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# THE HSIUNG-NU: MILITARY STRUCTURE AND WARFARE TACTICS

**Murat ÖZTÜRK[1*]**

*[1]Associate Professor, Inonu University Faculty of Science and Literature, Department of History, Malatya, Turkiye*

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*Corresponding Author: Murat ÖZTÜRK*
*((murat.ozturk@inonu.edu.tr)*

## ABSTRACT

***This study provides a comprehensive examination of the military structure, tactical innovations, and historical legacy of the Hsiung-nu Empire, which served as the preeminent power in Inner Asia for over four centuries. Central to this analysis is the consideration that Hsiung-nu military prowess was not merely a product of numerical strength, but was deeply rooted in a nomadic lifestyle that functioned as an innate and continuous training ground for combat readiness. The research explores the sophisticated command-and-control systems established during the reign of Mao-tun Shan-yü, highlighting the transformation of the Hsiung-nu army into a disciplined and highly organized military force through innovations such as the decimal system and the use of whistling arrows for tactical signaling. The paper scrutinizes the diverse tactical repertoire of the Hsiung-nu, ranging from traditional feigned retreats and psychological warfare—exemplified by the Battle of Ping Cheng—to creative tactical engineering, such as the nighttime employment of trenches against the Han forces. Furthermore, the Battle of Zhizhi is analyzed as a critical strategic juncture where the departure from traditional mobility in favor of sedentary defensive structures resulted in strategic vulnerability. The material culture of the military is also evaluated through archaeological findings from the Hermitage and Kyakhta museums, focusing on the evolution of composite bows, iron weaponry, and specialized arrowheads. Ultimately, the study argues that the Hsiung-nu's military success was predicated on a synergy between technological superiority, tactical flexibility, and charismatic leadership. The research concludes by emphasizing the enduring institutional legacy of the Hsiung-nu, noting that the official foundation of the modern Turkish Land Forces is traced back to Mao-tun's accession in 209 BC. This continuity underscores that the Hsiung-nu military tradition persists not merely as a historical record, but as a living cornerstone of contemporary military identity.***

**KEYWORDS:** Hsiung-nu, Mao-tun Shan-yü, Nomadic Warfare, Whistling Arrows, Military Tactics, Battle of Ping Cheng, Turkic Military History.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Like every branch of social sciences, the primary element and focal point of history is the human being. Humans reside within a geographical context and are an integral part of nature. Consequently, all events experienced throughout history are inextricably linked to geographical spaces. When examining the world, we observe that climate, natural resources, and topography vary and are not uniform in quality across different regions. Geography is heterogeneous; it does not possess the same characteristics or productivity in all locations and periods, yet human needs remain fundamentally similar and constant. For this reason, since the earliest epochs, humanity has contended with geography and nature, developing various techniques in the fields of production, logistics, transport, and communication. Conversely, due to these same geographical inadequacies, migrations, wars, and occupations have occurred between different regions (Ozturk, 2010).

With geographical diversity and the increase in population over time, people have sought to acquire resources in other regions. Naturally, those who control resources also hold power. When resources are mentioned, one should not only consider minerals or contemporary energy sources. In addition to these, many geography-related factors—such as routes and regions of commercial or strategic significance, water sources, fertile lands, and more habitable terrains—have caused, and will continue to cause, warfare. While wars stem from various causes, it can be argued that historical conflicts and wars have fundamentally originated from the impulse to possess what others have and to attain power. Although the motivations for war have shifted and new pretexts have emerged over time, this impulse has remained the most significant driver of warfare. Those who possess more resources and wealth will inevitably become powerful. In this way, the wars that have persisted throughout history have necessitated the maintenance of a strong army for survival. This situation has gradually evolved into a vicious cycle, and humanity has failed to eliminate warfare from its constitution and live in peace.

One of the fundamental prerequisites for power is a robust economy. It appears improbable for a state to maintain a strong economy by relying exclusively on the resources within its own sovereign territories. Just as an individual cannot produce everything they require on their own—historically or currently—societies and nations have likewise been unable to achieve self-sufficiency for all their needs. Therefore, the necessity of procuring these requirements from other states or nations through various channels has surfaced. While trade represents the most prominent and legitimate avenue, other historical means of satisfying these needs have included pillaging through warfare, securing spoils, and imposing tribute upon the parties controlling the desired resources through military force.

For the reasons cited above, the party that seizes economic resources will also attain political hegemony. Naturally, there have been motivations for war other than economic ones. Among these, reasons such as taking pre-emptive measures against potential threats and fighting for sacred sites [1] can be identified. Whether driven by economic or political factors, the victor of the war will, by extension, be the party that secures power.

At this juncture, the army has been one of the fundamental institutions of the state structure throughout history for the sake of achieving sovereignty, possessing habitable lands and valuable resources, protecting the country, and maintaining those resources. For thousands of years, every state has exerted immense effort to possess a robust army. The concepts of war and the army do not merely consist of occurrences on the battlefield; they are complex structures with numerous variables. The events taking place on the battlefields—namely, the front—constitute only a portion of the war. Therefore, the progression of developments to that point is, in fact, a culmination (Guler, 2022). For this reason, the process an army undergoes until it reaches the front incorporates many elements, from training to war culture. Establishing successful armies in almost every period of history, as the Turks have done, is not a matter to be taken lightly. The foundations of the Turkish army were laid by the Asian Hsiung-nu State, the oldest known state in Turkish history[2]. Following these states, the Turkish states that appeared on the stage of history possessed strong armies in almost every period by taking the Hsiung-nu as their basis. Some nations other than the Turks were also occasionally influenced by the Hsiung-nu army; the Mongol armies can be an example of this. Furthermore, the legendary Emperor Shih Huang-ti of the Qin Dynasty sought to model his army after the Hsiung-nu army.

The fundamental sources of this subject consist of written Chinese records and archaeological findings. The primary written sources of Hsiung-nu history are the chronicles of the Han Dynasty, which was contemporary with the Hsiung-nu. The Shih-chi by the renowned historian of the period, Ssu-ma Ch'ien

(145–86 BC), and the Han shu by Pan Ku (32–92 AD), who is considered Ssu-ma Ch'ien's successor, constitute the principal sources regarding the Hsiung-nu. In both works, the Hsiung-nu are discussed in a dedicated section. However, detailed information concerning the Hsiung-nu is also available throughout the remaining parts of these extensive sources. In this study, two different English translations of the Shih-chi have been utilized. These are various volumes of The Grand Scribe's Records, edited by William H. Nienhauser, and the three-volume Records of the Grand Historian, consisting of selected translations by Burton Watson. For Pan Ku's Han shu, the Turkish translation of the ' Hsiung-nu ' section by Ayşe Onat et al. has been employed. In addition to these, publications by leading scholars in the field have been used as secondary sources.

Apart from written records, archaeological data have also been utilized visually. These visuals were examined at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia; the Buryat History Museum in Ulan-Ude; and the V.A. Obrucheva Kyakhta Museum of Local Lore in the town of Kyakhta. The images included in this study belong to my personal archive.

It is well-established that the Hsiung-nu were a state formed by the unification of nomadic tribes. This process of state formation is a matter that warrants serious consideration[3]. A more extensive study would be required to examine the entirety of the Hsiung-nu army's activities. Therefore, the present study is limited to the structure and training of the Hsiung-nu army, the specific weaponry they utilized, and the military methods employed in certain battles that are tactically significant. Furthermore, there is a lack of sufficient data regarding the conflicts the Hsiung-nu engaged in outside of their wars with the Chinese. Chinese sources, which convey remarkable details from millennia ago, described the Hsiung-nu based solely on their own observations. This is a natural consequence of the historical context. For this reason, our knowledge concerning the military methods practiced in the wars against the Yuezhi or the Donghu, as well as in internal conflicts, remains limited. Consequently, the battle tactics selected for this study are those employed in the wars against the Han State. Since the focus will be on the significant wars between these two powers, I am of the view that it is necessary to first detail the causes of this struggle.

## 2. HSIUNG-NU – CHINESE CONFLICT

The Hsiung-nu and the Chinese were societies of entirely distinct characters. While the Hsiung-nu primarily consisted of pastoral nomads, China was a quintessentially agrarian society. This disparity in economic systems led both states to require one another's products. The Hsiung-nu sought primarily cereal products and silk from China, whereas the Chinese desired horses and animal products from the Hsiung-nu. However, if one were to inquire as to whose needs were more pressing, the answer would undoubtedly be the Hsiung-nu. The determinant factor here is geography, as discussed in the opening lines. The Hsiung-nu utilized their most fertile lands as meadows for their horses, followed by the necessity of pastures for their other livestock. For the sustainability of a pastoralist system in this harsh geography, at least barley was essential. Through pastoral activities, the Hsiung-nu economy was capable of meeting the vast majority of the population's basic needs. In addition to meeting nutritional requirements through animal food production, needs for clothing and shelter were fulfilled through the production of felt, wool, and leather. Through horse breeding, a military instrument of high strategic significance was produced. Throughout history, societies utilizing horses have consistently been those that conquered and explored. Conversely, societies with infantry-based armies remained on the defensive against cavalry and were confined to specific regions. Consequently, expanding and conquering societies are those that possess cavalry. The Asian Hsiung-nu are one such society. Facing them, China was largely compelled to remain on the defensive, as its army was predominantly composed of infantry and was unable to take the offensive against the Hsiung-nu. The most prominent evidence of this centuries-long defensive stance is the Great Wall of China they constructed. During the periods of the Hsiung-nu and later the Turkic Empire, nearly every Chinese emperor who ascended the throne initially sought a path of reconciliation with the Turks, followed immediately by efforts to repair the Great Wall. We observe that in periods when China conducted expeditions against the Turks and achieved success, they abandoned their existing military structures and incorporated a high number of horses into their armies.

Despite all the advantages of pastoralism, it also possessed significant vulnerabilities. Risky situations—such as the inability to store animal products in the same manner as agricultural ones, the fact that animals are productive only during a specific period of their lives before eventually dying, and the sudden loss of large numbers of livestock due to factors like famine or extreme cold could abruptly

destabilize the balances of the steppe economy. This inherent weakness compelled the successful leaders of nomadic states to develop a more secure economic structure (Barfield, 1981). Consequently, there was a need for storable and preservable products, namely agricultural goods. The necessity for agricultural products was not solely for the purpose of ensuring stability; they were also required to sustain both the population and the livestock.

To be sure, the Hsiung-nu also engaged in agriculture, yet their own production occasionally proved insufficient to meet all their needs[4]. This was because the Hsiung-nu utilized their most fertile lands as pastures for their animals, primarily horses. However, this was not always adequate. Particularly when fertile lands in the southern Gobi Desert and western regions were lost, this insufficiency transformed into a catastrophe. Therefore, in a sense, the Hsiung-nu were dependent on China. Consequently, the nomads' modes of contact and commercial exchange with—and dependency upon—settled people plays an important role (Di Cosmo, 1994). The Hsiung-nu were obliged to secure spoils through raids on China, to impose tribute, and otherwise to acquire what they desired through trade. They were compelled to exert pressure on China for the grains they desperately needed. To achieve these objectives, the Hsiung-nu constantly required a strong and dynamic army. This was because their population was smaller than that of China, and their geography was merciless. A failure to bring China under control meant extinction for the Hsiung-nu.

Upon examining China, it is observed that there was also a requirement for Hsiung-nu goods. However, this requirement was not a matter of vital necessity as it was for the Hsiung-nu. I am of the view that China's objectives regarding the Hsiung-nu pertained more to border security than economic factors. Much like the Hsiung-nu, China represented a significant economic resource for all nomadic tribes of the north. China sought to bring the Hsiung-nu under control and assign them the duty of protecting the northern borders. Furthermore, if the Hsiung-nu were brought under control, they could also produce horses, various animals, animal products, and mineral products for China. I wish to conclude these brief observations regarding the mutual perceptions of the Hsiung-nu and the Han Dynasty—essentially a very broad subject of study—with these points. Consequently, the Hsiung-nu were obliged to possess a strong army to obtain what they desired from China. Similarly, China required Hsiung-nu goods. Primarily horses and other animals, animal products, war materials, and mineral products were the Hsiung-nu goods most needed by China. To this end, China aimed to bind the Hsiung-nu to themselves and render them a vassal. For these reasons, both states sought to establish dominance over one another. I do not believe they had a goal of seizing the entirety of each other's territories. This is because the Chinese cannot survive in the Hsiung-nu steppes, and the Hsiung-nu cannot survive in China (Gumilev, 2002).

In their written records, the Chinese trace the origins of the Hsiung-nu to a Chinese prince believed to have lived between the 19th and 16th centuries BC[5] (Giele, 2011). Following this view, which is widely recognized as biased within scholarly circles, the sources provide fragmented information regarding the Hsiung-nu until the 3rd century BC. Although chronologically disconnected, this information predominantly concerns the pressure exerted on China by the ancestors of the Hsiung-nu. While it is possible to speak of a military organization among the Hsiung-nu during these periods, the sources are insufficient to verify whether this military structure constituted a regular army. According to available data, the organization of the Hsiung-nu army was largely finalized during the reign of Mao-tun.

### *2.1. Mao-tun (209–174 BC) and Organization within the Army*

The Hsiung-nu, particularly from the reign of Mao-tun onwards, reached a level of political and administrative organization that served as a model for numerous subsequent states. The entities for which the Hsiung-nu set a precedent were not limited to those established by their direct descendants; the Hsiung-nu state apparatus influenced a multitude of steppe societies, most notably the Mongols. One of the most pivotal structures of this institutionalization was the army. From this period, as written sources begin to gain greater clarity, it becomes possible to access more definitive information regarding the Hsiung-nu military forces.

When considering the military organization under Mao-tun, the most significant aspect is the decimal system. Fundamentally, the decimal system is a structure wherein each officer, based on their rank, is responsible for ten individuals, thereby streamlining and expediting the chain of command. The objective is to essentially enhance the overall mobility and speed of the army by accelerating the process of command and control. Regardless of the seniority of their rank, every commanding officer

primarily interacts with ten subordinates to whom they transmit their orders. Each of these individuals, in turn, passes the commands to the unit of ten below them. In this manner, orders reach every soldier in a rapid and intelligible fashion. Established approximately 2,200 years ago, this system remains so practical and effective that the decimal system is still employed in many contemporary militaries, including the Turkish army.

Discipline is the foundation of every army; however, Mao-tun was exceptionally stringent in this regard. This is evident from the rigorous discipline and obedience training he imposed on the soldiers assigned to his command by his father, Tou-man. In this context, Mao-tun punished soldiers who failed to comply with his orders with death, and ultimately ascended to the throne by executing his father. Following Mao-tun, discipline remained at the highest level within the Hsiung-nu army. Although the military system experienced deterioration during periods of territorial loss and defeat, the martial nature of the Hsiung-nu remained steadfast.

While our information regarding the pre-Mao-tun era of Hsiung-nu history is limited, the data that began to gain clarity during his reign provides various insights into the military structure and battle tactics of the Hsiung-nu. Furthermore, records from the Mao-tun era indicate that the Hsiung-nu organized their battlefield deployments according to the color of the horses. According to the accounts of the Battle of Ping Cheng—the details of which will be examined in subsequent sections—the western wing of the Hsiung-nu army consisted of white horses, the eastern wing of black horses with white faces, the northern wing of black horses, and the southern wing of bay (light brown) horses (Giele, 2011). It is our consideration that this categorization facilitated the oversight and control of the emperor and high-ranking commanders over the army. Moreover, it is evident that this system further expedited the chain of command in a broader sense.

The Hsiung-nu army was inherently swifter than the Han forces by virtue of their horses. While the Hsiung-nu military was composed entirely of cavalry, the Han army comprised infantry, cavalry, and war chariots. The fundamental Hsiung-nu tactic, predicated on wearing down the enemy followed by a strategic retreat, relied heavily on this speed differential. Through his innovations, Mao-tun further enhanced the mobility and the speed of command and control within the army, thereby widening the gap with the Han forces and perhaps establishing an invincible military force.

Although Mao-tun engaged in regional conflicts to bring the steppe tribes under control, his reign essentially witnessed three major wars. These were the wars against the Tung-hu and the Yuezhi, and the Battle of Ping Cheng, which resulted in the Han State being bound to tribute through a Marriage Alliance (Heqin). Mao-tun subjugated the three great powers in his periphery through a single decisive campaign each. In subsequent years, the Hsiung-nu may have conducted further expeditions against the Yuezhi, the details of which remain obscure; however, the Yuezhi issue was entirely resolved during the reign of his son, Ki-ok.

These wars, waged against three distinct states, manifest the formidable power attained by the Hsiung-nu army during the Mao-tun era. The Tung-hu were a steppe people of a structure similar to the Hsiung-nu, making them exceptionally difficult to defeat. Perhaps relying on their own strength, "the Tung-hu had at first taken Mao-tun lightly and had not made preparations. When Mao-tun with his elite troops arrived, he attacked, crushed, and wiped out the King of Tung-hu and captured his people and livestock" (Giele, 2011; Watson, 1961). Shortly after this victory in 206 BC, Mao-tun marched upon the Yuezhi and defeated them as well. By the conclusion of these campaigns, he had reached a force of 300,000 bow-pulling cavalry. It is well-documented that following these defeats, the Tung-hu and the Yuezhi remained silent, so to speak, for many years.

Mao-tun's final major conflict was against the Han State. In this war, Mao-tun effectively besieged Han Emperor Kao and shortly thereafter imposed heavy tribute upon the Chinese. The specifics of this engagement will be elaborated upon in the section dedicated to exemplary battle tactics.

## 3. TRAINING

First and foremost, it must be stated that the steppe lifestyle is, in and of itself, a military training ground. The Hsiung-nu, the vast majority of whose population was engaged in pastoralism, were compelled by this economic activity to live within a specific discipline. For instance, the migrations to summer pastures (yaylak) necessitated a strict order and discipline. When categorized by number, the Hsiung-nu primarily raised sheep, horses, and cattle, in addition to various pack animals. The types of livestock raised by each tribe varied; while one tribe might predominantly breed horses, another would focus on sheep. The grazing patterns of these animals differ significantly: horses feed on the longest grasses and require substantial amounts of water. Consequently, the tribes breeding horses were the first to initiate the migration movement, settling in

the most fertile areas. They were followed, in order, by tribes raising cattle and then sheep. Due to their pastoral activities, the Hsiung-nu were obliged to lead a nomadic existence, as their livestock required constant access to fresh grass and clean water, and could not withstand extreme cold or heat. Therefore, locations that were milder in winter, cooler in summer, and generally abundant in grass and water throughout the four seasons were preferred as summer and winter quarters. The specific locations where each Turkic community would spend the summer and winter were determined by strict customary laws, known as töre (Ögel, 1991). This order was no different among the Hsiung-nu. Transporting their tents with them, the Hsiung-nu completed their relocations rapidly and immediately commenced their daily activities. However, summer pastures were occasionally changed depending on weather conditions. Naturally, locations abundant in grass and water were selected. If the previous year's summer pasture lacked sufficient resources or if weather conditions were unsuitable for pastoralism, an alternative was chosen. This order and discipline in the migration movement facilitated easy military deployments and provided a deep familiarity with the geography. Since this migratory pattern was a part of life and repeated annually, weather conditions, routes, and particularly food resources for animals and water sources for the army were well known. The Hsiung-nu, who were in constant motion throughout their history, did not have to exert additional effort for geographical reconnaissance during wartime, enabling them to move rapidly. Furthermore, these migratory movements and pastoral activities ensured that military discipline permeated daily life. Selecting locations based on livestock, maintaining order during migration, and the safe transport of the population and animals required a high level of discipline and organizational skill. Essentially, for the Hsiung-nu, whose lives were disciplined and demanding for these reasons, military service ceased to be a hardship and became an integral part of daily existence. Consequently, due to the aforementioned structure of migratory movements, instances of soldiers succumbing to nature are extremely rare in Hsiung-nu history. An exception to this occurred in 71 BC. Following a successful campaign to the west against the Wusun, a blizzard struck during the return. The snow depth exceeded two meters. The Hsiung-nu lost the majority of their armies and herds (Ercilasun, 2019). Nine-tenths of the Hsiung-nu army perished (Ögel, 1981).

The military training of the Hsiung-nu was not fundamentally based solely on daily life. One cannot disregard formal training by merely claiming that the people's lifestyle constitutes a form of military drill. Among the Hsiung-nu, military training began at a very early age. Young children started learning archery by riding on the backs of sheep and hunting birds and mice with bows and arrows. As they grew older, they hunted foxes and rabbits for food. Once they attained the strength to fully draw a bow, all males became armored cavalry (Giele, 2011). Training cavalry in this manner constitutes the foundation of the transformative development in history known as the "cavalry revolution." For a mounted archer to discharge arrows during military action, both hands must necessarily remain free. Any unexpected change in the horse's movement places the rider at risk of falling from the horse's back and beneath the feet of the enemy. In chariot warfare, this problem was resolved by assigning the task of driving the vehicle to one individual and the task of archery to another. However, the cavalryman had to perform both tasks simultaneously and alone. This necessitated not a division of labor between two individuals, but rather a division of labor within the body itself: between the lower body, which controlled the horse, and the upper body, which utilized the bow and arrow. Under these conditions, reliable coordination that would render riding safe could only be achieved through a prolonged period of habituation for both the rider and the horse (McNeill, 2015). As is evident from these statements, military life was an activity that commenced at an early age for all Hsiung-nu males. At this point, it is necessary to briefly mention the horse as well. As noted by McNeill, the cavalryman's mount must also be habituated to these maneuvers and modes of movement. Although I have not encountered explicit mention in the written sources, it is my consideration that the Hsiung-nu also trained their horses during these drills. The superiority provided by the cavalry also stems from the Hsiung-nu's pastoral activities. It is inconceivable for a soldier to possess only a single horse; due to reasons such as injury, death, or exhaustion, a soldier must own multiple mounts. In such a case, a soldier would require at least three or four horses. The Hsiung-nu bred an exceptionally high number of horses and trained them accordingly. In sedentary China, however, the situation was entirely different. Military service was a distinct profession, and individuals entered this profession upon reaching a certain age. Only those settled in border regions functioned as both farmers and soldiers. These individuals—whose duty was to protect the borders from the Hsiung-nu—were

typically landless poor or convicts. This practice of mobilizing such individuals in exchange for land ownership was a policy that began during the reign of Emperor Shih Huang-ti of the Qin Dynasty. At this juncture, even in the processes of a soldier's daily life and training, there were profound differences between the Chinese and the Hsiung-nu.

It is the custom of the Hsiung-nu, when they possess sufficient resources, to sustain themselves by following their livestock and hunting with their bows. During times of crisis, however, the men practice the arts of fighting and raiding to execute incursions and attacks. Thus, when war is imminent, the Hsiung-nu males—all of whom function as soldiers—engage in rigorous drills. These exercises are not limited to archery; they also encompass maneuvers such as attacking, retreating, and drawing the enemy in through feigned retreats (Giele, 2011). A Hsiung-nu warrior had secured certain guarantees to prevent the deterioration of his economic standing. Since spoils of war were regarded as private property that could not be confiscated from him, raiding served as his primary means of accumulating wealth. An ordinary Hsiung-nu would occupy himself with migrating from place to place, practicing military drills, and resting at his leisure during the spring and autumn. It was no coincidence that a Chinese minister, based on accounts from slaves along the borderlands, remarked that Hsiung-nu warriors lived relatively comfortable lives. Consequently, Chinese individuals frequently fled their own territories to seek refuge among the Hsiung-nu (Gumilev, 2002).

As evidenced, military training among the Hsiung-nu was a continuous process. Daily life, encompassing activities such as migration and hunting, provided the fundamental bedrock for military instruction. However, training was not comprised solely of daily routines; professional drills and tactical exercises were conducted during periods of peace. Furthermore, the Hsiung-nu organized nearly incessant raiding expeditions into China. Although these raids did not constitute full-scale military operations, they served a dual purpose: securing economic gains and contributing significantly to the practical military experience and preparedness of the warriors.

## 4. BATTLE TACTICS

When considering the history of warfare regarding the Turks, a limited number of battle tactics typically come to mind. However, I am of the view that this is not the case. As will be seen from the examples provided, the Hsiung-nu employed diverse battle tactics tailored to specific circumstances. Although they occasionally experimented with various tactics that were not inherent to their structure, their power was virtually unrivaled when they fought under the leadership of a strong ruler using tactics suited to their nature.

We learn of the Hsiung-nu's battle tactics primarily through Chinese sources. This presents a certain limitation, as Chinese chroniclers only described the Hsiung-nu based on what they observed. Consequently, the battles for which we have detailed records are those between the Hsiung-nu and the Han Dynasty. We lack specific details regarding the wars the Hsiung-nu waged against the Yuezhi or the Tung-hu.

The only significant insight into conflicts outside of China comes from a letter written by the Hsiung-nu Emperor Mao-tun to the Han Emperor Wen-ti in 177 BC. In this letter, Mao-tun recounts that he punished the Wise King of the Right for attacking the Chinese border by dispatching him to the west to find and attack the Yuezhi. Regarding this offensive, Mao-tun states:

"Through the grace and assistance of Heaven, the superior talents and virtues of my officers and soldiers, and the extraordinary strength of my hardy horses, [the Wise King of the Right] immediately crushed and defeated the Yuezhi. He executed them all, brought them into our fold, and settled them under our will" (Baykuzu, 2012; Ercilasun, 2019).

What stands out in this passage is the emphasis on the talents of the soldiers and the power of the horses. It is my consideration that the "superior talents and virtues" of the soldiers refer to their training-based tactical and combat skills. Furthermore, the strength of the horses—the primary power of the Hsiung-nu army—is explicitly highlighted. Beyond this, we lack substantial information regarding the wars the Hsiung-nu conducted against tribes or nations other than the Chinese.

I wish to exemplify the various tactics employed in the wars waged against the Chinese through three specific battles. One of the most significant conflicts between the Hsiung-nu and the Chinese is the Battle of Ping Cheng, which occurred in 200 BC and culminated in the capture of the Chinese Emperor Kao-tsu. When examining the structure of this battle and the Han army in general, it is observed that the Chinese primarily utilized three groups of soldiers: infantry, chariot-borne troops, and a small number of cavalry. In contrast, the Hsiung-nu army was composed entirely of cavalry equipped with bows and arrows. Utilizing a bow and arrow on horseback is only achievable through the childhood training

previously mentioned. When the advantages of speed and the ability to inflict casualties from a distance—thereby minimizing the risk of loss—are combined, an almost invincible force emerges. While Hsiung-nu soldiers utilized bows and arrows for long-range combat, they employed daggers and short swords in close quarters when necessary.

The primary tactic of the Hsiung-nu army—characterized by its mobility, efficient command structure, and high lethality—was to lure the Chinese army, comprised of infantry, cavalry, and war chariots, into pursuit in order to break the cohesion between these unit groups, which possessed differing speeds. Consequently, the Hsiung-nu could inflict significant losses on the Chinese through fragmented engagements. The most critical aspect of this tactical retreat was the concealment of their true strength; the Hsiung-nu would hide their main force in a pre-selected location for a major engagement, away from Chinese observation. Despite these risks, Chinese armies consistently chose to pursue the Hsiung-nu, as was the case during the Battle of Ping Cheng. Furthermore, Mao-tun deliberately concealed his elite forces from the Chinese envoys who arrived for negotiations, showcasing only the elderly, the infirm, and weak horses within their sight. Encouraged by these reports, Emperor Kao-tsu launched a precipitate offensive, believing the prolonged pursuit would culminate in victory. However, this offensive resulted in his own encirclement and subsequent captivity at Pai-teng. Mao-tun exhausted the Chinese army by leading them on a protracted pursuit. Due to the plummeting temperatures, to which the Chinese soldiers were unaccustomed, it is recorded that two or three out of every ten soldiers suffered from frostbitten fingers (Giele, 2011). Through this battle, the Hsiung-nu dealt a severe blow to the Han State. For many years following this defeat, the Han Dynasty was unable to field an army against the Hsiung-nu and was forced to seek diplomatic avenues to alleviate the pressure. The Emperor's capture remained a mark of historical shame for the Chinese for centuries.

Another significant engagement occurred during the reign of Hu-lu-ku Shan-yü (96–85 BC). This period marked a phase where the Hsiung-nu had been regressing against China for some time, and the Han Dynasty sought to deliver a final, decisive blow. In 90 BC, faced with a massive Chinese force, the Hsiung-nu initially retreated continuously while suffering heavy losses. Hu-lu-ku Shan-yü and his staff convened to devise a solution. The resulting plan involved infiltrating the area in front of the Chinese army at night to dig long, deep ditches. Simultaneously, the Hsiung-nu army maneuvered to the rear of the Chinese lines. At the first light of dawn, they launched a surprise attack from the rear; the Chinese army, falling into the ditches and losing all cohesion, was nearly annihilated. General Li Kuang-li was taken captive (Onat, Orsoy, Ercilasun, 2004). This victory provided much-needed relief to the Hsiung-nu, who had been under immense pressure for a prolonged period. In this battle, the Hsiung-nu employed a tactic they had not previously utilized. Hu-lu-ku Shan-yü, retreating before a much more numerous Chinese army, embraced the idea of trench-digging that emerged from his council with his staff. Beyond the tactical conception itself, the flawless execution of this plan is of equal importance. The Hsiung-nu soldiers managed to dig these trenches ahead of the Chinese without being detected. When the attack designed to drive the Chinese into the trenches was executed at the right time and from the right position, a catastrophic defeat for the Han forces became inevitable.

The final conflict I wish to discuss corresponds to the first period of fragmentation among the Hsiung-nu. Chih-chih Shan-yü, who departed from the center to migrate westward and established the Western Hsiung-nu, came into contact with the Romans. In the Battle of Carrhae[6] in 53 BC, the Parthians took a significant number of Roman soldiers captive. A portion of these prisoners was transported to the vicinity of the city of Merv to guard the border (Eberhard, 1944). It was here that the Roman soldiers interfaced with the Hsiung-nu, leading to a mutual exchange of military knowledge and expertise between the two parties. Notably, the Hsiung-nu constructed a fortress alongside the Romans—a structure not typically seen among the Hsiung-nu. Furthermore, it was recorded that infantry soldiers fought in a formation referred to as 'fish-scale,' a tactic characteristic of the Romans. In 36 BC, the Chinese attacked this location, winning the battle and executing Chih-chih and his followers. Information regarding this conflict is derived from the reports of the victorious Chinese commanders. In this instance, the Hsiung-nu, despite their contact with the Romans, were unsuccessful against the Chinese. This strategic choice by Chih-chih Shan-yü highlights the inherent risks of abandoning mobility—the asymmetric advantage of steppe armies—in favor of sedentary defense doctrines. The confinement of traditional mobility within a fortification rendered the Hsiung-nu army a static and vulnerable target against the numerical and technical superiority of the Chinese. In this context, it can be argued that the primary cause of failure was

not a technical deficiency, but rather the forfeiture of the army's existential martial character.

The Hsiung-nu, for whom I have provided examples of various battle tactics, generally fought by gradually drawing the Chinese army towards them. This tactic, employed both to wear down the enemy and to create distance between the various units comprising the Chinese military, was the primary battle tactic of the Hsiung-nu. Naturally, there were also battles in which the Hsiung-nu remained on the defensive. While there is insufficient data regarding Hsiung-nu defensive methods, it is known that they constructed walls. In the great and bloody war of 119 BC, mention is made of Hsiung-nu cities with walls and grain storehouses. It is mentioned in the Shih-chi that during the war conducted at this time, the army of Wu-ti, which entered Hsiung-nu territories, reached a walled city and seized the grains stored by the Hsiung-nu to feed their armies, burning the remainder before returning (Farmer, 2011). Broadly speaking, it is observed that the parties occasionally gained superiority over one another in the wars waged between the Hsiung-nu and the Han Dynasty. This particular war is significant as it demonstrates the period in which China held military superiority. It is clearly evident that during periods when the Chinese were successful against the Hsiung-nu, they attempted to emulate the Hsiung-nu militarily. The Chinese were unable to achieve success against the Hsiung-nu with their existing military systems. The powerful Emperor Wu-ti of the Han Dynasty exerted great effort to convert the infantry and chariot troops in his army into cavalry and ultimately succeeded in doing so, albeit partially. When internal problems within the Hsiung-nu were added to this situation, the Hsiung-nu began to lose power.

### *4.1. Weapons*

Hsiung-nu's long-range weapons are bows and arrows, their short range weapons are dagger and a short, all metal pike (Giele, 2011).The primary weapons of the Hsiung-nu army were the bow and arrow. Bronze or iron was utilized in the manufacture of arrowheads, depending on the period. While various types of arrowheads were employed, the most significant impact was created by whistling arrows. Believed to have first been utilized during the reign of Mao-tun, this type of arrow involves a hole drilled into a bone piece attached to the shaft, intended to produce a sound similar to a whistle. The collective sound generated when thousands of arrows are discharged simultaneously creates fear and panic in the enemy. It is not my consideration that the sole function of these arrows was to induce panic; whistling arrows may also have been utilized for signaling and direction. Ranking officers might have used these arrows to indicate the target direction to their soldiers on the battlefield. Examples of whistling arrows can be seen in Figure 1. The white components visible on the right are animal bones that facilitate the production of sound.


***Figure 1: Whistling Arrows. B.C. I-A.D. I. Found in Southern Siberia near Ivolga Settlement. Exhibiting in State Hermitage Museum. Murat Öztürk Archive.***

As previously stated, the types of arrowheads utilized by the Hsiung-nu were diverse. Identical or similar arrowheads were also employed by the Scythians, the Turkic Empire, and the Uyghurs. Examples of various Hsiung-nu arrowheads can be observed in Figures 2 and 3. To define these findings, which are exhibited at the Kyakhta Local History Museum, the original Russian descriptions provided by V.A. Obrucheva Museum were utilized.

In Figure 2, findings numbered 4, 5, 6, and 11 represent three-winged and tanged arrowheads. Numbers 5 and 6 also feature a whistling apparatus manufactured from horn. Numbers 7 and 10 are two-winged and tanged arrowheads, while numbers 8 and 9 are figured three-winged and tanged arrowheads. Regarding the materials utilized, it is evident that all of the arrowheads displayed are

manufactured from iron.

*Figure 2: Various arrowheads from Hsiung-nu Period. Found in Southern Siberia. Exhibiting in V.A. Obrucheva Kyakhta Local History Museum. Murat Öztürk Archive.*

In Figure 3, arrowheads numbered 12, 13, and 14 are identified as three-winged and socketed. Arrowhead number 15 is defined as three-faced and socketed; all of these arrowheads are manufactured from bronze.

*Figure 3: Various arrowheads from Hsiung-nu Period. Found in Southern Siberia. Exhibiting in V.A. Obrucheva Kyakhta Local Tarih Müzesi. Murat Öztürk Archive.*

Hsiung-nu soldiers generally utilized daggers and knives in close-quarter combat with the enemy. Archaeological findings further corroborate this fact. In the Hermitage Museum and the Ulan-Ude Buryatia Museum of History, there are examples of daggers dating back to periods long before the reign of Mao-tun. These artifacts exhibit great similarity to examples from the 3rd century BC and later in terms of style and manufacturing technique. Additionally, bronze spearheads dated to the pre-Mao-tun era are exhibited in the Hermitage Museum. The founding date of the Hsiung-nu State remains a matter of scholarly debate; as the establishment of the state is not the primary focus of this study, I have not discussed the earliest weapon specimens. An example of a dagger can be seen in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: Dagger dated to the 4th–3rd centuries BC, Exhibiting in State Hermitage Museum. Murat Öztürk Archive.*

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION:

### *5.1. The Origins of Supremacy and the Role of Leadership*

The Hsiung-nu, whose state's founding date remains a matter of scholarly debate, entered a period of comprehensive ascendancy starting from the reign of Mao-tun. However, a sudden and total rise in every domain is contrary to the natural course of historical progression; such an ascent must be predicated upon a pre-existing accumulation of development. While written records corroborate this through fragmented accounts, archaeological data provides more definitive clarity. Nevertheless, it is evident that a rapid resurgence occurred from Mao-tun's reign onwards, resulting in an organizational structure that remains influential even today. Perhaps the most profound transformations during Mao-tun's reign were witnessed within the military. The army, already characterized by speed and potency due to the factors examined in this study, reached even greater levels of sophistication. That the

Hsiung-nu were militarily superior to sedentary China is a comprehensible consideration. However, how can one explain their decisive triumph over neighboring groups who possessed similar cultural and martial characteristics? Why did the Hsiung-nu emerge as the dominant regional power rather than the Yuezhi, to whom Mao-tun was sent as a hostage, or the Donghu, who underestimated him? What distinguished the Hsiung-nu from other nomadic confederations? Undoubtedly, Mao-tun's ability to further accelerate the maneuverability and command-and-control systems of an already rapid army played a pivotal role. It is my consideration that leadership and command capability were also fundamental factors. Commanding proficiency was not restricted solely to Mao-tun. His son Ki-ok, while perhaps not a genius of the same caliber as Mao-tun, exhibited comparable traits. Even during the period of regression, Hu-lu-ku Shan-yü bolstered national morale by securing a brilliant victory against the Han Dynasty. Hu-tu Shan-yü, who sought to liberate the Hsiung-nu from Chinese vassalage, shared similar qualities. Why, then, did the Hsiung-nu, as the preeminent military power of the region, face such profound challenges against the Han Dynasty? Essentially, the answer to this inquiry is too comprehensive to be contained within this scope.

The Hsiung-nu and the Han Dynasty intermittently gained superiority over one another. With Emperor Wu-ti, the Han Dynasty began to seize the upper hand. The most critical move of the powerful Emperor Wu-ti was within the military. To increase the number of cavalry, he was prepared to lose thousands of soldiers in order to secure superior breeds of horses from Ferghana. A formidable leader, Wu-ti found the solution in reorganizing his army like that of the Hsiung-nu, comprised of cavalry. Aside from the lethal pressure he exerted on his commanders and the severe economic consequences of his pro-war policies, Wu-ti was able to distance the Hsiung-nu from his borders, even if he could not bring them under his direct control. Wu-ti's exceptionally long reign was also a factor in this success; however, even after his death, the Hsiung-nu could not recover and eventually sought vassalage to China as a final resort.

In this context, it is my consideration that the most significant factor lies in leadership. Maintaining unity among steppe tribes requires charisma and power, as each tribal chieftain is essentially a leader governing a small country, and their satisfaction is paramount. The Hsiung-nu army, for the reasons I have emphasized throughout this study, was the preeminent power in the region. Yet, if the opportunity and capability to utilize this power are absent, it cannot progress beyond being a potential force. In addition to inadequate administrators, the territorial losses experienced by the Hsiung-nu and the occasionally very short reigns led to their decline and their inability to utilize their power to its full extent. Nevertheless, emerging leader-emperors were able to mobilize the power of the Hsiung-nu even during their short reigns, and consequently, the Hsiung-nu remained the greatest power in Inner Asia for at least 400 years.

Not only through their military but also through various administrative organs, the Hsiung-nu served as a model for a multitude of subsequent states. Foremost among these are the Turkic states. The influence of the Hsiung-nu army—capable of implementing unexpected tactics when necessary, producing high-quality weaponry, and acting as an unstoppable force in the hands of a powerful leader—is so profound that it extends to the present day. In particular, the recognition of Mao-tun's accession to the throne in 209 BC as the foundational basis of a modern military demonstrates that the Hsiung-nu legacy is not merely confined to the dusty pages of history, but rather persists as a living tradition.Today, the founding date of the Land Forces of the Republic of Türkiye is officially recognized as 209 BC, the year of Mao-tun's accession to the throne. Figure 5 displays the current emblem of the Turkish Land Forces.


***Figure 5: Emblem of Turkish Land Forces***

**Notes**

1. A significant portion of wars fought for sacred sites are grounded in economic and political objectives. Throughout history, religion has been utilized as an instrument for the legitimation of these economic and political goals."
2. I shall not enter into the debates regarding

whether the Hsiung-nu State was a Turkish State here. However, I am of the view that the statements in Chinese sources from the period of the Turkic Empire asserting that the Turks were descendants of the Hsiung-nu, and the shared culture of both tribes, have concluded the discussions on this matter. For details, see Liu Mau-tsai, Doğu Türkleri (Eastern Turks) and Eski T'ang Tarihi (Old Tang History-Chiu T'ang-shu) 5170:13

3. Regarding the capacity of nomadic tribes to evolve into powerful empires, see Di Cosmo N. (1999), 'State formation and periodization in Inner Asian history. Journal of World History, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1-40.
4. For details, see Murat Öztürk, Asya Hunlarında Tarım ve Yerleşik Hayat, Hiperyayın, İstanbul 2019 (Agriculture and Sedentary Life Among the Hsiung-nu)
5. For this dating, which corresponds to the Hsia (Xia) Dynasty period, see: Eberhard Wolfram, Çin Tarihi (A History of China), Turkish Historical Society Publications, Ankara 1995, p. 23.
6. Today, this is Harran, located within the provincial borders of Şanlıurfa, Turkiye.

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