

Steppe Weapons in Ancient China and the Role of Hand-to-hand Combat

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Abstract

The early societies of central China in the Yellow and Wei River valleys, concentrating on cereal crops, were surrounded to the north and north-west by very different groups of people, who herded animals. In the paper, following Tong Enzheng, this border area is named the arc. The cultures of peoples in the arc were closely connected with those of the mobile pastoralists on the steppe in Mongolia and South Siberia. Through this link, metallurgy came into central China, as did many weapon types. However, the large populations supported by the fertile agriculture of the Central Plains were, by the Shang dynasty, organised into large infantry forces to combat the attacks by much smaller groups of invading pastoralists. Thus while the two forces used some similar weapons, their military tactics were very different. The paper points out that, individual combat by the elite does not seem to have been practised in the Shang and Western Zhou periods. Even in the Eastern Zhou, when swords and daggers were borrowed from the arc and the steppe, the central Chinese relied far more on massive armies than on individual personal military prowess typical of the steppe. The paper illustrates the routes by which these weapons were acquired and surveys some relevant textual sources. The last section emphasises the role of weaponry and armour for the dead.

Keywords: Steppe, arc, central China, weapons, armour, swords, individual combat, Shang, Zhou.