

# THE ROLE OF MILITARY IN THE SOGDIAN SOCIETY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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## Abstract:

Due to its strategic location, Central Asia has historically been a region of significant military activity, with numerous military campaigns aimed at controlling these territories. In particular, the Sogdian state was under the constant influence of military operations for several centuries. This article discusses the role of the Sogdian Confederation's military in society, as well as the descriptions of military titles, based on the research of leading Sogdian scholars.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Silk Road, Military class, Yuezhi, Kushan, Turk Khaganate, Afrasiab, Panjikent, Varakhsha, Chokar, Sogdian Confederation.

## Introduction

In the early Middle Ages, the Central Asian region, strategically located along the Great Silk Road, was of significant importance and constantly faced external invasions. Particularly, Sogdiana, located at the heart of Central Asia, was always under the influence of military movements. The conquest of Samarkand by the Yuezhi, the capture of this city by the Xionites in 437, the Sassanian invasions of Southern Sogdiana mentioned by Tabari, military actions by Kushan forces in the region of Nakhshab between 25-265 AD, and later attempts by the Kang, Turk Khaganate, and the Arab Caliphates to control Sogdiana all contributed to the formation of a population knowledgeable in military affairs, that is, the development of a military class. This indicates that military matters were given considerable attention in Sogdiana. Moreover, considering that Sogdiana was governed on a confederative basis, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the constituent regions of the confederation were required to unite their military forces and form an alliance against a common enemy [1].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

These circumstances reflect a period of more than seven centuries, from the beginning of the Common Era until the Arab Caliphates established their influence in Sogdiana, during which the military class developed as a distinct social group in Sogdiana. The «freemen» initially served as soldiers, later gaining certain privileges in exchange for voluntary service, and they were not engaged in continuous military duties. As a result, the military formed a specific social stratum within Sogdian society. Evidence of this can be found in wall paintings from ancient Sogdian settlements like Afrasiab, Panjikent, and Varakhsha, where depictions of mounted and infantry soldiers are shown.

Another important aspect to consider is that every peasant had under his command several soldiers, sometimes dozens or even more, and the social status and characteristics of this military class have yet to be fully explored.



## METHODOLOGY & EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In Sogdian documents, the title «γwyrpt» (akhwirpat) is mentioned, referring to a person who served as the «stablemaster» or leader of the cavalry. According to the Sogdian scholar V.A. Livshits, «γwyrpt» is derived from the Middle Persian terms «āxwarrbed» and «āxwarrsālār», which are based on the Sogdian «āxwēr» and the Persian «āxur». The administrators of the Kesh region in Sogdiana held this title. Such titles can also be found in Chinese chronicles and coins. The title «akhwirpat» refers to a military position, essentially the leader of the cavalry or, more broadly, the «commander» [2]. In addition to the title «akhwirpat», the military title «ispahbod» was also present in Sogdiana. In the 730s, the administrators of the Nashtab region of Sogdiana held this title. The «ispahbod» was a high-ranking military official, often responsible for leading and organizing military forces, similar to a general or commander. This title reflects the importance of military organization and leadership within the Sogdian society during that period [3]. The title «ispahbod» is closely related to the terms «sipah» and «sipahiy», meaning «military» or «soldier», and is understood to refer to a position akin to a «commander» or «military leader.» According to Sogdian scholar B. Goyibov, based on information provided by A. Otakhojaev, after the Turkic Khaganate established control over Sogdiana, various military titles were introduced, and the position of the military within society grew stronger. These titles included «tutuq» (captain or military leader), «tarxon» (noble or military officer), «çor» (warrior), and «erkin» (free or independent), which were associated with military functions. This highlights the increased prominence and influence of the military class in Sogdian society under Turkic rule [4].

The Japanese scholar Yu. Yoshidan's theory is often referenced as an example: according to him, the title «cho'r» transitioned from the Ephthalite period to the Turkic Khaganate. V.A. Livshits argues that this title was used starting from the Sassanian period, and Yoshidan's interpretation of «cho'r» as related to the Ephthalite era requires further evidence. In contrast, Sogdian documents from the Mug' Mountains suggest that the title «cho'r» existed in Sogdiana and was associated with the role of a military organizer. Specialists in the field also recognize that the title «cho'r» is more closely related to military affairs.

Another Turkic title used in the Sogdian Confederation was «erkin», which, like «cho'r», had military connotations. This title was adopted from the Juan-Juan (a tribal group) and was also granted to powerful tribal leaders [5].

Sogdian scholar G. Boboyev also presents his views on this matter. According to his perspective, the holder of the «erkin» title in the Sogdian Confederation was not a tribal leader but rather a military administrator of the Khaganate. However, there is insufficient information about the activities of officials with the «erkin» title in Sogdiana. For example, the «Tang Shu» chronicles mention a ruler who governed the Kesh region of the Sogdian Confederation between 738 and 741 AD, identified as Syginta (Ashkand). Some researchers interpret the Chinese form «sygin» as a representation of the Turkic term for «erkin» in Chinese characters [6]. Based on this perspective, Kesh was considered a strategically significant principality within the Confederation, and the Turkic Khagans may have governed it by appointing one of their military officials to the «erkin» position. Numismatic evidence indicates that Kesh rulers held the title of «axurpat.» The «erkin» title likely referred to the deputy of the Khaganate in Kesh. However, there is no available information at present regarding the use of this title in other regions of the Sogdian Confederation [7]. Sogdian society's structure, which included numerous military titles, underscores the



significant position of the military class within the state. This suggests that the rulers of Sogdiana were likely to appoint military leaders, reinforcing the prominence of the military in both governance and society. Following the establishment of Turkic Khaganate control, the status of the military in society increased, reflecting their central role in shaping the political landscape. This highlights that the military formed a distinct social class in Sogdian society.

## RESULTS

The rise of the military class during the Turkic Khaganate can be attributed to the state's demands on its vassals. While the Khaganate did not impose an obligation on all vassals to engage in military campaigns or provide material support in all instances, the Khaganate would have likely made similar demands in times of need. For example, during the late 7th and early 8th centuries, the Turkic Khagans, leading an alliance of rulers from regions like Choch, Fergana, Sogd, and Tokharistan, required their allies to provide provisions, troops, weapons, horses, and supplies. This is supported by both Arabic and other historical sources.

Arabic sources further confirm that the Sogdian ruler, Gurak of Samarkand (738), referred to himself as one of the Khagan's «slaves» and a «chokar» (personal soldier) during his meeting with the Arabs. Additionally, a document from the Mug' mountain region (V-17) reveals that during the Arab invasions, the ruler of Panjikent, Devashtich (709-722), emphasized the «high rank and respect» bestowed upon him by the Khagan. The document also mentions that the Turkic commander had stationed his troops in a particular location (qunalsa). These sources highlight the military and diplomatic interactions between the Turkic Khaganate and Sogdian rulers [8]. Another factor contributing to the increase of military personnel in society was the Khaganate's requirement that each vassal administrative unit provide troops. Each region of Sogd supplied small groups of soldiers, known as «chokars,» to the central authority. This system significantly contributed to the growth of the military class as a distinct social group.

According to Chinese records, a feast was held for foreign chokars (military soldiers) in the 12th month of 759, after which each soldier was given 30 pieces of silk as a gift. The group of chokars was managed by the landlord of a specific territory. Even rulers were recognized as chokars. It is noted that the Sogdian ruler, Gurak, emphasized his loyalty by declaring himself a chokar of the Khagan [9]. Thus, the majority of adult men in society were likely to become chokars due to conscription into military service. Becoming a chokar signified a level of loyalty to the ruler and indicated the military's distinct position within society. However, there is no detailed information in sources regarding the privileges granted to chokars.

Wall paintings found in early medieval Sogdian sites such as Afrasiab, Panjikent, and Varakhsha show scenes where chokars and soldiers are depicted mainly as hunters, guards, or warriors. In the Panjikent murals, soldiers are shown hunting and killing wild animals [10], while in the Afrasiab murals soldiers appear as royal guards [11]. The decorations and imagery in the «Red Hall» of Varakhsha have also been interpreted by specialists as depictions of military combat [12]. It is important to note that the state governance of early medieval Sogdian society, as discussed in academic literature, was based on a military structure. The assignment of military titles such as isphabod (commander) in Nashab and axurpat (commander) in Kesh to govern border regions can be seen as evidence of this. However, it cannot be denied that after the disintegration of the Kangju state, the «Council of Elders» composed of representatives from various societal classes played a



central role in governing the state and society [13]. Therefore, there has not yet been a consensus on the views regarding the state system of early medieval Sogd.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is evident that in Sogdian society, the military class, which encompassed a large part of the social and aristocratic elite, held positions ranging from the state leader to the smallest military commander. Their existence is confirmed through wall paintings, military titles found in Sogdian documents, historical events recorded in Chinese and Arab sources, and the many military weapons discovered in Panjikent and Afrasiab.

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