Ottoman Turks for Song of Drums and Shakos
Historical Introduction

The Ottoman Army of the Napoleonic period was divided in Capou-Koulis (paid soldiers) and Irregulars, raised in great numbers when enemies (mainly Russians) were approaching.

The Janissary Corps were the backbone of the regular Army since 1300, but at the end of the 17th century very little remained of their military prowess. Privileges, political power and opposition to any kind of modernization transformed this once glorious Corps in a kind of State-within-the-State. Sultan Selim III tried to limit their influence by raising a “New Order Army” (Nizam-i-Jedid) drilled and armed in the European style and led by European Officers, but faced a strong opposition (and several mutinies) from Janissaries, who refused to serve with them in several campaigns. Finally, in 1807 Selim III was overthrown by a Palace Revolt led by the Janissaries, and the Nizam-i-Jedid Corps was disbanded.

One year later, Mahmud II (Selim’s cousin) became Sultan and the Nizam-i-Jedid Corps were raised again but under a different name, taken from the Turkish military tradition (Segban-i-Jedid) not to offend the Janissaries. Notwithstanding this, in late 1808 another revolt took place and the Segbans were exterminated by the Janissaries after being disbanded again. Mahmud seemed to abandon the reform project, but in 1826 he took revenge on the Janissaries finally destroying their military organization and eliminating a large part of them.

Over half of any Ottoman Army operating in Europe was composed of Sekhans (Irregulars). They were raised and organized by local Governors and – even if officially not paid – they actually were mercenaries. Their quality varied enormously, but Albanians, Bosnians and Greek Sekhans were considered above the standard. Bedouin Militia and Fellahin were nothing more than (badly) armed mobs: undisciplined, unpredictable, and often of little use in battle.

Like infantry, cavalry in the Ottoman Army was made by large numbers of provincial forces and a nucleus of Capou-Koulis: the Suvarileri. Organised in six divisions numbering 28,000 they were the real heavy cavalry of the Porte. Guard Suvarileri are reported to be armoured, but maybe just had a shield to protect themselves. All Suvarileri were armed with lances.

The Sipahis (horsemen) formed the bulk of Ottoman cavalry. Following the ancient feudal system, they were rewarded for their services with land (Timars) which could be inherited. As for Janissaries, Sipahis also were – at the beginning of 1800 – the pale reflection of the proud military force they were in the past, so they were ordered by Selim III to spend six months every two years in training in the capital. Unfortunately, few of them did it.

The Mamluks, a kind of Egyptian cavalry, were known to Europeans thanks to Napoleon, who wanted some of them in his own Guard. Originally slaves captured by Egyptians during their campaigns, with time they rose in power and became the rulers of Egypt. Armed with swords, pistols and javelin, the Mamluks were aided by several foot servants who followed the charge to finish off survivors and retrieve the javelins thrown by their masters.

Ottoman light cavalry was made up by Yoruks (Turcoman volunteers) and Djellis (Guides) specialised in pursuit and reconnaissance. When called by the Sultan in time of war, these irregular cavalrymen would flock in thousands to the Ottoman banners.

During the period covered by Song of Drums and Shakos, Ottomans fought several border wars against Russia (1787-1812) mainly in Rumania and Bulgaria and along the course of the Danube. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt, entering Cairo on July 21. French forces remained in Egypt until forced to surrender to a joint British-Ottoman Army in August 1801.