History

siege warfare in ancient Greece

Siege warfare entails the capture of forts and fortified cities. For much of Greek history, this process remained crude. An attacking army might try to take a site by storm—that is, by massed assault using scaling ladders. Alternatively, there was siege—the attackers would encircle the enemy walls with earthworks (a procedure known as circumvallation) and wait to starve out the defenders or to win treasonous help from within. The legend of a 10-year-long siege of Troy surely reflects the frustrations of primitive siege warfare.

By the late 700s BCE the armies of Near Eastern empires (well in advance of the Greeks) were using machines and scientific methods to reduce enemy fortifications. The Greeks, impressed by Persian siegecraft in the era 546–479 BCE, began copying these tactics. These included use of battering rams to tear open an enemy wall, siege mounds to bring attackers to the top of a wall, and miners tunneling under walls. Yet the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) saw only a few successful sieges, such as at Plataea or Byzantium. Siege was still largely a waiting game, and a fortress city with a harbor (such as Athens) could almost never be captured without being completely blockaded, by both warships at sea and troops on land.

A breakthrough came in about 399 BCE with the Greeks' development of the catapult. Credit goes to the engineers of the Syracusan dictator Dionysius (1), who probably were copying the machines used by their enemies, the Carthaginians. The earliest type of Greek catapult resembled a giant medieval crossbow, set atop a stand. This wooden device shot a single, six-foot-long arrow and was typically aimed at troops visible at the parapet of the enemy wall. Although unable to knock down walls, the arrow could easily pierce a man's armor, hence the Greek name katapeltes, "shield-piercer."

Volleys from multiple catapults provided valuable "covering fire" for troops conducting siege operations. Typically the besiegers' catapults would be perched inside of siege towers. The siege tower was a wooden structure, built as tall as the enemy wall and used as a kind of multistory armored car, with catapults set on internal parapets and sighted through portholes. Pushed forward on wheels, the tower approached the enemy wall gradually, while engineers prepared a roadbed ahead. Some towers were apparently designed to be pushed right up to the city wall, in order to bring up attacking troops on internal ladders or to employ a ground-level battering ram.

The first recorded use of Greek catapults and siege towers was at Dionysius's capture of the Carthaginian stronghold of Moyta, in western Sicily (397 BCE). Dionysius's dramatic successes brought swift imitation and improvement by other Greek commanders. A more powerful type of arrow-shooting catapult arose, perhaps under the Thessalian dictator Jason of Pherae (reigned ca. 385–370 BCE). This new design used the principle of torsion. Instead of a horizontal, bending wooden bow, the torsion catapult featured two vertical cylinders of taut skeining (composed of human hair or animal sinew), set on either side of the front of a long wooden stock. Into each skein was slotted one wooden arm, extending outward; the arms' outer ends were attached to a bowstring. Winched back, the bowstring brought great tension from the twisting skeins to the arrow waiting in the groove of the stock.

Siegecraft in the Greek world reached its mature stage under the Macedonian king Philip II (reigned 359–336 BCE), who successfully coordinated the use of tower, catapult, and battering ram. Philip's catapults were torsion-powered arrow-shooters. It was Philip's son Alexander the Great who (among other achievements) pioneered the use of rock-firing catapults. Alexander's "stone-throwers" (lithoboloi or petroboloi) could hurl 170-pound boulders more than 190 yards, to batter apart enemy walls. Mounted aboard ships, these deadly machines helped Alexander to capture the island fortress of Tyre, in one of history's monumental sieges, conducted simultaneously by land and sea (332 BCE).

Stone-throwing catapults were made of wood and were torsion-powered, looking much like the foregoing arrow-shooting type. This design remained the basic form for Greek catapults. (A different design, with one vertical arm, has been popularized by medieval European artwork and now represents what most people think of as a catapult. Although probably invented by the Greeks, this type was used later, by Roman armies.)

Alexander and his successors of the Hellenistic Age (around 300–150 BCE) were the most ambitious besiegers the world had yet seen. The Macedonian prince Demetrius Poliorketes won his surname (Poliorketes means "city besieger") from his huge—but unsuccessful—siege of Rhodea in 305–304 BCE. Demetrius's armament included two massive battering
rams (iron-clad treetrunks, perhaps 130 feet long, hung inside mobile sheds and worked by hundreds of men) and an armor-plated siege tower called the Helepolis, or "taker of cities," containing nine levels of stone-throwers and arrow-cumcatapults.

Tactics of defense also improved in this era—with catapults on city walls shooting flaming projectiles against wooden siege machines—but generally the advantage had now swung to the besiegers. The Romans of the late 200s BCE adopted Hellenistic siege tactics and brought them to new technical heights in conquering the Mediterranean. In 213–211 BCE the Romans besieged and captured the Greek fortress city of Syracuse, which 200 years before had defied and destroyed a besieging Athenian army.

Further Information


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