the *yatgak* that worked at night. Both were under the overall command of an officer known as the *kapujubashi*.

While the exact way in which the royal bureaucracy administered the army is unknown, Qarakhanid sources mention that soldiers were recorded in a *defter* (record book) called the *ay bitiği* or simply *ay*, possibly for pay purposes, and that their names could also be removed from the *defter*. Since similar *defters* were a feature of the military *divans* of later Turkic states, this may indicate that the Qarakhanids had a *divan* in charge of military affairs.

When the Qarakhanid army went on campaign it utilized a forward unit known as a *yezek* whose primary duty was to scout for ambushes and enemy forces along the path that the main body of the army would take. At night, the duty of intercepting enemy scouts and vanguard forces fell to a unit known as the *tutgak*. The ruler's security on in the field was the responsibility of the *mevkib*, a unit composed of palace guards and other palace units.

When the Qarakhanid army prepared to engage the enemy, officials known as *chawush* (*çavuş*) were responsible for forming the men into their ranks. Battle was typically opened by long-distance mounted archery, followed by infantry archery. The infantry only closed with the enemy when it appeared that they were sufficiently weakened and could be defeated.

Qarakhanid cavalry were armed with bows and arrows, and lances. Infantry forces carried swords, axes, maces and daggers. For personal protection the soldiers wore helmets and body armor and carried shields.

While most Qarakhanid military forces were under the command of the Qarakhanid Khan, not all were. Members of the ruling dynasty who were responsible for the administration of specific territories had military forces at their command, as did provincial governors and some other government officials.

While the surviving sources make no mention of the siege equipment in the Qarakhanid army, it would appear that the Qarakhanids had neither siege equipment nor engineers capable of making any. In 982 the Qarakhanids established a siege of the city of Khotan in the Tarim Basin. The city only fell to the Qarakhanids 24 years later in 1006, clearly indicating that the Qarakhanids had not been able to breach the city's walls. If the Qarakhanids had siege equipment it is unlikely that Khotan would have been able to hold out for so long.

Readings

Davidovich, E.A. "The Kharakhanids", in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

Golden, Peter B.. "The Karakhanids and early Islam", in Sinor, Denis (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 2008.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in determining the organization of the Qarakhanid army?
2. What sources and methods can historians use to reconstruct the Qarakhanid army?