History

weapons and military equipment in ancient Egypt

There was little difference between the weapons of Egypt and her neighbors in Africa and Palestine during the time from the Archaic Period to the Middle Kingdom, and the equipment underwent few changes. In predynastic times the throwstick was exhibited in war dances, but in fact it was used only for fowling in the Delta marshes. During the Old and Middle Kingdoms soldiers used a sling or bow for long-distance fighting. There were different types of bows, and the Egyptian version had one curve while the Nubian type had two. For close combat fighting, soldiers used spears, daggers, maces, and axes, which were made of beaten copper or stone with wooden handles. By Dynasty 12, bronze was beginning to replace copper, but there were few changes in the weapons. It was the Egyptian custom to retain stone and metal tools and weapons alongside each other if they still suited a particular purpose. This innate conservatism meant that they never gained superiority in weaponry over their neighbors. To defend themselves foot soldiers had rectangular shields made of wood and covered with leather. Curved at the top, these had developed from the shields made from turtle shell that were used in predynastic times.

Both scenes and objects provide information about weapons. Generally, traditional style weapons of proven ability were favored. For example, the Egyptians continued to use the tang type axe (this became common in the Middle Kingdom and had a convex cutting edge attached by tangs to the haft) when other people had introduced the socket type axe (in this, the blade was attached to the handle by means of a socket). Over the years, however, some changes were introduced: Axe blades became shorter with a more narrow edge, as exemplified by those depicted in the hands of infantrymen on the lid of the wooden chest in the tomb of Tutankhamun and those used by soldiers of Ramesses II in a wall relief in the Temple of Karnak. Arrows were made of reed, and arrowheads were fashioned from bronze.

Foreign Innovations

Innovations were introduced from Asia during the New Kingdom and later. The first of these occurred at the end of the period of Hyksos domination. Although the Egyptians used their traditional weapons in the wars to drive out the Hyksos, they subsequently adopted some of the Hyksos's military equipment for their own use, which made an impact on their military organization and tactics over the next few centuries.

The Hyksos had obtained new skills and war techniques from the north in their attempt to overcome the Egyptians toward the end of their overlordship of the country. These included advancements in metalworking skills; construction of a particular type of fort that was very large with an earthen wall surrounded by a moat; the introduction of the horse-drawn chariot; weapons such as the khepesh sword and composite bow, and protective armor.

The khepesh (sickle sword), similar to the curved sword used by the Asiatics, was probably introduced from Canaan. It became part of the Egyptian weaponry from the New Kingdom and is shown in temple scenes presented by the gods to the king as a promise of victory over his enemies. The Egyptian chariot was also similar in design to the Canaanite chariot and was probably introduced to Egypt from Canaan. The Hyksos first used horses and chariots in their conflict with the native Egyptians at the end of their time in the country, and there is no convincing evidence that they employed them before that.

It has been argued, however, that it was easy for the Hyksos to invade Egypt because they used the horse drawn chariot. The chariot has been claimed to be of Aryan origin since technical terms associated with it are said to be of Indo-Aryan origin. The Hyksos included numbers of Hurrians, an Aryan people who came from the Caspian Sea region. Both horses and chariots were known in Mesopotamia, however, long before the Hurrian influence reached there. There is no conclusive evidence that the Hurrians were a major element in the "Hyksos invasion" or that the horse drawn chariot was introduced directly to Egypt from anywhere other than Canaan toward the end of the Hyksos domination.

Egyptian chariots that have been found in New Kingdom tombs are made of pliable wood covered with leather. The earliest had two four-spoke wheels, but by the reign of Tuthmosis IV (middle of Dynasty 18) the Canaanite influence had disappeared and they usually had six-spoke or, more rarely, eight-spoke wheels. In the reign of Ramesses II a further innovation provided the chariot with a special quiver for hurling javelins.

Armor and Equipment
In early times soldiers wore a leather triangular apron over a short kilt as a protective garment. Coats of mail introduced in the New Kingdom were rare in the middle of Dynasty 18 and were worn only by the king. Archaeologists have discovered a set of bronze corselets in the Theban palace at Malkata. Under the Ramesside kings soldiers wore a leather or cloth tunic covered with metal scales.

Soldiers probably did not wear helmets before the Late Period except for the Sherden (a group of foreign mercenaries), who had real helmets and were equipped with long swords and round shields, all part of their own original war dress. (Generally, the Egyptians allowed their foreign mercenaries to use their own weapons, thus maximizing the army's capacity to kill and wound the enemy. For example, in the great battles of the New Kingdom the Egyptians used chariots, arrows, swords, and axes while the Nubians fighting for them brandished hardwood clubs and the Sherden mercenaries used long swords.) The king is often shown wearing the Khepresh, or Blue Crown, in the New Kingdom, which is usually misidentified as the royal war helmet. It was in fact a crown that symbolized victory rather than a helmet worn in battle.

Other army equipment included scaling ladders, which are depicted in scenes of military attacks when the soldiers scale the walls of enemy towns or forts or force entry through gates. There is no evidence that battering rams were used on campaigns in Syria/Palestine, perhaps because it would have been difficult to transport them from Egypt on such long-distance campaigns. The army had a substantial support system which enabled it to assemble and administer supplies at home or abroad. This was the responsibility of military scribes who acquired supplies from local governors en route when the army was campaigning abroad. They also made detailed lists of booty taken after the battles. Donkeys and ox drawn wagons provided transport on foreign campaigns. Ramesses II used ox drawn carts and pack animals, including mules, when he fought at Kadesh in Syria, and for Tuthmosis III's campaigns wheeled ox carts transported boats built at Byblos on the Syrian coast overland to the river Euphrates.

There is little evidence relating to weapons and equipment after the New Kingdom, but there were apparently no major innovations. Later, Greek mercenaries brought some changes to the weaponry, but the conservative Egyptians continued to use bronze weapons well into the Iron Age. Egypt's lack of native iron deposits and an unwillingness to change meant that the Assyrians, who had good resources of iron and new weaponry, were eventually able to establish their own empire and conquer Egypt.

Further Information


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