

Circassian Weaponry

The History Museum in Moscow has a large collection of weaponry of the mountaineer peoples of the North-Western Caucasus and Daghestan.

The making of weapons, associated first of all with their military organization, was a time-honored occupation among the hill men. Every male between the ages of 20 to 60 was regarded as a warrior expected to answer a summons fully armed. As a rule every warrior was expected to acquire armor and weaponry; the poor were assisted by the community. In addition the feudal rulers maintained a standing host of professional men at arms.



The weaponry of the Caucasian hill men traditionally consisted of defensive armor — shirt of mail, a helmet and armlets, and offensive weapons — a bow and arrows, a spear, dart, sabre and dagger. When the fire-arms became widespread in the 18th century, the bow and arrows, the gun and the defensive armor coexisted for some time. As time went on, fire-arms replaced the bow and arrows while the defensive armor, which afforded no protection against bullets, was discarded. Beginning from the second half of the 18th century the armament of a Hillman consisted of a gun, pistol, sabre or cavalry sword and a dagger.

Surviving specimens of ancient Caucasian weapons are very few. Archaeologists find ancient swords, sabres and daggers manufactured before the 16th century. A few Circassian blades and shirts of mail came down to us from the 16th — 17th centuries, and they are kept in the Kremlin's Armory. 18th century cold steel and even that of the first half of the 19th century are great rarities. This is quite understandable — such weapons were heavily used, were subjected to wear and tear, got broken, and since the initial materials were in short supply, weaponry out of repair was never discarded but was forged and hammered into new weapons. Much greater is the number of surviving cavalry swords of the late 19th century and still greater is that of late 19th and early 20th century daggers. There are quite a number of fire-arms — captured as trophies during the Caucasian war they were never used again and are preserved better than the cavalry swords and sabres.

The History Museum collection contains diverse types of mountaineer weaponry and accoutrements: helmets and elbow-guards, bows and arrows, quivers and bow-cases, guns and pistols, breast cartridges and powder flasks, sabres and cavalry swords and daggers.

NORTH-WESTERN CAUCASUS

This is the home of related ADIGEY peoples — the Kabardins, the Circassians and Adighes, all of them formerly called Circassians. The ADIGEY peoples had from ancient time the highly developed skills of making and adorning weapons. This was noted by all foreigners who had visited Circassia in the 15th — 19th centuries. Some of the weapons were home-made — arrows, spear-heads and gunpowder. More

sophisticated articles were made by professional armourers. There were no large armor manufacturing centers in Circassia — all demand were met by two or three armourers working in each village.

Defensive Armor

Circassian defensive armor was of the general Caucasian type, consisting of a helmet, shirt of mail, elbow-guards and gauntlets.

The tall conic iron helmet was riveted of two halves and modestly decorated with a few silver or even iron plates engraved in niello or gilt with very moderate ornamentation. It is these ornamental curlicues in the shape of a comma that make it possible to identify a Circassian helmet. Occasionally the armorer would engrave his name and the date of manufacture on it. Quite a series of such helmets were made in the 1780s, as follows from inscriptions on them, by the armorer Ali, son of Haji Bek. A ring on the crest served for attaching a red morocco flag edged with galloon and ornamentally embroidered. A pendent mail neck-guard protects half the face, descending at the sides and behind onto the shoulders above the shirt of mail and secured with a hook in front. In addition to tall helmets low ones were used with a similar long mail neck guard.

A warrior's body was protected by a hauberk — a shirt woven from metal rings. One ring as a rule was interlinked with four neighboring ones. The hauberk had two cuts: one at the collar for the head and the other at the hem for unimpeded walking. Rawhide leather straps were interwoven into the collar to stiffen it for better protection of the neck. The collar hooks were frequently adorned with nielloed silver. The hauberk of a foot soldier was longer than that of a horseman. A medium-sized shirt of mail contained 20 to 25 thousand rings. Distinguished among the coats of mail were those in which the rings were made of wire with a round section and those with a flattened section. Kabardin hauberks won great fame and were bought for the Persian shah; in the 16th century the Turks exacted tribute from the Circassians in humans, horses and hauberks. Kabardin armorers worked in the Russian city of Astrakhan in the 1660s and were eventually transferred to Moscow.



Armlets and elbow-guards protected the arm against blows by the blade. These are plates secured to the arms by means of other two small plates, mail rings and clasps. The surfaces of armlets were at times adorned with engraving or gilt inscriptions.

The warrior's equipment included also gauntlets of red or black morocco with lengths of mail attached and leather bands for securing to the hand. The gauntlets were made by women who adorned them with

galloon woven from gold or silver threads. Curved horns, a typical Circassian ornamental motif, were embroidered in the middle of the gauntlet



COLD STEEL

The Museum has a large collection of Circassian sabres, made at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, which were found during excavations of the Belaya Rechka burial mounds near Maikop. A remarkable feature is the bayonet-shaped tip intended in all probability for piercing the shirt of mail. The Historical Museum collection boasts a very rare blade manufactured in all probability in the 16th or 17th century, also with a bayonet tip; a damaskeen gold inscription says: "Worked by Hussein". Blades of this type are kept also in the Armoury and a 1687 inventory designates them as "Circassian". They may have been made by Kabardin armourers who worked at first in Astrakhan, and since 1661 — in Moscow, transferred there "as damask steelmakers of the highest order".

It was probably in the 17th century that the Adighes developed a new kind of cavalry sword — the "shashka", which means "long knife". This weapon differs from the sabre: it has no cross-guard for protecting the hand and the blade is sunk into the scabbard to the very top of the hilt. The cavalry sword was worn with its cutting edge upwards and the blade was withdrawn from the scabbard right in front, without the arm sweeping to the right.

The cavalry sword blade is much shorter than the sabre: the length of a sabre blade with a bayonet tip is 104—114 cm, of the cavalry sword — 75 cm. The cavalry sword blade curves very slightly. West European blades, imported into Circassia through Black Sea ports for several centuries, were used for making cavalry swords. Particularly popular were the Genoese "gourd", the Solingen "top", and the "Transylvanian knot" and "hussar" of Hungary. We can see these symbols on cavalry swords of the 18th and 19th centuries. Some of them are old genuine blades, others are copies from them made by local armourers; and still others are products of the Solingen factories which in the 19th century made blades especially for the Caucasus bearing images popular there.

Cavalry sword hilts were made of horn or silver. The hilt heads were rounded with a wedge-shaped notch at the top.

All foreigners who visited Circassia in the 15th — 19th centuries noted the extremely elegant silver finish of the weapons. A special niello alloy composed of silver, copper, lead and sulfur was used for adorning the silver hilts of cavalry swords, daggers and scabbard plates. Niello on silver resulted in very original ornamentation.

Scabbards and sheaths were made by women of the home for the warriors of their family. Two wooden planks cut to fit the blade were covered with green leather and then tightly sheathed in a velvet casing adorned with galloon laces. These velvet attachments were secured with small nielloed plates. Girdles and yokes were made also of silver.

The cavalry sword was suspended on a shoulder strap made of galloon or leather, its individual parts fastened with buckles. Silver was in short supply and was used very sparingly.



The "shashka" cavalry sword became so popular that it completely ousted the sabre; at any rate no Circassian sabres of the 19th century have been found.

The collection of the History Museum contains the earliest dated cavalry sword bearing the year 1713 on its blade. The blade is of West European origin and the hilt is made of black horn. An interesting cavalry sword in the History Museum collection is dated 1857. It has an elegant narrow blade and the hilt is adorned with engraving, niello and gilt — a characteristic Circassian ornament of rings and semi-ovals, and hornlike curlicues, garlands of leaves shaped like commas. The grips of the hilt features slanting stripes drawn with a sharp tool against zigzagging backgrounds — a technique characteristic of the Circassians.

There are very few surviving Circassian daggers: unlike sabres and cavalry swords, they were not regarded as treasured weapons handed down from the ancestors: they were simply personal effects which were occasionally used even for domestic purposes. Broken and spoilt, they were forged into new ones. Daghestan craftsmen, who appeared in the Western Caucasus in the 1870s, produced the greater part of the surviving daggers. The Museum preserves an interesting dagger of Circassian work of the first half of the 19th century with niello ornamentation and an old type hilt, and also an early 20th century dagger adorned with large granules, very much in vogue in the Western Caucasus at the time.

Projectile Weapons

Very few projectile weapons — bows and arrows — have survived. Caucasian bows belong to the composite ones, i.e. made from horn, cooked sinews and wood glued together. The horn was on the inner side of the bow and ensured strong tension. The cooked animal sinews attached with fish glue along the horn made the bow springier; a fine layer of wood made up the external side. The tips to which the bowstring was attached were made of bone. The wooden side of the bow was covered in black leather adorned with gold starlets.

Arrows were made in the home. A 15th century writer informs us that all the Circassians, not excepting the nobles, every day made arrows for themselves, and that those arrows had a long range and excellently tempered heads. Women made the cases for the bows and arrows — bow cases and quivers, of red or black morocco trimmed at the edges with strips of colored leather or galloon.

Bows and arrows were still widely used, along with fire-arms, in the 18th century. Circassian arrows were purchased by the Tatars and Nogais in quantities amounting to about 300,000 annually.



Fire-arms

Fire-arms have been known in the Northern Caucasus since the 16th century, but became widespread only in the 18th century, for some time coexisting with bows and arrows. Guns were brought from the Crimea and Daghestan (Kubachi) and were also made locally. Guns with faceted barrels and a Turkish inscription "tested" and dated the late 18th and early 19th centuries are probably of Crimean origin. These guns have long and narrow butts, lined with leather and almost unadorned. Guns made by local gunsmiths have heavier barrels with silver yokes and plates on the stocks adorned with Circassian ornament.

Museums in Moscow and Leningrad preserve Circassian pistols, some of them dated the 1840s and 1850s, i.e. the time of the Caucasian war when arms manufacture went on at a particularly high rate. They are fitted with flintlocks of the Turkish type. The barrels are occasionally adorned with gold chasing. The stocks are lined with black leather; the handle terminates in a bone sphere frequently with silver side plates. The yokes and plates were made of silver and



adorned with engraving and niello ornamentation. There occur some highly ornamental pistols whose stocks are made entirely of ivory with silver inlay.

Fire-arms required special accessories. Measured gunpowder charges were kept in wooden tubes carried in special pockets on the breast of the Circassian tunic. The projecting tops of the tubes were closed with an ornamented silver cap. High quality gunpowder to be placed in the pan of the flintlock was kept in powder-flasks made of wood, horn or bone and adorned with silver plates. Pistols were carried in leather holsters. The holsters, like all kinds of casings, were made by the women; they were embroidered with gold and silver thread or decorated with fabric woven of gold and silver. Holsters were frequently made without a bottom to accommodate pistols of any length.

Harness

Many objects are associated with harness. Horse breeding was particularly widespread in Kabarda where big feudal lords had excellent stud farms. Each stud farm had its own branding iron (tamga) to brand its horses. Circassian thoroughbreds were sold to other parts of the North Caucasus, to Georgia, Russia, the Crimea, Lithuania and Poland. The price of a Kabarda thoroughbred horse in the Crimea was 25 times that of a local animal.

The making of saddles and other furnishings for saddle horses was an important item of Circassian handicrafts. Four craftsmen took part: the saddletree-maker made the wooden frame; the saddler covered it with leather and made all the straps and harness and the padding; the blacksmith made all the iron parts and the stirrups; the silversmith provided all the silver decorations. Harness was made of black rawhide straps and adorned with round buckles, engraved, nielloed or gilt. A common ornamental motif was the family cattle branding iron — the tamga. Caucasian saddles are high, lined with red or black morocco, and padded with down. They were occasionally adorned with large ornamented silver plates. Round iron stirrups were painted red or black. Caucasians never used spurs, controlling the horse by means of small riding crops adorned with galloon and silver capped at the top and bottom. Carried on the tip of the loop was leather or felt pennant embroidered with curlicues and trimmed with a silver thread. Women adorned the riding crops with galloon and embroidered the pennants.

