

## A KHEPESH SWORD IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL MUSEUM

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### ABSTRACT

An examination of a khepesh sword in the University of Liverpool Museum. The first section of the article will deal with the measurements and typology of the artifact. Secondly, we will try to determine when this artifact was most likely manufactured by comparing with known examples. The last thing the article will attempt to do is to try to determine the function of this kind of sword within the culture of ancient Egypt.

### KEY WORDS

Sword, Weapons, Bronze, Warfare

In this study, we shall look at a *khepesh* or ‘scimitar’ sword that is presently located in the University of Liverpool’s museum. Although the context of the sword is unknown, and was most likely found in a burial during one of Garstang’s excavations, the information about it has not been published before.<sup>1</sup> Very little work has been done on an analysis of these swords, so this study will also try to relate this example with known types in order to deduce in all likelihood what context it was found in.

### Description

No. # E1530

Object: Khepesh-scimitar sword

Material: Bronze, handle originally inlaid

Provenance: Unknown

Date: New Kingdom, circa 1300 BCE

Measurements: 57.79 cm long X 1.9 cm wide X 1 cm thick (*Photograph 86*).

Length of handle: 12.4 cm.

Length of handle in concave grip: 10.2 cm.

Width of pommel: 2.3 cm.

Length of forte: 12.7 cm.

Length of curved area: 32.7 cm.

Length of beveled-blade area: 17.4 cm.

### *The Handle*

The entire sword is cast in one piece. The handle angles approximately four degrees towards the bottom from the forte (*Photograph 87*). It has upraised ridges 3 mm higher than its recess so it can accommodate inlay (presumably wood or ivory) which has long since deteriorated. In the recess cavity there are three rivet-holes. The rivet closest to the “pommel” is the deepest of the three at 5 mm deep. The middle rivet barely marks the bronze at all at 1mm and the uppermost rivet, located in the middle of the handle, is 2.5 mm deep. The layout of the rivets indicates that the inlay must have relied on glue to fasten it together because these holes would have hardly been secure enough

as they only secure the bottom half of the handle. The pommel is straight on the top and the bottom is hooked to prevent slippage out of the user's hand. It is apparent that from the size of the handle's concave side that it would have been intended to have been wielded with one hand. The ribbed border is missing from the upper right corner (blade facing downwards); it appears that it was never there to begin with. The hand guard is a small squared area that does not appear to have been designed to actually protect the hand, but rather it appears as a suggestion of a guard.

### *The Forte*

The 'forte' is the straight area that extends from the top of the hand guard to the beginning of the curvature of the blade (*photograph 88*). The material is in a squared shape and provides the artifact with the most tensile strength. There appear to be two lines that were cast in the mould process. The line closest to the handle goes straight across horizontally. The upper raised line goes across horizontally as well but just before it meets the top of the forte it turns a right angle and follows the border until the curvature of the blade starts. After that, the bloom of the bronze obscures the line; it is undetermined if the line continued towards the end.

### *The Blade*

The curvature of the blade drops 8cm deep from the forte. A distinct beveled blade area is on the convex side until the distal 5 cm of the curvature where, by a corrosion bloom, the blade becomes too distorted. The blade at the middle is beveled the most on the side when the sword is placed horizontal with the grip on the left-hand side and the blade facing downwards. Ridges that follow the curvature of the blade may suggest that this area was burnished but the bloom distorts any conclusive claim. The end is squared and appears to have been slightly beveled on its top. The lack of a point suggests that this implement was designed for use in slashing motions not stabbing. There are no signs of wear on the blade area.

## **Typology**

In order to place the sword in some kind of context we must first look at other examples from the ancient world to infer how it was used and any cultural significance it might have had. Bonnet notes, quite rightly, that the term 'sickle-shape' sword is inappropriate as the blade is on the convex side whereas a sickle has its blade on the concave side.<sup>2</sup> There are three examples from the Royal Tombs at Byblos. It should be noted that these tombs are notoriously problematic in terms of dating. All three examples are around 56cm long and bear some minor relief decoration. They differ in that they possess a tang to fix into a wooden handle and they have the earlier "crook-blade."<sup>3</sup> All three burials date, awkwardly, to the later part of the Middle Bronze Age I period (2000-1850 BCE). The tanged design must be a precursor to the sword being cast in one entire piece. The overall shape of these earlier swords is about one third of the piece which is composed of the hooked blade. There is an extremely long forte in comparison with the examples from the latter period. Interestingly, example no. 654, from Tomb III at Byblos, is cast entirely of bronze but retains fragments of gold along its surface<sup>4</sup>; surely this was more of a funerary article than a fighting weapon. Another example comes from the site of Shechem but has no context. This example is slightly shorter (45.2 cm long) but does bear a similar form to the MBA I examples from Byblos. When these examples are compared to the Abydos example, located in the Oriental Institute,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that these swords

are the precursors to our artifact in the University of Liverpool collection.

The latter forms of the *khepesh* sword underwent a dramatic change. The blade becomes elongated and now makes up half of the weapon. The sword is cast in one piece. All known examples have these ridges in the handle to accommodate the inlay for the grip. One of the examples from Tutankhamun's tomb had evidence of ivory still in this recess and possesses a more barbed point folding back onto the concaved area.<sup>6</sup> This is the best preserved example known to researchers at this time. When compared to examples from Gezer (Tomb 30)<sup>7</sup> and Ugarit (both are from 13th century contexts),<sup>8</sup> it is clear that these examples are the latter form of the "crooked" examples.

A later example comes from an unknown context but bears a very similar form to the Liverpool example even though it comes from Iraq. This sword is located at the Boston Metropolitan Museum of Art (cat. no.# II.166.I [472]). The level of preservation on this example is remarkable. It is 53.4 cm long and was cast in solid bronze. Like the Liverpool example it has a recess at the handle that is missing its inlay. The handle is slightly curved downwards from the spine. The pommel has a straight top while the concave side has a 'flanged'/'hooked' end to prevent slippage during use. The blade is on the convex side of the curved area and shows no signs of wear. The spine bears an inscription in cuneiform that identifies it as belonging to Adad-nirari I (1307/5-1275/3 BCE).<sup>9</sup> It bears a striking resemblance to the Liverpool example in shape making the initial estimate of its date (1300 BCE) reasonable. However, this example has a more rounded tip. The overall impression we observe from this example is that it was an artifact of symbolic significance.

The presence of these types of swords in the hands of kings and gods has been well-noted throughout the ancient world. The pylons at Karnak display the god Amun handing this type of sword to Seti I and to Ramesses III.<sup>10</sup> The swords in these examples are rather delicate like the physical examples. The handle is always remarkably thin in Amun's hand but it displays a pommel that is flared on both sides. The hand guard is also curiously represented as having a papyriform shape which can be seen in the Tutankhamun example. A reference to a curved sword in literary texts comes from Papyrus Amherst 2.4 where the thieves describe how they found a king's tomb.<sup>11</sup> What is most telling about this particular phrase is that the word *khepesh* is not written with an assumed curved sword figure, but rather a god sign: a falcon perched on top of a standard. Obviously this weapon communicated a symbolic meaning to all those who saw/bore it.<sup>12</sup> This type of sword obviously held some deep meaning connected to higher status that was understandable over a wide geographic area.

## Conclusions

The overall composition of the *khepesh*-sword at the University of Liverpool Museum does not represent an actual fighting weapon. The delicate handle does not appear as robust as one would expect from a weapon. Since all known examples come from burials, this item most likely came from one. The most telling feature that these weapons were not actually used is that the corpus of curved swords (including the Liverpool example) do not show any signs of wear at all. Its determinative, in Papyrus Amherst, is a Horus-falcon on top of a standard, not a *khepesh* sword in form. This, added to the fact that it is in the hands of divine personages, we can safely assume that these swords served a spiritual/symbolic nature rather than a utilitarian one.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The sword's museum index card does not state a provenance. It mentions only that it was cleaned by electrolysis in the Manchester Museum in 1958. The sword was also treated by the North-West Museum Service in January 1975.

<sup>2</sup> H. Bonnet, *Die Waffen der Völker des alten Orients* (Leipzig, 1926), 85.

<sup>3</sup> G. Philip, *Metal Weapons of the Early and Middle Bronze Ages in Syria-Palestine* (BAR International Series 526, Volume 1; Oxford, 1989), 143.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands: In Light of Archaeological Discovery*, (Volume 2; New York and London, 1963), 473.

<sup>5</sup> *A Guide To The Oriental Institute Museum* (The Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> 40 cm long, hilt inlaid with ivory; H. Carter, *Tut-ench-Amun*, Leipzig, 1934, Taf. 43, B.

<sup>7</sup> Bronze, 50 cm long, *Istanbul Museum*; R. A. S. Macalister, *The Excavation of Gezer III*, London, 1912, Pl. LXXV, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Bronze, 58 cm long; C. F. A. Schaeffer, "Fouilles de Ras-Shamra, 7e campagne, Rapport sommaire," *Syria* 17 (1936): pl. XVIII, 2.

<sup>9</sup> O. W. Muscarella, *Bronze and Iron: Ancient Near Eastern Artifacts in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1988), 340-1.

<sup>10</sup> The Epigraphic Survey, *The Battle Reliefs of King Sety I* (The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1986) = Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak, 4, pl. 17a.

<sup>11</sup> P.E. Newberry, *The Amherst papyri, being an account of the Egyptian papyri in the collection of the Right Hon. Lord Amherst of Hackney, F.S.A., at Diddlington Hall, Norfolk* (London, 1899).

<sup>12</sup> The anomaly in asserting whether these swords were used only in grave goods comes from the Medinat Habu wall scenes. The preparation and the outset of the march to meet the Sea Peoples definitely show minor soldiers carrying these weapons. They may have been included in the scenes as a symbolic justification of the power and authority the pharaoh had. However, this aspect of this weapon goes well beyond this paper's intention. I plan to address this question in a further article.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Pat Sweetingham and Steven Snape for allowing me to observe the sword and take photographs of it during December 2003.