History

Weaponry and Armor in the Ancient World

Warfare has been a constant element of life since ancient times, yet relatively few ancient weapons and armor have survived to be studied. Iron decays easily, as does the wood and other organic materials that early people used for weapons. Bronze has a better rate of survival, but this material was not used in southern Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. The study of ancient weaponry is further complicated by confusion over how weapons were used. While surviving art and literature from Europe, the Near East, and Asia contains descriptions of weaponry and armor, the same sources are not available for other regions of the world.

In Europe weapons were used almost exclusively to kill enemies and prey. A few daggers and swords, highly decorated and in the possession of high-status men, had ceremonial purposes. Daggers, swords, and spears were typically used for combat, with only daggers intended strictly for attacks upon humans. Slings were the first missile weapon, followed by the enormously popular bows and arrows. The Greeks invented chemical warfare in the form of Greek fire and sulfur gas. Metal, wood, skins, and leather were employed to construct head and body coverings as well as shields. The users of weaponry and armor in Europe were almost exclusively male.

In the Near East warriors used the same sorts of weaponry and armor that were found in Europe. The Assyrians are the earliest warriors of history of whom we have detailed knowledge. They were armed with spears, battle-axes, maces, swords, and shields as well as bows and arrows. Assyrians show liquid fire on bas-relief artwork. Along with other people of the region, they employed simple incendiary materials such as blazing arrows, pots of boiling oil, and naphtha. Babylonian spearmen protected themselves with square shields held edge to edge, as did the Greek phalanxes and Roman legions 3,000 years later. The Assyrians were the first to develop scale armor that consisted of many small metal plates sewn on a leather jacket so that the rows overlapped.

In the Americas some of the aboriginal people used copper and bronze, but they never developed wrought iron or steel for weapons. Stone arrowheads and spearheads continued to be used century after century, as they were in Oceania. In Asia the Hindus became renowned as the best temperers of steel in the ancient world. Few clues to the weaponry of ancient Africa remain. The Africans passed from the Stone Age directly into the Iron Age, missing the Bronze Age entirely. In the context of ancient Africa a weapon has to be viewed as part of a highly complex system of interdependent actions and beliefs. Some weapons were empowered by the application of magical substances. No matter how thick the hide of a shield or well tempered the blade of a sword, both were considered incomplete without the symbolic designs applied to them. Even accessories such as sword sheaths seem also to have had great importance.

Further Information


Arthur Cotterell, Chariot: From Chariot to Tank, the Astounding Rise and Fall of the World's First War Machine (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2004).


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