

UIGHUR MILITARY

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.

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 Tang 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?