

# Armed Nomads, Nomadic Arms



The volume of collected essays entitled *Armed Nomads, Nomadic Arms* (*Fegyveres nomádok, nomád fegyverek, 2004, Szeged*) contains the proceedings of the 3rd Conference on the History of the Steppe held in 2002 at Szeged. The book has been edited by László Balogh and László Keller as Vol. 21 of the series *Library of Hungarian Prehistory* (*Magyar Óstörténeti Könyvtár*). The 16 articles concentrate on the arms and tactics of the nomadic peoples of Eurasia based on written and archeological sources, as well as on the available linguistic data.

The volume is introduced by the conference's opening lecture presented by András Róna-Tas, the founder of Turkic studies at the University of Szeged. He pointed out the importance of the conferences on medieval nomads in Szeged and emphasized that there still are a number of questions in connection with the nomadic tactics.

The article *Eulogy to Arms* (*Himnusz a fegyverekhez – R̥gveda VI, 75*) by Gyula Wojtilla analyzes the last hymn of Book VI of *R̥gveda*. The author collected useful pieces of information from Book VI about the arms and tactics of the Indo-Aryan speaking ethnic groups that conquered India in the second millennium BC. The strength of this military elite laid in its chariots. The main improvement of these chariots proved to be their use of an advanced wheel design (using an increased number of spokes). These chariots could be disassembled and were carried to the location of the battle on vehicles designed especially for this purpose. Cavalry had no function in this army, as basic saddlery (e.g. bridle-bit) was unknown. Based on the hymn, it is possible to ascertain that their main armor consisted of bow and arrow. They used two different types of arrows: long-range arrows with metal arrowheads and short-range arrows with poised bone arrowheads. Gyula Wojtilla concludes that the pieces of information available in this source partially correspond with the data available through the early literature of Indo-European peoples. However, in order to get a complete picture of the tactics of this ethnic group, complex research has to be carried out, incorporating the results of linguistics and archeology.

Tibor Schäfer calls the attention in his article entitled *Nomadic Influence on Eastern German Peoples* [*Lovasnomád hatás a keleti germán népekre*] to a neglected topic: the various influences on the way of life of the Germanic tribes reaching the South-Russian steppes from the end of the second century onwards. The author emphasizes mainly on the basis of the work of Iordanes that the steppe environ-

ment proved to be a major influence on their economy (e. g. they had a large stock of animals; the cultivation of land is less characteristic). Besides, he mentions the main types of armor used by the Germanic tribes: bow, arrow, lance and long sword. Schäfer concluded that further data can be gained about the interaction between the peoples of the steppe and the Eastern Germanic tribes from the results and methods of archeology, history of art and linguistics.

Johannes Gießauf analyzes the distinctive features of nomadic tactics based on the available written sources in his paper *Nomadic Arms and Tactics in Enemies' Accounts* [*A lovasnomád fegyverzet és harcmodor az ellenfelek beszámolóinak tükrében*]. He establishes that the authors stressed mainly the importance of the reflex bow in their books from the times of the Schyrians to the Mongolic Period. Furthermore, a number of sources emphasized the importance of horses in the life of the nomads. Another characteristic element of the sources is the description of the horse-mounted archer: a countless number of authors from different ages and backgrounds described the tactics of feigned retreat in connection with the nomadic peoples. These tactics impressed and threatened them at the same time. Besides, the fact-finding of the authors provides introspection into how they tried to show these peoples as negatively as possible, connecting the myth of the fierce savage to the figure of the nomadic fighter, leading to numerous further myths.

The article by Mihály Dobrovits focuses on the identification of the nomadic leader who formed alliance with the Byzantine emperor, Heracleius during his campaign against the Persians. His paper is built upon the data of Theophanes, the contemporary Chinese sources and Moses Kałankatvac'i. The accounts refer to the same person, i.e. *Ziebel* of the Greek source, *yaybu* of the Khazars is identical with the "King of North presiding over Northern Country" mentioned by the Armenian source, and the kaghan *T'ung sō-hu* recorded in the Chinese sources. According to Dobrovits, the leader who formed an alliance with Heracleius was *T'ung sō-hu* himself.

László Keller describes the warfare, fighters and their weapons of the Türk Khaganate in his paper. He examines the data from the Turkic runic scripts, comparing them with those of the Chinese and Byzantine authors. He mentions that internal sources provide evidence for the existence of infantry in the army of Turks, in contrast to the Chinese and Byzantine sources. However, Keller also attributes more important role to the cavalry in the nomadic army. The data of the Turkic runic scripts is in accordance with the information of external sources about the Turkic soldier's use of bow, arrow, sword, protective armor and lance. The most often mentioned weapon in the scripts is the lance. Keller emphasizes that the soldier of the scripts does not completely fit that pictured by Chinese and Byzantines sources. However, it is reflected all the more in the representations surviving on the cliffs of Central Asia. Finally, he underlines the importance of the internal sources as they described the picture of the nomadic fighter more clearly than external sources.

Hansgerd Göckenjan analyzes the importance of flags and drums in the culture of the nomads (*Flags and Drums by the Altaic Peoples* [*Zászlók és dobok az altaji népeknél*]), on the basis of sources on the Mongols, but he also takes into consid-

eration data on the Hsiung-nu, Türks, Pečenegs, Seljuks and Ottomans. Göckenjan points out that flags and drums had an important role in the representation of ranks and in religious life beside their basic significance in warfare.

Szabolcs Felföldi's paper calls attention to a special problem of the nomadic tactics: the crossing of rivers (*A nomád hadviselés egyik jellegzetes problémája: a folyón való átkelés*). According to the widely-accepted notion the nomads swam across on horseback and made use of their leather hose. This is oversimplified and schematic. The author, collecting the data of the sources from the age of the Huns to the Mongolian period, concludes that they carried out this task using thorough espionage and scouting (the establishment of the places of fords and bridges), or they chose suitable timing for the campaign (mainly in winter, waiting for the rivers to freeze). Or, they acted in alliance with sedentary peoples, using the fleet of the Byzantines or other peoples, or gained the help of foreign masters in building bridges.

Szabolcs Polgár examines the trade of weapons recorded in the sources in Eastern Europe during the period from the ninth to the twelfth century (*Kora középkori [9–12. századi] kelet-európai fegyverkereskedelemre utaló feljegyzések az írott forrásokban*). He concludes that mainly swords of Frankish and Scandinavian origin and arrows, helmets and armor represented the commercial goods carried East by Radanite, Rus and possibly Hvarzmiian or Volga-Bulgarian traders in the ninth–tenth centuries. The amount of Frankish weapons carried to Eastern Europe decreased from the end of the tenth century and the route of commerce changed by the twelfth century, as Muslim weapons were brought to Eastern Europe.

István Zimonyi examines the number of soldiers in the army of the conquering Hungarian (*A honfoglaló magyar haderő létszáma*). The most important data about it are provided by the Ġayhānī-tradition. It mentioned an army of 20,000 horsemen in connection with the Hungarian. Zimonyi collects the available data in Muslim and other sources about the size of the army of the Khazar Empire including its other subdued tribal confederacies (Burtas, Volga-Bulgar, Sarīr, Alan, Bašgirt), as well as other nomadic and sedentary peoples (e. g. Avar, Turk, Mongolian, as well as Chinese and Byzantine). He believes that in the development and evolution of the structure of the conquering Hungarian, mainly the influence of the steppe peoples is decisive. The army structure of Turkish and Mongolian peoples was based on the decimal system, and the Turkish name for a regiment of ten thousand is *tümen*. Ibn Rusta counts the army of the Khazar, Burtas and Hungarian in *tümen*, which is two *tümen*s in case of the Hungarian. Zimonyi claims that a *tümen* does not always exactly mean 10,000 soldiers, so the two *tümen* of the conquering Hungarian does not necessarily equal 20,000 soldiers.

The article by László Balogh is an analysis of the passage recorded in 839 in *Annales Bertiniani* (*Az Annales Bertiniani 839. évi bejegyzése és a magyarok*). The source contains the history of the delegation by the Byzantine emperor to the Frankish ruler Louis the Pious. It is mentioned that the *Rhos* were sent as delegates to Byzantium by their ruler, the *Chaganus*. These delegates intended to return home through the Frank Empire, as the route they used was endangered by

Barbarian attacks. It cannot be proven that the title of Kagan was already held by the Rus ruler at the beginning of the ninth century, therefore it is more probable that it refers to the Khazar kagan. So the Rus delegates in Byzantium were subjects of the Khazar kagan. Balogh considers that the Rhos delegates could have been members of the Khazar delegation – ascribed most recently by Treadgold to the years 838–839 – that asked the Byzantine Emperor for help in building of the castle of Sarkel.

János B. Szabó in his paper *Remarks on the Hungarian Warfare of the ninth–tenth Centuries [Gondolatok a 9–10. század magyar hadviseléséről]* shows the parallel features between the warfare of the conquering Hungarians and the Tatars of the Crimea. He considers his approach valid supposing that before the conquering of the Carpathian Basin the Hungarian people might have lived among similar geographical conditions as the peoples of the Crimean Khanate in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. Comparing the military activities of the two peoples, he states that both of them carried out raids without the intention of expansion, solely for plundering; both of them participated in European power struggles during their raids. He thinks the analogy of the Crimean Tartar to be especially important for military history of the ninth–tenth-century Hungarian people, as there are vernacular sources about their warfare.

Szilvia Kovács studies the missionary and frontier-guarding activity of the Teutonic Order of Knights settled in 1211 in Burzenland (expelled in 1225), based on charters. She claims that the members of the order did not carry out missionary activity. Their main duty was to guard the borders and to conquer new territories.

Mária Ivanics's article is a critical survey of Trepavlov's book, *The History of the Nogaj Horde (Istorija Nogajskoj Ordy, Moskva, 2001)*. She gives an outline of the history of the Mangit who established the Nogaj Horde, considerably influenced by the history of the Golden Horde. Their first leader of importance was Edige who held the title of *begler-bey* by Toktamis. After the death of Toktamis, the descendants of Edige became *begler-beys* of the successor states of the disintegrated Golden Horde. At this time they started to use the expression Nogaj as a distinctive title, the name of the first *begler-bey* of the Golden Horde. Their aspirations for independence started in 1480, from this time on they started to call them Nogaj in a uniform fashion. The necessary component for legitimate power was still Genghisid descent. In order to counterbalance the lack of it, they devised Muslim descent. The Nogaj Horde became a de facto independent nomadic empire by 1520. The organization of the state shows the classical nomadic partition (center, left wing and right wing), but new titles can also be observed (*nogaj biy, nureddin, kekovat*). The breaking apart of the Nogaj Horde was the consequence of aggressive expanding Russia and the conflicts between the two Nogaj wings. It completely disintegrated in the seventeenth century. Mária Ivanics considers the history of the Nogaj Horde exemplary, as an extraordinary wealth of sources is available, and it is possible to view the complete "life-span" of a nomadic empire: the establishment, the stabilization, the decline and the disappearance.

Gábor Szöllősy tries to prove in his paper that the Hungarian bow is not a descendant of the Avar bow, although both of them belong to the group of complex reflex bows. He examines the problem on the basis of archeological finds of Hungary, comparing them with Eastern parallels (the bow of Moshchevaya Balka, the Gogops-bow), as well as of bow-making experiences. As a result of the comparison, he establishes that the Hungarian bows' degree of grip is much narrower than that of the Avar ones (180°), and while the folding back of the Avar bows is caused solely by the stiff arms of the bow, in case of the Hungarian ones the bending towards each other of the flexible arms of the bow also supports this movement, considerably intensifying the energy conserving capability of the bow. Szöllősy thinks that the closest relatives of the Hungarian bows are the bows of the Khazars and the Pečeneg.

Mária Magdolna Tatár examines the etymology of three words from the Transdanubian dialect: *csomak*, *csomasz*, *csokmány* (carving axe). In her opinion both of the two basic forms (*csomak*, *csomasz*; and *csokmány*) can be traced back to the Turkic *čom* and the verb *čok*. The words *čomak* (stick, fighting stick) and *čo-qmar* (weapon for hitting) can be found both in Chagatai and in Kipchak Turkic dialects. She establishes that both forms can be found in Hungary before the period of Ottoman-Turkish occupation (sixteenth century) in the form of place names and proper names. Tatár based on territorial aspects categorizes these words and their forms as place names and proper names belonging to the middle layer of Turkic loanwords in Hungarian.

The sixteen articles published in the volume provide a good insight into the military history, the military structure and weapons of various nomadic peoples. At the same time, the inevitable and necessary complexity provided by the comparison of different sources (written, linguistic and archeological) can be clearly observed. The book is useful for historians and those interested in nomadism.

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