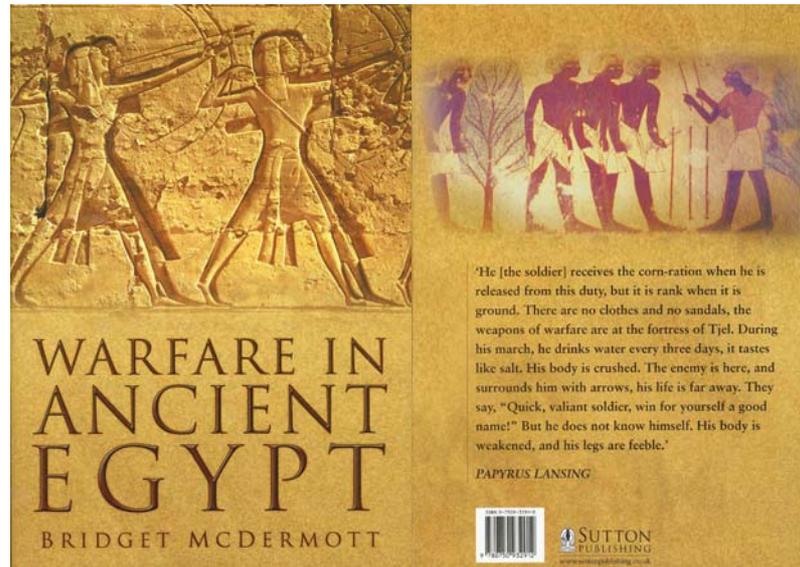


McDermott, B. 2004. Warfare in ancient Egypt. – Gloucestershire, Sutton Publishing

Book review by M. Signore



Being interested in the ancient and middle ages warfare and combat, both as a scholar and as a re-enactor, I have read this book with much interest and, to be honest, with a lot of expectations. Most of them have not been deluded, but some have been left quite wanting. In order to understand why, let us take an excursus of this interesting volume.

The book is divided into three parts, each respectively concerning the Old, Middle, and New Kingdom military organisation. Three appendices complete the book (the first about weapons and armours of the Amarna period, the second and third being just lists of military sites and the usual chronology of Egypt).

The first impression by reading the book is that McDermott has done extensive field researches, as the vast majority of the black and white pictures are at the hand of the author. The whole book has only black and white pictures and drawings (made by McDermott as well). Most pictures are clear, but some are not, and there is the occasional misquoting of pictures, or references to pictures that should be numbered differently. For instance, on page 32 there we find figure 26. One normally expects that the next figure is 27, but on the following page we find figure 17; figure 27 has been printed on page 35. This causes a bit of confusion for the reader that finds a reference to figure 17 on page 22, whereas figure 15 is actually printed on this page. One sees figure 16 on the following page, and expects figure 17 to follow, which is, again, not the case.

But despite these small errors, a strong integration between text and images can be found throughout the book. The text is easy to read, quite agile and comprehensive. Of course, much of the book is devoted to the warfare in New Kingdom Egypt, while the predynastic and Old Kingdom are only discussed in brief sections. A brief introduction to siege warfare in the Middle Kingdom is included.

Most of the knowledge about military Egypt comes from the famous battles, such as Megiddo or Qadesh, and this book is also based on this. But the style of the author is different from comparable books, in that McDermott draws heavily from art in order to illustrate weapons and armour. This kind of approach is theoretically good, given the fact that Egyptian art was very keen to details, but it lacks the 'military' or 'daily life' approach: the book is good in depicting weapons and, to a lesser extent, armours, but the life of a soldier, and most of all the use of weapons and armours seems overlooked. McDermott tries to give some insight in the use of military equipment, and most of her conclusions come either from written records (such as the Papyrus Lansing) or from interpretation of pictorial records. And although the author stresses very much the attempt to reconstruct the daily life of Egyptian soldiers, the book is just doing that. Some paragraphs have headings that show the good intentions (e.g. 'Soldiers and spears', 'Soldiers and mace') but the actual interpretation of its use of the weapons and armours in battle is often lacking. Furthermore, uncommon and/or unfamiliar weapons such as the 'fish-tail' spears or the khopesh are only depicted and mentioned, but no serious attempt at reconstructing the use and the manoeuvres possible with it has been given.

Most of the weapon parts are dedicated to bows and arrows, but it becomes clear that no testing of replicas has ever been conducted in order to ascertain the possible uses of the weapons, arrows, armours and other protection devices.

All in all, this book is a very good reference book for the casual reader interested in weapons and armours (especially their depiction and description, as the descriptive text is exhaustive and the pictures, even though only in black and white, are a very good reference; the book has 129 figures in 179 pages, not including appendices). But from the combat, military and 'daily life point of view, this 'Warfare in ancient Egypt' is found wanting.

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