History

War and Conquest in Ancient Egypt

Perhaps no other civilization survived as long as that of the ancient Egyptians. In its long history Egypt not only invaded and annexed foreign territories but also was occasionally the subject of military conquest by invading armies. In discussing the development and organization of Egypt's armed forces and Egypt's imperialistic role in history, it is important to clarify terminology. The Egyptian word *mesha*, traditionally translated as "army," is used in reference not only to a body of soldiers but also to any kind of expeditionary force, such as a mining expedition or similar peaceful endeavor. Thus the meaning of the word is not inherently militaristic but much broader, perhaps even referring to any organized group of individuals who undertake state-sponsored excursions to achieve a state-sponsored objective, militaristic or peaceful. Avoiding use of the word *army* when describing Egypt's military force might be prudent, because the term would imply the existence of a national body of soldiers from the beginning of Egyptian history until the demise of pharaonic civilization, which was not the case.

Old Kingdom (ca. 2575–ca. 2134 BCE)

The earliest reference to a war in ancient Egyptian evidence appears on the Narmer Pallet. On one side of the pallet is a highly stylized pictorial representation of a king grasping the hair of an enemy in one hand and holding a mace in the other upraised hand. The king is shown in the process of hitting the fallen enemy, a pose that became associated with smiting enemies throughout Egyptian history. The other side of the pallet depicts the king marching in a victory procession. The representation preserved on the pallet has been interpreted as a record of a single militaristic action that led to the forceful unification of Egypt by a king of Upper Egypt. Although most scholars subscribe to a theory of a more gradual unification process, this scene, one of the earliest preserved, records some kind of a militaristic internal struggle.

As early as the Old Kingdom, Egypt wanted to acquire the natural resources of the region immediately south of its border, Nubia. To expand their kingdom's boarders southward, Egyptian forces occasionally mounted campaigns into the southern region. Egypt's southern expansion came as a natural consequence of its unique geography. Running the entire length of Egypt from its southern border to the Mediterranean shore, the Nile River was Egypt's highway. The strong river current carried the ships effortlessly north, while winds blowing from the Mediterranean enabled boats to sail south. Moreover, originating in the Ugandan mountains, the Nile facilitated easy access to the African heartland.

Evidence suggests, however, that Egypt did not have a standing army during this period. Instead, various local governors were called on not only to join military expeditions but also to recruit troops from among their local constituents. The autobiography of Weni, an official under the Sixth Dynasty king Pepi I (ca. 2289–2255 BCE), details an expedition to Nubia, Egypt's southern neighbor. Preserved in his tomb at Abydos, the autobiography lists Weni's many titles, including several hereditary positions (Weni had the social rank of an *iry-paet*, a title often translated as "hereditary nobleman" or "count."). In addition, Weni held several high-ranking administrative positions: He was both a governor and a chamberlain of Upper Egypt, the warden of Nekhen (a cultic center in Upper Egypt), and the mayor of Nekheb (an equally important cultic center).

Much like Weni, the officers under his command were hereditary noblemen and members of the civil administration of Egypt; among those Weni listed in his autobiography are "counts, royal seal bearers, sole companions, chieftains and mayors of towns of Upper and Lower Egypt" as well as chief priests and chief district officials. Remarkably, neither Weni nor his officers bore any specifically militaristic titles. The high-ranking administrators among them were required to recruit their own troops from the villages and districts they governed or administered. Farmers comprised the bulk of the Egyptian military force.

Indeed, Weni's autobiography recounts the marshaling of "tens of thousands" of troops against the "Asiatic Sand-dwellers," which was the Egyptian way of referring to Bedouins who subsisted along Egypt's eastern border. Troops were recruited from all the districts of Upper and Lower Egypt as well as from Nubia, the area immediately to the south of Egyptian border, and even included some Libyans. As the leader of this very diverse force, Weni was proud of the discipline of his forces, which he attributed to his own rectitude. In his autobiography he boasts that while he led the
troops, "no one attached his fellow, … no one seized a loaf or sandals from a traveler, … no one stole a cloth from any
town, … no one took a goat from anyone."

Weni roughly sketched the route of the campaign, but his autobiography focuses primarily on the victorious outcome
of the campaign, ending in a poetic refrain that recounts the safe return of the troops, "having slain thousands… [and] having
carried off many troops as captives." The successful outcome of the campaign ensured that Weni would head the military
force sent to fight against the Bedouins five more times. At least once Weni traveled to the battleground aboard a ship,
while half of his troops proceeded on land.

**Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–ca. 1640 BCE)**

Soon after the long reign of Pepi II, a period of political turmoil ensued in Egypt. Known as the First Intermediate Period
(ca. 2134–ca. 2040 BCE), the tumultuous period following the collapse of the Old Kingdom lasted from the Seventh
Dynasty through the middle of the Eleventh Dynasty. Egyptian literature describing this period implies that it may have
witnessed some form of civil war. In particular, the "Instructions to King Merikare," a text written in Middle Egyptian and
surviving in three Eighteenth Dynasty copies, describes the following conditions: "Troops will fight troops… Egypt
fought in the graveyard." Traces of hieroglyphs preserved in this document suggest that the text refers to King Khety, a
possible conflation of Akhtoy, a name commonly held by rulers of the Ninth and Tenth dynasties.

This text belongs to a larger corpus known collectively as pessimistic literature and comprising literary works dating to
the Middle Kingdom. Works belonging to this genre describe how Egypt went through a period of turmoil until order was
finally restored by a savior king. The "Instructions of King Amenemhat," founder of the Twelfth Dynasty, belong to this
genre. After a lengthy account of the chaos in which he found the land, Amenemhat describes how he was able not only to
restore order in the land but also to vanquish Egypt's southern neighbors in Wawat and Medajj (two districts in Nubia).
Amenemhat also claimed that he "made the Asiatics do the dog walk."

However, even in the Middle Kingdom and despite many campaigns into Nubia, the Egyptian military force lacked the
many ranks and titles characteristic of a regular standing army. Similarly absent was a formal division of the military into
units and subunits. Egypt's strategic location in northeastern Africa, lack of a formal standing army, weakened
governmental authority, and lax control of the northeastern border eventually led to the occupation of the delta region by
nomadic groups of western Asiatic descent, known as the Hyksos (the name is a Hellenized version of the Egyptian term
heqa khasut, meaning "rulers of foreign countries"). The Hyksos are credited with the introduction of several technologies
and inventions, not the least important of which were the wheel and its use in the military chariot.

**New Kingdom (ca. 1550–ca. 1070 BCE)**

As founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550–ca. 1307 BCE), King Ahmose is famous for the successful campaign he
launched against the Hyksos strongholds in the delta. Among the several texts recording the events leading to the
expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt is the autobiography of an officer in the Egyptian military, also named Ahmose, who
started his military career as a crew commander under King Ahmose and later served in the Nubian and Syrian campaigns
of Amenhotep I and Thutmose I. The autobiography, inscribed in the officer's tomb at El-Kab, records his early career and
provides a vivid account of his involvement in the battle against the Hyksos. Ahmose portrays himself as a courageous
"crew commander" who climbed the ranks of the military and was rewarded for his bravery and prowess with gold (seven
times) as well as tracts of arable land. As part of his reward Ahmose the officer also received male and female slaves,
some of whom he had captured himself in battle and some whom others captured.

It is clear from his autobiography that Ahmose was an infantryman who "followed the sovereign on foot when he rode in
his chariot." In one episode the soldier records going to the battlefield aboard a ship called the Wild Bull while he was still
an unmarried young man. As an infantryman Ahmose actively participated in the siege of the town of Avaris, the delta
stronghold of the Hyksos. He was then appointed to serve aboard a ship named Rising in Memphis and took part in some
"fighting on the water." This episode, however, should not be taken to indicate that a naval battle took place. Rather, the
fighting occurred on a lake or perhaps a tributary of the Nile near Avaris. The ship merely served as a platform from
which archers could aim their arrows. During the battle Ahmose captured a prisoner of war, and when the captive tried to
escape, Ahmose waded into the waters and recaptured him.
It is clear from his autobiography that although Ahmose was aboard ship to reach western Asia, he was an infantryman who fought on land. Thus he could be considered a marine who mainly engaged in infantry warfare. The text also suggests that Ahmose fought using primarily short-range weapons, such as the club or mace for clubbing; the spear, straight sword, or dagger for stabbing; and the battle-ax or broadsword for slashing and cutting.

Ahmose's vivid descriptions of the fall of the cities of Avaris and Sharuhen indicate that he also engaged in siege warfare. Whenever forces could not infiltrate a fortified city or fortress by tunneling under, climbing over, or smashing into its walls, they would launch a siege that would continue until the inhabitants began to starve and surrendered to the attacking forces. Ahmose describes how Sharuhen was besieged for three years.

Two other types of warfare, not mentioned by Ahmose but attested to elsewhere are naval warfare, in which battles took place on water, and chariots, in which combat occurred from horse-drawn chariots. These two types of warfare, though not as well documented in the archaeological and pictorial records, are depicted on the walls of a few temples.

Although it is emblematic of ancient Egyptian warfare in popular culture and art, the chariot was rarely used in Egyptian battles. Appearing soon after the expulsion of the Hyksos, the chariot enabled a soldier to fight aboard a wheeled vehicle. A unit of mounted troops, or chariots, was limited in size and thus considered elite. The main function of the two-wheeled, horse-drawn chariot was to provide military intelligence and reconnaissance. Protected by its mobility, a chariot would travel along the front lines of the enemy, learning the organization of its infantry forces and bombarding them with arrows. However, the chariot's use as a mobile platform from which archers could shoot their targets was only secondary. Chariots were expensive to maintain. Each vehicle required at least four horses, which needed fodder, tending, and specialized care. Eventually, the chariot became "a status symbol, and in the case of the king … a surrogate throne."

A mid-Eighteenth-Dynasty title, commander of horsemen, suggests the existence of a sort of cavalry or mounted troops. This is further corroborated by scenes from the tomb of Horemhet from Saqqara, which clearly depict the cavalry as an arm of the chariots. Further evidence suggests that the cavalry unit was used extensively in Sheshonq I's Palestinian campaign of around 925 BCE.

Egypt's location on the Mediterranean subjected it to repeated attacks from the Sea Peoples, first during the reign of King Merneptah (ca. 1224–ca. 1214 BCE) and later under Ramses III (ca. 1194–ca. 1163 BCE). These invaders were groups of migrants who swept through the Mediterranean world in the 11th century BCE. Although the exact reason for this massive population movement remains elusive, possible reasons include severe climatic changes in the northern and western Mediterranean.

Pictorial evidence of Ramses III's naval battle against the invading Sea Peoples survives on the walls of his mortuary temple at Medinet Habu. The evidence preserved there constitutes the only known example of an active naval engagement. The scenes indicate that during the Twentieth Dynasty of the New Kingdom the Egyptians commanded large seafaring vessels. The evidence also suggests the existence of naval ranks and titles, and military ships had specific designations. Earlier in the struggle against the Hyksos and later during Piye's 25th march into Egypt, ships were used to transport troops north. But the reliefs of Medinet Habu clearly depict troops fighting from onboard ships, although the specifics of conducting naval battles cannot be reconstructed.

Along with distinct naval ranks and titles, the evidence suggests that during the New Kingdom the Egyptian forces were finally divided into distinct units, each exhibiting a clear hierarchy of ranked officials. The units were organized according to their modes of transportation. Foot soldiers, or infantry troops, made up by far the largest units. Indeed, the evidence suggests that this was the only type of unit up to the beginning of the New Kingdom.

The accounts of two major battles (Megiddo and Kadesh) shed light on New Kingdom warfare. The two accounts are propagandistic in nature, concerned primarily with the exultation of the king and expounding on his role as the great warrior-savior in great detail. Although their propagandistic tone makes the reliability of the numbers (of troops as well as booty) mentioned there quite unreliable, they remain our only primary source on warfare, strategy, and battle moves in ancient Egypt.

Prompted by rumors of a coalition of western Asiatic rulers, Thutmose III launched a preemptive campaign into Syria-Palestine in his first year of sole reign (ca. 1458 BCE). The confrontation between the two armies took place on the plains of Jezreel across from the Canaanite city of Megiddo. Written in literary form, numerous accounts of the battle of Megiddo were engraved on Egyptian temple walls, the most extensive preserved on the walls of the Amun temple at Karnak. As in similar works of this literary genre, the author goes to great lengths to demonstrate the king's military
prowess and strategic brilliance. The propagandistic tenor of the text is clear in its introductory lines, which give the complete titles of the king: "Mighty Bull, Shining in Thebes; King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands; Menkhopeperre; Son of Re." The text then relates how all the victories he enjoyed in battle were granted him by "his father Re [the sun god]."

Under the pretext of quenching perceived rebellion, Thutmose III decided to march against the Asiatics at a time when they seemed to have "fallen into disagreement," when their infighting would have made them an easy target. The account engraved at the Amun temple details the events of the battle: the troops marched "out of Egypt to Gaza, then along the coast of Canaan to the entrance of the Aruna Pass" (probably the Wadi Ara near modern Hadera). Giving this account its particular historical appeal is the seemingly accurate date provided at the beginning of the narrative. The troops set out in Thutmose III's 22nd regnal year, on the 25th day of the fourth month of Peret (the winter season). The text also records the date that the king arrived at his destination at the city of Yehem in western Asia: year 23, first month of Shemu (the summer season), on the 16th day.

On his arrival, however, Thutmose III convened a council of war and received bad advice: to take "a safer route toward Megiddo." The king ignored the advice of his courtiers, deciding instead to take the dangerous crossing of "the Carmel ridge via the Aruna Pass" and enter the Jezreel Valley just outside of the city of Megiddo. He "commanded his entire army to march on that road, which threatened to be narrow. His majesty swore, saying, "None shall go forth in the way before my majesty…. He went forth at the head of his army himself, showing the way by his own footsteps; horse behind horse, his majesty being at the head of his army."

At seeing the king, considered a divine being, the enemy troops fled into disarray. According to the inscription preserved on a stela in Napata (a city in Nubia, in modern Sudan), the Egyptian forces then laid siege to the city of Megiddo until its leaders surrendered. The text gives a vivid description of the surrender and details the booty carried off by the Egyptian troops, giving exact numbers for prisoners of war captured (340), enemy troops killed (83), mares taken (2,041), and stallions seized (6). The text further details the finery of a gold chariots seized and records that 200 suits of armor were taken. Significantly, it does not mention the number of Egyptian troops deployed for battle, and there is no mention of how long the march (or the battle) lasted.

The battle of Qadesh, fought in the fourth year of the reign of the pharaoh Ramses II (ca. 1274 BCE) at Tell Nebi Mend on the Orontes River, was widely published, with many scenes of the battle engraved on the walls of several temples in Egypt and Nubia. The scenes, which proclaim the military prowess of Ramses II, propagate a version of events that claim Egyptian victory in the battle. Like Thutmose III at the battle of Megiddo, Ramses II was misled by false intelligence. The Egyptian forces were ambushed, and although both sides fought ferociously, the Hittites did not yield the land. In fact, extant Hittite records of the battle indicate that the Egyptian troops suffered a severe defeat and fled in chaos. The ensuing peace treaty between Ramses II and the Hittite king Mutewalis preserved the status quo, with both sides suffering considerable losses.

The Egyptian account of the battle of Qadesh is most significant because it indicates that the Egyptian military was subdivided into four battalions, each named after one of the major Egyptian deities. Indeed, the Egyptian versions focus on the bravery of Ramses II who, having been deserted by his infantry and chariots, continued to fight gallantly. The poetic version of the battle surprisingly preserves a passage in which Ramses II complains that the god Amun-Re had deserted him in battle. Despite the lack of divine support, however, Ramses II is able to single-handedly defeat thousands of enemy troops. Indeed, this seems to be the sole purpose of the numerous inscribed versions of the battle: the glorification of the reigning king and the further establishment of his bravery and divinity.

Egyptian military forces were not always on the offensive. In its long history Egypt also experienced several invasions by the armies of other Near Eastern nations: the Nubians, Assyrians, and Persians, and later the Greeks and Romans, all invaded Egypt. At the end of the New Kingdom, Egypt witnessed a period of political fragmentation known as the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1070–ca. 712 BCE). During this period several rulers simultaneously claimed the kingship of Egypt. Occasionally these rivaling dynasts fought over territorial hegemony. Sometime in the early to mid-seventh century BCE Egypt's southern neighbor in Sudan, the kingdom of Napata, rose to power. One of its earliest rulers, Kashta, marched north and may have controlled all the area to the south of Egypt up to Aswān. Located at the first cataract, Aswān was Egypt's traditional southern border. Kashta's sons, Piye and Shabaka, invaded Egypt several times: Piye twice in his fourth and 20th regnal year and Shabaka in his second year. The Nubians eventually succeeded in having a firm grip on Egypt; from 715 to 671 BCE they fully controlled Egypt as its Twenty-fifth Dynasty. The penultimate ruler of that dynasty, Taharqa, was a military man who had spent the early part of his career leading his predecessor's armies. Taharqa tried to expand Egypt's northeastern frontiers.
Assyria was the main military force in the ancient Near East at the time, with a strong presence in Palestine. Taharqa's ambitious military intervention in western Asia may have prompted several subsequent Assyrian invasions into Egypt (in 674, 671, and 667–666 BCE). The Assyrians' invasion of Egypt was a natural consequence of its need to secure Palestine's southern boundary. They left Egypt only after installing their Egyptian ally, Psammetichus I (664–610 BCE), as a vassal king. Psammetichus I succeeded in driving Tantamani, the last Nubian ruler of Egypt, from Egypt, having chased his armies all the way to Nubia in the Sudan. Psammetichus I and his successors of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty relied heavily on the use of mercenaries. Cretans, Greeks, and Jews were among the many nationalities employed in the Egyptian military at the time.

But perhaps the most devastating of all invasions was the Persian invasion of Egypt in the spring of 525 BCE. Having swept through the Near East, the Persians conquered Egypt and ruled it for more than a century. An Egyptian revolt in 401 to 399 BCE led to the expulsion of the Persians from Egypt. Shortly thereafter, in 343 BCE, the Persians reconquered Egypt. This time their rule of Egypt was short lived. After a brief decade Alexander the Great invaded Egypt in 332 BCE.

After Alexander's sudden death his generals divided the territories he had conquered. Egypt fell into the hands of General Ptolemy, who declared himself king of Egypt. His decedents constitute the Ptolemaic Dynasty, and the period from 305 to 30 BCE is known as the Ptolemaic Period. The last Ptolemaic ruler was none other than the famous Queen Cleopatra VII. Egypt was finally annexed to the Roman Empire after Cleopatra and Marc Anthony’s defeat at the naval battle of Actium in 30 BCE.