

SELJUQ HISTORY - Military

Military Composition

In the early period the Seljuq army, sometimes referred to as the “old” (قديم, *qadīm*) army, was composed almost entirely of semi-autonomous Türkmén, who would continue to play a military role on the borders (sometimes acting on their own) throughout the history of the Seljuq state. However, in the 12th – 13th centuries a “new” (حديث, *ḥadīth*) Seljuq army developed that used slave-soldiers (*mamlūk*, مملوك, or *ghulām*, غلام) who were later freed, but in Rum the slaves were primarily Greek captives taken in frontier raids and not Turkic slaves as was common in other parts of the Islamic world. Slaves were believed to be more loyal to the state and brought specialized military knowledge and techniques unknown to the Türkmén as well.

In addition to the slave forces, there is some evidence that at least part of the forces that made up the Seljuq army in Rum were *muqṭaʿ* (مقطع), that is, holders of an *iqṭāʿ* (اقطاع). An *iqṭāʿ* was a grant of land by the sovereign to an individual, usually as a reward for extraordinary service, allowing that individual to collect the tax revenues from it in exchange for military service and/or a set number of soldiers. The *muqṭaʿ* had rights only to the revenue from his *iqṭāʿ*; the land remained the property of the sovereign. In addition, the *iqṭāʿ* was not automatically heritable; rights to the *iqṭāʿ* had to be confirmed by the sovereign before they could be passed on. The *iqṭāʿ* system was widely employed by the Great Seljuqs in Iran, Iraq and Syria, but the extent of its use in Anatolia is unclear. Some *iqṭāʿ* appear to have been given to Türkmén, but most seem to have been granted to *ghulāms*.

By the 13th century the Seljuq army had acquired two elements unique among the Muslim armies of the Middle East. The first was class of men of mixed ethnic origin, called *mixobarbaroi* (μιξοβάρβαροι, “semi-barbarians, half-breeds, half-castes”) by the Byzantines and *ikdiş* or *igdish* (اكديش) by the Seljuqs. These men were the children of Turkish fathers and non-Turkish mothers, generally Greeks. Anna Komnene, daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I and author a history of his reign titled *The Alexiad*, mentions the *mixobarbaroi* in the Seljuq army taunting the Greeks in their own language during a battle.

The second distinctive element was foreign mercenaries. A large part of the army was made up of hired soldiers referred to as *jirā khvār* (جری خوار or جرا خوار) “receiving a wage”. These hired soldiers came from many different regions and consisted of both Muslims and Christians. In particular, the Seljuqs of Rum made wide use of Christian Frankish mercenaries (فرنگ, *firang*). The Franks were esteemed for their military abilities, and played an important role in defeating the followers of Baba Ishaq during the Babaʿi Rebellion in 1240 since they, unlike the Muslim Türkmén in the Seljuq army, did not attribute any supernatural powers or protection to Baba Ishaq and his followers, and attacked them without hesitation.

The last element in the pre-Mongol Seljuq army were the forces provided by vassal states. These forces varied in size and quality, but did add to the strength and numbers of the Sultan’s army.

After the Mongol victory at the Battle of Köseadağ in 1243, the Sultanate of Rum became a Mongol vassal. In parallel with the increasing political decline of the Seljuq state in the following years, the army also began a process of decline. There was an increasing reliance on the *jirā khvār* forces, and the Türkmén tribes increasingly fell into this category. In addition, although the *ghulām* slave forces appear to have remained the core of the Seljuq army, the number of *muqṭaʿ* found in the army steadily declined as the institution of the *iqṭāʿ* itself fell into decline. Eventually, like the Seljuq sultans themselves, the army of the Seljuqs of Rum seems to have been disbanded or simply faded away.

Seljuq Military Titles

Historical sources relate a number of military titles from the army of the Seljuqs of Rum. Some of these titles have parallels with the army of the Great Seljuqs, but others are unique to Rum. The first is the position of *Beglerbegi* / *Beylerbeyi*. The exact role of this office is unclear in the pre-Mongol period. In the 12th century the *beylerbeyi* may have been the equivalent of the *archisatrapos* (ἀρχισατράπος), or

the *ispahsālār* (اسپهسالار), or the *amīr kabīr* (امير كبير). In the 13th century he may have been the *amīr al-umarā'* (امير الامراء) or the *malik al-umarā'* (ملك الامراء). The *beylerbeyi* often seems to have been responsible for controlling the Türkmén whose leaders were called *bey*, but at least one member of the Komnēnoi family was a *beylerbeyi*.

The commander-in-chief of the army was titled either *subaşı* or *sarlashkar* (سرلشكر, "head of the army") in Persian. Lesser commanders were either *amīr* (امير) or *beg /bey* (بك), the latter often referring to a Türkmén commander, and the commander of a garrison was a *shihna* (شحنة). The "master of horses", *amīr al-akhūr* (امير الاخور) may have sometimes been referred to as the *kundestabl* (كندستبل), from the French *contestable* (Latin *comes stabuli*, English *constable*). However, this post may have been a purely military position, distinct from the *amīr al-akhūr*. A similar position was found in the Byzantine Empire, the *kondostavlos* (κοντοστάβλος) or *konostavlos* (κονοστάβλος), and there is at least one reference to this position by the 12th century Arab historian Ibn al-Qalānīsī, where it is written *qundiṣṭabl* (قندصطبل).

Seljuq Weapons and Tactics

The weapons and tactics of the Seljuq army in Rum were essentially the same as those of the Qarakhanid army. However, the use of foreign mercenaries, and the Frankish mercenaries in particular, provided the Seljuq army with a wider range of tactics and capabilities than those found in the armies of many of the Seljuq's neighbors. The strength of the Seljuq armies was proven by Seljuq victories in battles such as the Battle of Myriokephalon (1176) against the Byzantines, and the Battle of Yassıçemen (1230) against the combined forces of the Khwarezmshahs, the Empire of Trebizond, and Seljuq rebels. However, Seljuq forces proved inadequate in their encounter with the Mongols at Köseadağ in 1243.

Readings

Bombaci, Alessio. "The Army of the Saljuqs of Rum", *Annali* 38/4 (1978), pp. 343-369.

Cahen, Claude. *The Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rum: Eleventh to Fourteenth Century*. Harlow, 2001.

Lambton, A.K.S., "The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire", in J.A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, V. Cambridge, 1968, pp. 203-282

Discussion Questions

1. What characteristics of the Frankish mercenaries made them so valuable to the Seljuq army?
2. In what important ways did the army of the Seljuqs of Rum differ from the army of the Great Seljuqs?