

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED
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The Weapons and Tactics Of the Huns and Avars, based on written
sources

(Summary of Thesis)

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Introduction

The written sources primarily highlight the importance of light cavalry in connection with the tactics of nomad nations. The features (like the horseback-archery tactics) first outlined by Herodotos, have been adopted by later authors and have been applied by the settled civilizations to the actually appearing nomad nations during the Middle Ages. The *topoi* used by contemporary authors have been accepted and emphasized by modern research for a long time in regard to the tactics used by nomad peoples. While it is true that the utilization of light-cavalry was dominant among the tactics of nomad warfare, in the eyes of the contemporary observer of that period it was a novelty. Therefore it was better highlighted by sources. In addition however, after analyzing written and archeological sources and taking a closer look at visual representations, it can be stated that alongside light cavalry, heavy cavalry, infantry and siege techniques have also been used.

The goal of my dissertation is to analyze the written sources in relation with the weaponry and tactics of the Hun and Avar armies. It means on one hand the gathering and interpretation of weapon terminology (occasionally comparing it to archeological materials) and on the other hand collecting and analyzing the descriptions of their tactics.

The structure of the paper

My paper consists of two big chapters apart from the general introduction of written sources. These chapters deal with the weaponry and tactics of the Huns and Avars. In both parts, first I study these two nomad people's weaponry. I have gathered the mainly Latin and Greek terms and also the descriptions from written sources regarding their weapons and their characteristics. Following the analysis of the weaponry, I focus on the tactics of these two nomad nations. I have discussed in separate chapters the phenomena related to the pre-campaign, battle preparations, investigating the topics of: exercises, discipline, reconnaissance, fortune telling, river crossing and the issue of supplies. I have analyzed the observations of the military formations, headcount, military signals, and the different forms of psychological warfare and camp defenses, from the phenomena that can be observed during the course of battles. I discussed the different units of their armies' -such as: forward guard, light cavalry, heavy cavalry, infantry, bodyguards and engineering corps (siege

equipment) – in a separate chapter. Following this, I have examined the data concerning the servant-nations of the Huns and Avars. In case of both nations, at the end of the sub-chapter about tactics, I have analyzed a major battle. In case of the Huns, the battle of Mauriacum and in case of the Avars, the campaign against the Byzantine general, Priskos in 599.

Conclusions

After examining the sources concerning the Huns and Avars, we can conclude that there are several authors commemorating the nomad nations' weaponry and tactics that have conquered the Carpathian Basin in 567 (twenty-one works about the Huns and twenty-eight about the Avars). The temporal distribution of the available sources is completely different in case of the two nations. While in case of the Hun Empire we have data about the Huns' weaponry and tactics covering almost the entire time of its existence – despite the fact that it was a period of rare sources- the situation with the Avars is completely different. The majority of the sources report about the tactics during the Byzantine–Avar wars of the Avar Khaganate. We have no information about the topic from the second part of the 7th century until the end of the 8th century. We have a limited knowledge about the Frank–Avar wars of the late 8th century. Therefore essentially, the sources provide more data about the tactics and weaponry only for a shorter period of time in case of the Avars. We can observe a significant difference regarding the genre of the sources mentioning the Huns and Avars. While the vast majority of sources mentioning the Huns' weaponry and tactics are historical works and poetry, the situation with the Avars is much more diverse. In addition to historical works and poetry, we can find data in various theological works (sermons, legends, etc.), yearbooks, letters, a Frank decree and military manual about the tactics and weaponry used by the Avars. There is an opus: The Strategikon of Maurikios that can be highlighted. Among the sources writing about the Huns and Avars, this is the one that specifically focuses on strategics of the Avar army. Moreover it is an interesting phenomenon that while in case of the Huns, the authors often can give a general description of their weaponry and tactics, in case of the Avars, only Maurikios can provide a general description in the topic.

In the written sources about the armament of the Huns, besides bow and arrow they mention spear, cutting weapon, tether and protective weapons. The authors do

not mention blunt weapons and their usage and the archeological findings prove the same. The sources related to the Avar weaponry tell about the usage of the following: bow and arrow, cutting weapons, spear, blunt weapons, sling and defensive weapons. The usage of these weapons –with the exception of: the tether, the sling and equine armor- is confirmed by archeological findings as well. In most cases, we can get punctual information about the structure of the weapon, its fabrication and types. Due to the organic materials used in the fabrication of the components, the usage of the tether and the sling is only proved by written sources. The usage of the tether –after examining the two nomad nations- can only be observed among the Huns. This is a typical nomad device. Its application has been taken over by other settled people, like the Sarmatians in Eastern-Europe or the Goths. Throwing the tether was a widespread combat style among the nomad people (Sarmatians, Alans, Huns) 2nd-6th century AC. Subsequently the sources do not mention this weapon, only later, when they write about the Mongols. In spite of this, we cannot state unequivocally that the nomad people did not use tether after the 6th century until the arrival of the Mongols. It is important to state that the tether was not only a weapon, but also a main tool of the nomad people, used for shepherding of big animals. Therefore, there is little likelihood that it had not been used by Avars or Hungarians to manage their livestock. Moreover, it was also used to capture prisoners. In case of the Avars, the sources refer to capturing slaves from the Slavic people and also to capturing prisoners from the Byzantine region. We have data from the following times about slave trade, practiced by the Hungarians, Pechenegs and the Cumans. We can assume that these tribes also used the same tool to capture the slaves. It seems that by this time the Byzantine army also commonly used the tether, as Leo VI commemorates its usage upon writing about the weaponry of the Byzantine army. The sources also mention the sling as a projectile weapon used for distances during the Byzantine–Avar and Frank–Avar wars. It was commonly used in Europe since the Roman era. The Avars most probably have acquired it from the Byzantines or other European nations.

We can observe, in case of some weapons that besides their practical application they also had a symbolical meaning for the nomad people we examine. The Huns considered the bows a symbol of royal power. This is also supported by archeological evidence. The same can be assumed for the Avars, however its symbolic role cannot be proved through written sources. We assume this based on the findings of Kunbáony. Presumably the sword also had a sacred role along the bow

for the nomad people. According to the work of Iordanes –describing a mythical story- clearly the sword of Attila was a most prestigious symbol of the royal power that establishes its bearer’s power and ensured the continuity to rule. The sources also describe a similar cultic role for the sword for the Avars; in the description of the 579/580. AC Byzantine–Avar contracting, Bajan took an oath with his sword drawn.

Several elements of preparation to battle and campaigns can be studied for both Avars and Huns. Practicing the different tactical elements was crucial for nomad people. We found clear reference in Avar related sources that they practiced for campaigns even the during hunts. In case of the Huns, we can assume only based on the nomad analogies that the hunts described by authors were not only for the purpose of dropping game.

In order to successfully implement the practiced tactical elements, exercising discipline was also a key aspect. Tough we cannot find reference in sources in relations with the Huns and from Maurikios also only makes general reference in relation with Avars, probably both nomad nations put great emphasis on maintaining discipline similarly to other nomad (and not nomad) people we have data about.

Doing reconnaissance prior to and during campaigns was also an important task; it involved getting information about geographical features, the situation of the population and the opposing force’s numbers and movements. However, we only have limited data to work with in connection with the Avars and Huns. We can only assume from indirect data from some successful campaigns that the Huns had valuable information about the areas they chose to invade. Maurikios also only speaks in general concerning the Avars: they “skillfully notice” the right situation and use it to their advantage. Other sources however state that Avars used people who could travel well in unfamiliar areas. The “travel guides” led them to their desired destination. They also caught “tongues” from the enemy personnel to extract information.

It was a common practice for nomad people that they used fortunetellers upon initiating campaigns and immediately prior to battles to find out who will prevail. From our examined nations it was only the Huns who used fortunetelling from intestines and bones before the battle of Mauriacum (according to Iordanes). We can consider it a widespread practice on the Eurasian steppes. Fortunetelling from intestines however was not a trait for nomads, but it was on widespread on the territory of the Roman Empire. This tradition got suppressed by the 4th century.

Whilst Maenchen-Helfen accepts this type of fortunetelling for Huns and tries to substantiate with uncertain data from another author (Prosper Tiro), the possibility arises that the whole theory is just the fiction of Iordanes.

Crossing rivers represented a great hardship for a nomad army. In case of Huns we can only find limited data in written sources. Occasionally they used the weather to their advantage and crossed on frozen rivers and other times they crafted wooden boats and rafts to get to the other side. The Avars paint a more complex picture in this issue. They simply swam with their horses across smaller rivers or they have waited winter to come and crossed the frozen water. Moreover they used their subordinate nations (Slavs) or their allies (Byzantines and Longobards) to build instruments for crossing. They could also make themselves these instruments. The data from the sources do not clearly tell us what distinguished the “Scythian way” of bridges from the Byzantine way.

The Huns and Avars approached the supply problem of the military differently. On the one hand they could secure food from plunder and hunting. On the other hand, they were forced to carry many things for the campaigns, which the sources refer to be solved by the utilization of chariots by both nations. Sources prove that both nations went to campaigns with a significant number of horses. Furthermore, we can observe in sources that the Avars made their peace treaties and alliance treaties in a way that ensured further supplies for them.

Concerning the phenomena related to battles, we only have data about the how the Avars started theirs. They either timed the offense for the middle of the night for the advantage of surprise, or as some sources tell us, they sometimes agreed on a date for the battle with the enemy (as it was customary in Middle Ages).

Whilst we only have a singular data about the formations used by the Huns, we have more information available about the Avars. Iordanes provided data about the classical battle formation, meaning the Huns were in the center and the auxiliary nations were on the left and right flanks. Maurikios emphasizes that unlike the ternary Byzantine model (right and left flank, center mass), the Avars were organized into different regiments that seemed like one single formation. Eventually, this seemingly united formation breaks down into several bodies that follow different tactical orders. This phenomenon is verified by several other authors' (mainly Theophylaktos') works. Although the descriptions of battles do not provide exact information about the tactics of the Avar army, their battle formations clearly indicate tactics used by light

cavalry. Sources tell us that the Hun army's formations and tactics showed similar traits (multiple units and faux retreat).

There are multiple sources referring to the headcount of both nations' armies, but the medieval data found in the available sources are rather unreliable; therefore we cannot draw far-reaching conclusions concerning neither army's actual numbers. However, it is clear from these sources that the Huns and Avars both used a decimal military organization system, similar to other steppe nations (like Turkish and Mongol speaking nomads). This system can be observed in the armies' of nations with different cultural background (for example the Byzantines), where the army consists of companies, regiments and myriads. There is one source about the Huns in this topic that is worth highlighting. The late dated Scandinavian *Hervar and Heidrik saga* (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*) clearly shows the Hun army to be structured into companies, regiments and myriads. The source commemorates the headcount of individual units, revealing that the companies, regiments and myriads contained more, than a hundred, a thousand or ten-thousand warriors. This data is worth highlighting, as according to our current knowledge, other nations' tumens contained less, than ten thousand warriors.

Written sources state that the Hun army used military signals of human voices and instruments, while the Avars used military insignia as well. Only a few sources let us draw conclusions about the usage of human voice signals. These sources show that the Huns and Avars were shouting and screaming during sieges and battles. Most probably these included signals that were used to communicate military orders. Whilst the usage of horn by the Huns is only mentioned by sources in connection with the battle of Mauriacum, there are plenty of sources telling about the horns of the Avars. It is clear from some authors' tidings that the horn was a Kagan combat insignia and its raising or vocalization symbolized going into war for Avars. Furthermore additional data proves that horns were used during battles as a means of communication between units. We can find examples for some Avar military insignia, like the flag spear or the whip. In addition we can assume that the drums mentioned by the authors also served the same purpose.

Psychological warfare was used by both nations in several forms. Several sources commemorate that both the Huns and the Avars used loud and voices (of horns and drums) to put fear in the heart of the enemy. We can interpret as a form of psychological warfare that they tried to make their armies look bigger, than it was in

reality. They could do this, because of the large number of reserve horses they had. Both nations tried to use incantations to reach victory.

During the campaigns both the Huns and Avars ensured the protection of their army camps. The Hun method can easily be observed in the battle of Mauriacum, when the defense of the camp of Attila was a circle of chariots. In case of the Avars, only their Slavic auxiliary nation used a chariot circle to protect their camp. Furthermore we can assume that the chariots that carried supplies (food, weapons, tents and siege instruments) were used to form the defensive circle for the camp. In contrast, Maurikios emphasizes that the Avars only used sentinels to guard their camps.

The forward guard was responsible for the cover of the marching army. Most of the times it was recruited from the auxiliary nations. In case of the Huns we can make assumptions based on the battle of Mauriacum, where the Gepids took this role. In case of the Avars, the Slavs served the same function.

We can examine an interesting phenomenon in the written sources, in connection with the assessment of tactics and lifestyle of the Huns and Avars. It can be sensed in relation with both nations that the majority of authors attempt to picture their habits, tactics and appearance negatively, just like in the case of other “barbarian” nations. They are commemorated as treasonous, gainful, “wicked and duplicitous”, cruel and ugly on appearance. However, it can be observed from the two nomad nations, only in case of the Huns to have the light cavalry archer tactics strongly emphasized. A number of sources commemorate and highlight – even strongly exaggerate – how great riders they have been and how fantastically they have used bows and arrows. The sources primarily emphasize the usage of bows and arrows when they generally describe the Huns. A number of authors write about how well they could ride horses and at the same time how incapable they were for pedestrian transport or ground battle. In contrast to this, a completely different picture is formed about the Avars from written sources. Maurikios mentions about the same nomad nation - using topos- the inability to fight on foot, but the strong emphasis on the usage of bow and arrow, the light cavalry tactics and the comparison to centaurs cannot be found in relation with the Avars. Maurikios practically considers the bow and spear equals in the Avar arsenal and in addition he notes, they put great effort in learning horseback archery. Simultaneously, the emperor, who is experienced in warfare, describes the nomad nation’s light cavalry tactics in detail. Linder took the

data of the sources literally and he considered the Huns more of a horseback-riding nation, than the Avars. He also concluded, based on sources describing the attacks of Avars in the 6th century, that their cavalry was not substantial and could not find traces of light armored horseback archers. In his view, the major battles of the Avars were infantry battles. The data of the sources however, draw a different picture and the explanation is unlikely not that they did not have light armored cavalry. The Huns that crossed the Volga in 370 carried out major attack against the Roman Empire and the surrounding “barbaric” nations around it. The Hun attacks had a significant impact on the alteration of the ethnicity of Europe. The overwhelming Hun attack was practically a shock to the Romans, which was recorded in a highly exaggerating manner. The formerly unknown and alien elements of their army and tactics were emphasized and highlighted. The light cavalry tactics of the Avars, appearing on the southern Russian steppes in the second part of the 6th century, was not surprising and alien for the settled empires. It can be observed from the middle of the 5th century that the Byzantine tactics were greatly influenced by the nomad people living around its borders. Therefore as the authors writing about the “deeds” of Avars already were familiar with their light cavalry tactics, it was not important for them to emphasize it, as they had significant experience. It can be observed in case of both nomad nations’ tactics that sources write about wedge-shaped attack formation, surprise attacks from cover and surrounding too. These tactical elements were widespread among the nomads of the Eurasian steppe. It can be clearly stated that when Huns and Avars attacked in a wedge-shape, it meant a multi-unit, loose battle formation. In addition, we can emphasize that whilst the summary of tactical elements of the Huns were traced from several minor references, in case of the Avars there is a single source that names theirs’; Maurikios’ work on warfare. The tactic of the faux retreat is first described by this author, who was experiences in warfare. Parts of this tactical element, such as waiting in an ambush position or surrounding the enemy, appear first to be used by the Avars. In addition, we can emphasize that the surrounding technique is not exclusively used in relation with the faux retreat. Other nomad people, including the Avars, used it in other contexts as well. In case of the Huns, shooting arrows backward while on horseback also appears as part of the faux retreat tactic in the sources. Written sources do not mention this about the Avars, but this way of shooting arrows can be identified on a picture representation depicting Avars from the Frank-Avar wars. The light cavalry tactic of scorched earth was also used by

the Avars, but not only them. Some researchers believe that during Charlemagne's campaign in 791, the Avars used said tactic to force the Frank army to retire.

Both nations used heavy cavalry in addition to light cavalry. Based on data of written sources it seems that the importance of this kind of unit was probably lesser. Presumably their heavy cavalry was built up on one hand from elements brought from East and Central Asia and/or Alans conquered on the south Russian steppe. It appears as the Avars gave a more significant role to heavy armor cavalry units during the Byzantine–Avar wars. The main attack weapons of the Avar heavy cavalry were the long stabbing-spear and perhaps the long, double edged sword. In addition, based on the armor of the warriors, their horses were probably armored too. In the upcoming times during the Frank–Avar wars, heavy cavalry gained significance again, but not as significant as during the campaigns against the Byzantine Empire. It was in this late period when the Frank type weapons –such as heavy armor- could have appeared in their inventory.

We assume that in case of battle the light cavalry used different tactical elements to loosen up the formation of the enemy's forces and following this, they used their heavy cavalry units to deliver the final blow to the enemy.

It can be observed that several nomad nations had their infantry units recruited from their own people. Written sources do not corroborate this in case of Huns and Avars. Both nations used subordinate nations to act as their infantry: German nations for Huns and Slavic and Gepida people for Avars. Beside these nations, other nomads were also part of infantry units, such as the Alans for Huns and Bulgars and Kutrigurs for the Avars, as we primarily assume.

The bodyguards ensuring the security of nomad emperors can be clearly found in sources about Attila, in relation with the Huns. The bodyguards of the Avar Kagan are only indicated in some indirect references of a few sources.

In order to be able to achieve victory against the Roman or the Byzantine Empire, both the Avars and Huns had to be able to implement siege techniques against fortifications successfully. We have much more data about the Avar siege techniques than Hun ones. Both nations were able to construct these siege weapons, but they also used their subordinate nations to build those for them. Some construction methods were borrowed from European empires. A good example for this is that the Huns learned from the Romans and the Avars learned from the Byzantines to build torsion structured catapults. Some of the siege machines of the

nomads were brought from the east. It can be assumed that the knowledge of building a simple Chinese catapult was brought from the east. However, the nomad nations did not simply built and used these machines, but also were able to innovate the field of siege techniques. Prokopois describes a battering ram built and used by the Sabirs that was utterly unknown for Persian and Byzantines before. In connection with the Huns' siege methods we can observe that their tower-like siege buildings looked unique as they differ greatly from their Roman counterparts.

In summary, we can conclude that the idea of the Huns and Avars having solely light cavalry in their war repertoire can be refuted. However, in case of the Avars, it is also not acceptable to state that the light cavalry was ousted from their tactics. We can observe light and heavy cavalry, infantry and siege weapons in the war repertoire of both nomad nations. The usage of military units and tactical elements was different for both the Huns and Avars. Maurikios' Strategicon about the tactics of the Avars is an outstanding work from military point of view. The author provides description of their inventory and weapons, as well as the tactics Avars used during battles and in addition he provides information on other nomad nations tactical elements. These general data filled with topoi are well complemented (or in some cases contradicted) by information from other authors.

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