

# (H)oplayu tögdi

On the military tactics of the Ancient Türks

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The present paper discusses the military tactics of early medieval pastoral nomads. In my discussion I rely on three sources; the Eastern Roman Emperor Maurice's references to the Western Türks preserved in his *Strategikon*, which is, in turn, also preserved in the text of the *Tactics* written by Maurice's successor, Leon the Wise, and the imperial address of the Chinese Emperor Sui Wen-ti to his troops fighting the Western Türks, which is preserved in the *Sui-shu*.

Nomadic warfare is usually depicted as comprising of tactical retreats forcing the enemy troops to launch an attack as well as of a masterly use of archery to stop and annihilate them. However, it is evident from these three texts that, during the period of the sixth to the eighth century CE, body-to-body fighting with lances, bows and swords was also an important part of the Türks' tactics not only against other nomadic peoples, but also against the armies of their sedentary neighbours.

Describing the life and fights of its main hero, the Kül Tegin inscription very frequently uses the expression *oplayu tögdi*. Clauson defines it as 'to attack panting with fury', and derives it from the Kirghiz *op* 'a sigh' and Turkish *ufla-* 'to ejaculate *uf*'.<sup>1</sup> Talât Tekin gives no standard translation. Sometimes he translates this expression merely as 'attacked' (I E 36) or 'rushed and attacked' (I E 32), or 'attacked suddenly' (I E 3; I E 5).<sup>2</sup>

The situations described in the Kül Tegin inscription where this expression occurs are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> G. Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish*, Oxford 1972, 11.

<sup>2</sup> If not shown otherwise, with some slight changes in transcription, I follow the standard edition given in T. Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, Indiana University Publications, Uralic and Altaic Series 69, The Hague 1968, 231-292.

*tägdi*E 32-33 [against Čača sərjün] *binip tägđi* ‘mounted and attacked’E 37-38\* *binip tägđi* ‘mounted and attacked’, captured firstly two Tūrgeš warriors, then the *eltäbär* of the Az, who was a *buyruq* of the Tūrgeš *qayan*E 40 [against the Tūrgeš] *binip täg-mis* ‘mounted and attacked’, he killed and subjugated the common Tūrgeš peopleN 6 [against the Oγuz] *binip tägđi, sančđi* mounted, attacked and stabbed (the enemy) with a lanceN 8\* [against the Oγuz] *binip tägđi eki ärig sančđi b[aliq(q)]a b[as]iğđi* ‘mounted and attacked’, he stabbed two men and thrust them into mud (?)*oplayu tägđi*E 32 [against the Tabyač oŋ tutuq] *yadayin oplayu tägđi oŋ tutuq yurčün yaraqliq äligin tudti* ‘rushed and attacked on foot’ (in Tekin’s translation), he took the Governor’s brother-in-law prisonerE 36 [against the Kirghiz] *binip oplayu tägđi* ‘attacked’ (in Tekin’s translation), he hit one man with an arrow and stabbed two men through the thighsN 2 [against the Qarluq] *oplayu tägđi eki ärig ud ašru sančđi* ‘attacked suddenly’ (in Tekin’s translation), he stabbed two men through the thighsN 3 [against the Az] *oplayu tägđi az eltäbärig äligin tudti* ‘attacked suddenly’, he took the governor of the Az (people) prisonerN 4\* [against the Izgil] ‘attacked suddenly’  
N 5-6 [against the Ädiz] ‘attacked suddenly’, he stabbed one man with a lance and struck nine men, turning them around and around

The text deliberately differentiates between the situations that have *tägdi* ‘he attacked’ and those that have *oplayu tägđi*. The latter nearly always refers to body-to-body fighting when the hero wounded, killed or captured his personal enemy. This is not to take into consideration such personifications as: ‘he killed and subjugated the common Tūrgeš people’, E 40; or ‘stabbed [the enemy] with a lance’.

The only exception is in I N 4 (‘attacked suddenly’), which, however might refer to the hero’s fall from his horse during the battle. Otherwise, when the text says that Kül Tegin attacked (*tägdi*), he could merely be leading his retinue into battle. It is also worth mentioning that *tägdi* (‘he attacked’) usually features in a phrase with the verbal stem *bin-* (‘to mount’), as, for example, in the construction *binip tägđi* (‘he mounted and attacked’). In these cases the horse of the hero is also described in detail. There are two cases (I E 37-38 and I N 8) when a body-to-body battle is referred to as *tägdi* and not *oplayu tägđi*. In one case, narrating the last

fight of Kül Tegin, the text is *binip toquz ärän sančd* 'mounted (...), stabbed nine men' (I N 9). We can surmise that the phrase *oplayu täg-* or even (*h*)*oplayu täg-* is an onomatopoeical expression meaning 'to jump into the battle, to enter body-to-body fight'. These battle-scenes clearly show that attacking face-to-face and fighting body-to-body were the most widespread methods of combat.

According to our sources, as well as archaeological evidence, the majority if not all of the Turkic cavalry were armoured.<sup>3</sup> There are indeed a lot of expressions concerning armour. In the Orkhon inscriptions, we find *yariq/yaraq*,<sup>4</sup> *yalma*, and as our colleague László Keller has shown, *kädim*, which is frequent in the Uighur inscriptions. There, however, it refers to horses, while in Orkhon Turkic it can also mean 'armour'.<sup>5</sup>

We are not fully convinced that Sinor was right to suppose that the famous passage in the Tonyuquq inscription, *eki ülügi atliγ ärti bir ülügi yada γ ärti* (T I W 4), gives us a permanent proportion of the Turkic army.<sup>6</sup> The whole narrative of the events that lead to the restoration of the Eastern Turkic Qaghanate is completely fabulous; it exaggerates the pains of the Turks who remained independent after the collapse of the earlier revolts between 679 and 681. There were 700 of them, which is evidently a mythological number; they were hiding in the steppes. This narrative provides us with no evidence in support of Sinor's idea. Of course, as becomes clear from a particular passage of the Kül Tegin inscription (I E 32), the Turks could equally fight as infantry, but they were mostly a cavalry force.

The equestrian tactics of the Turks aroused the attention of their contemporaries. The first work to give a detailed description of their military virtues is the famous *Strategikon* (II, 1) attributed to the Eastern Roman Emperor Maurice (582–602). Criticizing the Roman and Persian military commanders of his own age, he writes as follows:

With this in mind the older military writers organized their armies into *droungoi*, divisions and *moiras* of varying strength as conditions dictated, just as the

<sup>3</sup> J. G. Mahler, *The Westerners among the figurines of the T'ang-Dynasty*. Serie Orientalie Roma XX, Rome 1959, 22, Table IX; K. U. Köhalmi, *A steppék nomádja lóháton fegyverben* [The pastoral nomads of the steppes, mounted and armoured] Kőrösi Csoma Könyvtár 12, Budapest 1972, 116–118, 123–124; E. Nowgorodova, *Alte Kunst der Mongolei*. Leipzig 1980, 213; I. Kozhamberdiyev and Yu. Khudyakov, *Reconstruction of Ancient Turkic Armour from Sary-Djon Monument*, UNESCO, International Association for the Study of the Cultures of Central Asia, Information Bulletin, Issue 17, Moscow 1990, 57–62; С. Г. Кляшторный–Д. Г. Савинов, *Степные империи древней Евразии*, Санктпетербург 2005, 100–101 (Pictures 10, 11); L. Keller, "Türk harcos és fegyverei az írott források tükrében," [Turkic warrior and his arms in the mirror of written sources], in L. Balogh and L. Keller, eds. *Fegyveres nomádok, nomád fegyverek*, Magyar Őstörténeti Könyvtár 21, Budapest 2004, 45–52.

<sup>4</sup> According to Kāšyari/Rifšat III. 12, Kāšyari/Atalay III 15; later this expression could also mean 'weapon'.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, "Türk harcos", 47.

<sup>6</sup> D. Sinor, "Horse and pasture in Inner Asian history," *Oriens Extremus* 19 (1972), 173. Later, independent of Sinor, this idea was also proposed by Keller, "Türk harcos," 46–47.

Avars and Turks line up today keeping themselves in that formation, so they can be quickly called to support any unit that may give way in battle. For they do not draw themselves up in one battle line only, as do the Romans and Persians, staking the fate of tens of thousands of horsemen on a single throw. But they form two, sometimes even three lines, distributing the units in depth, especially when their troops are numerous, and they can easily undertake any sort of action.<sup>7</sup>

This was the strategic background of the tactics of the Türks in late sixth-century Eastern Roman eyes. The outlook of their tactics can be found in a well-known later passage of this work (XI, 2):

They prefer to prevail over their enemies not so much by force as by deceit, surprise attacks, and cutting off supplies.<sup>8</sup>

Their weaponry is depicted thus:

They are armed with mail, sword, bow and lances. In combat most of them attack doubly armed; lances slung over their shoulders and holding bows in their hands, they make use of both as need requires. Not only do they armor themselves, but in addition the horses of their illustrious men are covered in front with iron or felt. They give special attention to training archery on horseback.<sup>9</sup>

Another passage discusses how they engage in battle:

In combat they do not, as do the Romans and Persians, form their battle line in three parts, but in several units of irregular size, all joined closely together to give the appearance of one long battle line. Separate from their main formation, they have an additional force which they can send out to ambush a careless adversary or hold in reserve to aid a hard-pressed section. (...) They prefer battles fought at long range, ambushes, encircling their adversaries, simulated retreats and sudden returns, and wedge-shaped formations, that is, in scattered groups.<sup>10</sup>

The Turks sometimes suffer from shortages:

They are hurt by a shortage of fodder which can result from the huge number of horses they bring with them. Also in the event of battle, when opposed by an infantry force in close formation, they stay on horses and do not dismount, for they do not last long fighting on foot. They have been brought up on horseback, and owing to their lack of exercise they simply cannot walk about on their feet.<sup>11</sup>

The learned emperor also gives advice on how to fight against them:

Level, unobstructed ground should be chosen, and a cavalry force should advance against them in a dense, unbroken mass to engage them in hand-to-hand

<sup>7</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon. Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, tr. G. T. Dennis, Philadelphia 1984, henceforth *Strategikon/Dennis*, 23. For the original Greek text with a German translation, see: *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*. ed. G. T. Dennis, tr. E. Gamillscheg, Vienna 1981 (henceforth *Strategikon/Dennis-Gamillscheg*), 110, 112 (original), 111, 113 (German translation).

<sup>8</sup> *Strategikon/Dennis*, 116; *Strategikon/Dennis-Gamillscheg*, 362 (original), 363 (German translation).

<sup>9</sup> *Strategikon/Dennis*, 116-117; *Strategikon/Dennis-Gamillscheg*, 362 (original), 363 (German translation).

<sup>10</sup> *Strategikon/Dennis*, 117; *Strategikon/Dennis-Gamillscheg*, 362, 364 (original), 363, 365 (German translation).

<sup>11</sup> *Strategikon/Dennis*, 117-118; *Strategikon/Dennis-Gamillscheg*, 364 (original), 365 (German translation).

fighting. Night attacks are also effective, with part of our force maintaining its formation while the other lies in ambush.<sup>12</sup>

It is also worth mentioning that according to our Eastern Roman author the tactics of the Türks and of the Avars were definitely better than those of other pastoral nomads.<sup>13</sup>

A comparison of these instructions with the Orkhon inscriptions clearly shows that, when fighting against their nomadic and sedentary neighbours, the Türks made use of the same methods that the Byzantine author supposed to be successful against them. Breaking into the lines of the enemy, forcing hand-to-hand fighting, and night attacks were the most common methods the Türks used in combat.

Maurice, however, was not the only imperial majesty who recorded his experiences about fighting the Türks. His near contemporary, the Chinese emperor Sui Yang-ti (581–605), in 583 issued an imperial address to his troops concerning the Türks.<sup>14</sup> According to this address, the classical *limes* strategy (dislocating the troops by posting them to far remote garrisons along a long and almost uncontrollable border) is unsuccessful. Therefore, he continues, the Chinese should take the initiative and carry the war into the steppes, directly attacking the enemy. During the years to come, the emperor and his commanders were successful in doing so. Taking advantage also of the internal calamities of the A-shih-na tribe of the Türks, they were able to subjugate the Türks, previously the dreaded enemies of the Middle Kingdom.

In conclusion, we can state that, aside from ambushes and simulated retreats, hand-to-hand warfare was the most effective tactic against not only the nomads, but this was also a tactic the nomads themselves deployed against their enemies, both nomadic and sedentary. The term *oplayu tãgdi* describes moments when the Turkic warriors attacked hand-to-hand (mostly with bows and lances, as becomes clear from the Byzantine and Old Turkic sources), when fighting a real decisive battle.

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<sup>12</sup> *Strategikon*/Dennis, 118; *Strategikon*/Dennis-Gamillscheg, 364, 366 (original), 365, 367 (German translation).

<sup>13</sup> *Strategikon*/Dennis, 116; *Strategikon*/Dennis-Gamillscheg, 360 (original), 361.

<sup>14</sup> Liu Mau-tsai: *Die chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-Türken (T'u-küe)*. Wiesbaden, 1958. I-II, 45–49.