

THE FORMATION OF SELJUK MILITARY ART AND STRATEGIC PLANNING: A HISTORICAL-ANALYTICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of military art during the Seljuk state (1037–1194), concentrating on the strategic methods and battlefield tactics employed in pivotal engagements, including Dandanqan, Manzikert, and Qatwan. The study examines the fundamental components of the Seljuk military system, including the role of cavalry units, centralized command, fortress networks, religious motivations, and socio-economic foundations, drawing on primary historical sources and contemporary academic research. Furthermore, the article offers a comparative analysis of Seljuk military strategies with those of other civilizations, particularly the Byzantine and Ghaznavid empires. The findings demonstrate that the Seljuk army experience played a significant role in shaping the development of military thought in the medieval Islamic world and beyond.

Keywords: Seljuks, military art, strategy, cavalry, Manzikert, Dandanqan, Qatwan, political history, Islamic military theory, centralized system, Turkic tribes, Byzantium, Ghaznavids.

Introduction

The Seljuk State (1037–1194) is recognized as one of the most important political and military powers in the medieval Islamic world. Founded by nomadic Turkish tribes, this state brought vast territories such as Khorasan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia under its control. The Seljuk military art was formed by harmoniously combining nomadic Turkish customs with local military traditions, and their successful military campaigns and strategic plans played a crucial role in ensuring the state's stability. The purpose of this article is to analyze the formation process of military art in the Seljuk State and the strategic plans applied in battles. The research questions are as follows:

1. What factors formed the basis of Seljuk military art?
2. How effective were the strategic plans they used in battles?
3. How did the Seljuk military system differ from the systems of other states (Byzantium, Ghaznavids)?



4. What were the economic and social foundations of the military system? The article examines the state's military structure, main strategic methods, and examples of important battles (Dandanakan, Manzikert, Katwan), as well as analyzes the influence of Seljuk military experience on subsequent states.

Literature Review and Methodology

This research is based on historical-analytical and comparative methods. Primary and secondary sources were studied for data analysis. Primary sources include Ibn al-Athir's *Al-Kamil fi'l-Tarikh* (2006), Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatnama* (1978), and Ghazali's writings from the Seljuk period. Considering the potential bias in Ibn al-Athir's work, it was compared with other sources to ensure the article's objectivity. Secondary sources include studies by C. E. Bosworth (1968), M. A. Köymen (1979), A. C. S. Peacock (2015), and G. Agoston (2005). The research analyzes the Seljuk military structure, strategic methods, and important battles (Dandanakan, Manzikert, Katwan) through examples. Using the comparative method, Seljuk military strategies were compared with Byzantine, Ghaznavid, and Abbasid systems. The data is synthesized in a historical context to identify the characteristics and effectiveness of Seljuk military art. Additionally, Lambton's (1988) research on tax systems and Hillenbrand's (2007) work on military technologies were examined to analyze economic and social factors.

Discussion and Results

1. Formation of Military Art Seljuk military art combined the warrior traditions of Turkish nomadic tribes with the military experiences of the Islamic world. The following factors played a key role in the formation of military art: Dominance of Cavalry Forces: The core of the Seljuk army consisted of light and heavy cavalry. Light cavalry was used for reconnaissance and surprise attacks, while heavy cavalry was employed to break through enemy lines. The cavalry's ability to shoot arrows on horseback and move quickly was a primary factor in their success (Bosworth, 1968). For example, the flexibility of light cavalry provided a significant advantage compared to the Byzantine army's heavy armored cavalry (Haldon, 2001). Centralized Military System: During the reigns of Tughril Beg, Alp Arslan, and Malik Shah, the army was managed through a centralized system. Professional soldiers known as "ghulams" and sipahis were directly subordinate to the sultan's orders (Köymen, 1979). As emphasized in Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatnama*, the training and loyalty of ghulams ensured the state's military stability. Fortresses and Defense Systems: The Seljuks built strong fortresses in Khorasan and Anatolia, which served as bases for defense and attacks (Peacock, 2015). For instance, fortresses in cities like Isfahan and Nishapur had strategic importance. Religious Motivation: The idea of ghaza (holy war) was a significant factor in boosting the soldiers' morale. Writings by scholars like Ghazali highlight that this idea played a major role in strengthening the Seljuk army's fighting spirit (Ibn al-Athir, 2006). Technological Factors: Curved swords, flexible armor, and bows and arrows were important in Seljuk military art. As Hillenbrand (2007) notes, these weapons were adapted to the fast-paced combat style of nomadic Turkish tribes. The lightness and sharpness of swords made cavalry attacks more effective. Economic Foundations: Military campaigns were financed through taxes and spoils of war. According to Lambton (1988), the Seljuk tax system was centralized, enabling long-term campaigns. For example, taxes collected from Khorasan



provinces played a key role in supplying the army. Social Integration: The Seljuks successfully integrated their military system with local populations. For instance, local warriors in Iran and Anatolia were recruited into the army, increasing loyalty among local peoples (Peacock, 2015).

2. Strategic Plans Used in Battles The Seljuks employed several effective strategic plans in battles: Feigned Retreat: Based on drawing the enemy forward on the battlefield, disrupting their formation, and suddenly counterattacking. In the 1071 Battle of Manzikert, Alp Arslan defeated the Byzantine army using this method (Peacock, 2015). This tactic originated from nomadic Turkish traditions and was effective against the disciplined structure of the Byzantine army (Haldon, 2001). Encircling and Pursuit Strategy: Used to isolate enemy forces and prevent them from uniting. In the 1141 Battle of Katwan, this method was successfully applied against the Khwarazmshahs (Bosworth, 1968). Rapid Mobility: The speed of cavalry forces allowed for surprise attacks on the enemy. In the 1040 Battle of Dandanakan, speed played a crucial role in the victory against the Ghaznavids (Köymen, 1979). Diplomacy and Intrigue: The Seljuks disrupted enemy unity by inciting discord within their ranks. For example, internal conflicts in the Byzantine army before the Battle of Manzikert were exploited by the Seljuks (Ibn al-Athir, 2006). Logistics and Supply: Supply systems were well-organized for long-term campaigns, aiding the Seljuks' success in distant battles. For instance, caravan routes ensured continuous supply from Nishapur to Anatolia (Peacock, 2015).

3. Successful Battles The main battles proving the effectiveness of Seljuk military art are as follows: Battle of Dandanakan (1040):¹ Led by Tughril Beg, the Seljuks defeated the Ghaznavids and captured Khorasan. Rapid cavalry attacks and disrupting enemy lines were key (Köymen, 1979). The Ghaznavid army's heavy infantry proved helpless against Seljuk speed. Battle of Manzikert (1071)²: Alp Arslan achieved victory against the Byzantine Empire through feigned retreats and rapid attacks. This battle is recognized as the pinnacle of Seljuk military art (Peacock, 2015). Internal conflicts and lack of discipline in the Byzantine army worked to the Seljuks' advantage (Haldon, 2001). Battle of Katwan (1141)³: The encircling strategy was



1

By scanning this QR code, you can watch a video animation about the strategy of the Battle of Dandanakan.



2

By scanning this QR code, you can watch a video animation about the strategy of the Battle of Manzikert

3



successfully used against the Khwarazmshahs, strengthening dominance in Central Asia (Bosworth, 1968).

Table 1: Major Battles and Strategies

Battle Name	Year	Main Strategy	Outcome
Dandanakan	1040	Rapid cavalry attacks	Capture of Khorasan
Manzikert	1071	Feigned retreat	Dominance in Anatolia
Katwan	1141	Encircling strategy	Supremacy in Central Asia

The Seljuk military art successfully harmonized nomadic Turkish traditions with the military experiences of the Islamic world. The speed and flexibility of cavalry forces, centralized management, fortress systems, and religious motivation were the main factors in their military successes. Comparative analysis shows that the Seljuk military system significantly differed from the Byzantine army's system, which was based on heavy armored cavalry and disciplined infantry. The Byzantine army relied on fortress defense, but Seljuk rapid cavalry attacks provided superiority in open battles (Haldon, 2001). The Ghaznavid army, based on heavy infantry and elephant forces, was helpless against Seljuk speed (Bosworth, 1968). The economic foundations of the Seljuk military system were strengthened by the tax system and spoils revenues. As Lambton (1988) emphasizes, the centralized Seljuk tax system enabled financing long-term military campaigns. At the same time, integration with local populations increased the social stability of the Seljuk army. For example, cooperation with Turkmen nomads and local Greek populations in Anatolia enhanced the military system's flexibility (Peacock, 2015). After Malik Shah's death (1092), the state's fragmentation and internal conflicts weakened the centralized management of the military system. This led to a decline in military effectiveness in the later Seljuk periods (Peacock, 2015). Nevertheless, Seljuk military experience, particularly the organizational structure of cavalry forces and encircling strategies, had a significant influence on the military systems of the Ottoman Empire and the Safavids (Ágoston, 2005). For instance, the Ottomans adopted the feigned retreat tactic from the Seljuks and used it in the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Limitations of the Seljuk military system can include the weakening of centralized control, internal conflicts, and diminishing economic resources. Nevertheless, Seljuk experience served as an important stage in the development of military systems in the medieval Islamic world.

Conclusion

In the Seljuk State, military art was formed by combining nomadic Turkish traditions with the military experiences of the Islamic world. The dominance of cavalry forces, centralized



By scanning this QR code you can see a map of the strategy of the Battle of Qatwan.

management, fortress systems, religious motivation, and economic foundations were the main characteristics of the Seljuk army. The strategic plans used in battles, particularly feigned retreat, encircling, rapid mobility, and diplomatic methods, turned the Seljuks into a leading military power in the medieval world. The battles of Dandanakan, Manzikert, and Katwan prove the effectiveness of Seljuk military art. This research demonstrated that Seljuk military art was based on a synthesis of nomadic and Islamic traditions and its influence on subsequent Turkish states. As a unique contribution of the research, the economic and social foundations of the Seljuk military system can be further illuminated through analysis of their success factors. Future research is recommended to delve deeper into the integration of the Seljuk military system with local populations, the organizational structure of the tax system, and technological innovations. Future research should continue in the following directions:

- The Seljuks' regional military policy (e.g., in Syria, Iran, Iraq) and its role in relations with local peoples;
- The mutual roles of ghulams and local warriors in the Seljuk military system and issues of military social mobility;
- The fortress system built by the Seljuks and their urbanistic and geostrategic importance;
- The economic consequences of military campaigns and methods of maintaining financial stability through the taxation system;
- Determining the historical genesis of the influence of Seljuk military tactics on the military doctrines of the Ottomans, Khwarazmshahs, and Safavids.

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