The Egyptian army 5000 years ago
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Model of a regiment
of mummies and archers.
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THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ARMED FORCES

- The army

Until the takeover of Lower Egypt by the Hyksos, most conflicts the Egyptians had fought had been civil wars, where mainly armies of conscripted peasants and artisans led by noblemen opposed each other, or relatively short campaigns south into Nubia extending the southern borders of the realm, or east and west into the desert regions.

From the Old Kingdom on foreigners were incorporated into the army. The Egyptians possibly even signed contracts with foreign potentates to insure the supply of mercenaries.

Nubian Medjay entered Egypt during the turmoils of the First Intermediate Period, formed mercenary archer units and served in the armed constabulary. They are known to have fought under Kamose against the Hyksos.

![Archer units](image)

Draftees fought in regional contingents, led by local noblemen. Ameni, son of Khnumhotep I led his men on several campaigns against Nubia.

- The changing army of the New Kingdom

The equipment was basic at the beginning of Egyptian history: something to throw at the enemy or hit him with (see a predynastic battle scene) and a heavy shield to hide behind, and the need to improve the weaponry remained small for a long time.

After the Hyksos had taken control of the Delta [2], the Theban pharaohs of the 17th and 18th dynasties adopted new weapons and strategies, a prerequisite for empire building in the Middle East, a region where the constant development of new and better weapons was necessary for survival. Their presence also caused changes in the role of the military in Egyptian society. As the length of the campaigns grew, the use of conscripts became impractical, and the army turned professional, with the nobility in the role of officers and charioteers, and the king fighting among them, generally in closed ranks.

Many specialized troops evolved, such as sappers with heavy shields using battering rams and scaling ladders, trench digging pioneers and, after the reconquest of Nubia, Kushite shock troops and Nubian archers.
This new army did not have all the centuries old traditions other social institutions had. It was therefore relatively easy for talented individuals to rise through the ranks. They could move into other segments of society and maintain exalted positions thanks to the gifts of land and slaves they received from the pharaohs, from Ahmose I onwards. Appreciation for this new nobility, its courage and achievements, was often expressed in inscriptions.

A number of army commanders reached kingship, among them Horemheb and Ramses I (XIX Dynasty) and many kings surrounded themselves with former soldiers whose loyalty and self-sacrifice they had experienced. Didu, a professional soldier, was appointed to the post of responsible for the deserts east of Thebes, then became the king’s envoy to foreign countries, later standard bearer of the king’s guard, captain of the ship Meri-amen and finally commander of the police force. After a long and blameless service Neb-amen, another standard bearer, was appointed chief of police of western Thebes.

Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), whose bodyguard consisted mostly of foreigners -Syrians, Libyans and Nubians – used the army to break the power of the priesthood and the bureaucrats. But after his death the military establishment made peace with the civil service and the clergy. Subsequent pharaohs had to take into account the interest of all three sectors.

Apart from the regular infantry and the chariotry which under Seti I’s reign appears to have been separate from the rest of the army already, there were apparently less professional units as well. The king speaks of the DAm.w, interpreted as militia, in a stela:

With the expanding empire and the need to find capable soldiers, the Egyptians began to induct prisoners of war into their army, such as Sherden captured during the incursions of the Sea Peoples.

Their loyalty to the throne was such, that Sherden only were chosen for the bodyguard of Ramses II.

It was probably during the reign of Ramses II that the first regular mounted cavalry—as opposed to horse-drawn chariots—was introduced in any army, but it was only the Persians in the 6th century BCE who realized its full potential.

The XIX and XX Dynasties saw some of the most spectacular exploits of Egyptian power but also its decline, with Egypt barely able to defend its frontiers and relying heavily on mercenaries. By the middle of the 12th century sixty percent of the soldiers were non-Egyptians.

Sheshonq I (XXII Dynasty) recreated the royal army after years of neglect

- The army of the Late Period

The resurgence of Egyptian power after the occupations of the country by Libyans, Kushites and Assyrians was mostly based on the hiring of foreign mercenaries from the east and north: Ionians and Carians, Jews, Aramaeans, Phoenicians and others. They were deployed when native forces were considered to be unreliable. Jewish contingents were stationed at Elephantine and Aramaeans at Syene after Egyptian troops had deserted and fled into Nubia.
These mercenary troops were often officered by foreign commanders, at times of a different ethnic group, and their obedience was not always ensured. They and their families lived in communities which upheld traditional values to a large degree and cultivated their connection to their home countries by participating financially in the erection of public edifices “back home”, or by appealing to the authorities for support, as did the Jews who asked the government in Jerusalem for help after their temple at Elephantine had been destroyed.

Still, there was a feeling of loyalty to their employer, to their officers and to each other, which all soldiers need to be able to function in the battle field; and when their trust was betrayed their reaction could be savage: after Phanes of Halicarnassos had deserted to Cambyses his troops punished him by killing his children before his eyes.

Deployment

Deploying an army in ancient times was laborious business. Inside Egypt soldiers and their provisioning could be moved by ship, the fastest mode of mass transportation until the advent of the railway.

Marching an army to its destination took much longer, even when depots of food and water were available. On his way to Megiddo Thutmose III crossed the Sinai Desert from Tharu on the eastern border of Egypt to the closest major Canaanite town, Gaza, a distance of about 200 km in 9 days [8], at a speed of about 22 km per day.

His progress through Canaan was much slower, about 10 km per day [8], probably mostly due to the fact that in ancient times armies in enemy territory generally provisioned themselves by looting the countryside which slowed down their advance.

At the end of a marching day a camp surrounded by a shield wall had to be set up when one had to spend the night in the open. Into this protected space the pack animals could be herded and unloaded, tents could be erected there, skilled craftsmen could look after broken equipment and grooms tend the animals.

The army organization

Ancient armies were generally small compared to modern mass armies [5]. The Egyptian army of the New Kingdom was composed of three divisions under Seti I on his Canaan campaign, named Suteh (Set)–”the heroic archers”, Amen–”the mighty archers” and Re–”the many-armed”, [4] and of four under Ramses II on his Kadesh campaign, the forth being named Ptah.

A division numbered several thousand men, typically 4000 infantry and 1000 chariots, organized into ten battalions of about 500 soldiers, which were subdivided into companies 250 strong, platoons of fifty men and ten men squads.

The overall command lay in the hands of the pharaoh himself or one of his close relatives, generally a son. Similar to the administration of the whole kingdom, the army was divided into a northern and a southern corps overseen by Chief Deputies. The line of command included ranks corresponding to the modern generals, battalion commanders, standard
bearers and adjutants at the company level, lieutenants leading the platoons, and non-commissioned officers in charge of squads. [1]

The chariots were led by marshals (jmj-rA ssmwt – Ami-Re-sesemut). It was divided into brigades, each of which was comprised of two or more squadrons. Five companies of ten chariots each made up a squadron. Egyptian chariots were manned by two soldiers, a driver and an archer.

Parallel to the combat line of command there was a scribal administration organized on hierarchical lines and distinct from the combat officers.

The Egyptian army units

- The aftermath of battle

Egyptian leaders sometimes prided themselves on that nobody had died during their expeditions. But battles, even victorious ones, cause victims, wounded and dead. The dead had to be buried close to where they fell which was generally in foreign soil, a fate many Egyptians dreaded. Thutmose, a scribe serving in the army during the reign of Ramses XI, was clearly worried. He kept up a lively correspondence with his friends back home, and to one named Hafy he wrote fatalistically: Today I am alive, but the morrow is in god’s hand [12]. In many of his letters he asked his friends to beg the gods to intercede on his behalf: And you shall get water for Amen of the thrones of both lands and tell him to preserve me! [11]

The treatment of the injured was generally haphazard until the introduction of medical corps in modern times. Little is known about how the Egyptians prepared themselves for dealing with expected casualties, but some measures were taken; the above mentioned Thutmose, also called Tjari, for instance, received the following order:

The survival chances of the wounded were probably slim despite the Egyptian physicians’ extensive knowledge of how to treat serious injuries, knowledge collected in scrolls such as the Edwin Smith papyrus.

The Egyptian army units

- Behaviour after victory
While the Egyptians were perhaps less cruel than the Assyrians who erased cities and destroyed whole peoples in order to frighten others into submission, they still let the conquered know who was master, at times killing them as the depictions on the Narmer Palette and decapitated bodies discovered near Middle Kingdom fortresses in Nubia seem to indicate, often by enlisting survivors both civilian and military, or plundering their possessions and destroying their means of livelihood:

Sometimes sizable parts of the population were displaced. Snefru carried off thousands of Nubians after a victory in ca. 2599 BCE. It has been suggested that they were settled in Egyptian villages (domains) founded the following year:

Sometimes the bodies were shown to the public, often in a demeaning manner. Thutmose I displayed a killed Nubian hanging head down from the prow of his ship, Amenhotep II did likewise to Syrian enemies:

After the conquest of Megiddo by Thutmose III the surviving princes surrendered to the pharaoh, and after accepting the Egyptian king as their overlord, they were allowed to continue ruling their cities.

Behold, the chiefs of this country came to render their portions, to do obeisance to the fame of his majesty, to crave breath for their nostrils, because of the greatness of his power, because of the might of his majesty the country came to his fame, bearing their gifts, consisting of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, malachite; bringing clean grain, wine, large cattle, and small cattle for the army of his majesty. Each of the Kode among them bore the tribute southward. Behold, his majesty appointed the chiefs anew.

Booty was important as a source of remuneration of one’s followers and was sometimes the reason for not achieving military success. During the battle of Kadesh the Hittite charioteers seem to have abandoned the pursuit of Ramses and the remnants of his forces in order to plunder the Egyptian camp, which gave the pharaoh time to reorganize his forces and drive the Hittites back towards Kadesh.

Thutmose III exercised better control over his troops at Megiddo. Plundering started after the victory over the enemy chariotry was complete, though it prevented, according to the chronicler, the taking of the town by assault. The booty belonged to the king who distributed it to those he deemed deserving.

Some conquered territories like Nubia and the Sinai were annexed, administered by Egyptian officials and controlled with the help of the army, while in others, like Canaan, local kings subservient to the pharaohs ruled with armies of their own.

After a victory was achieved the plunder was distributed, the deserving were honoured and the gods were thanked.

In a Luxor relief Ramses II depicted an unidentified Asiatic fortress which had been taken, with six pigeons rising from it, seemingly sent forth to announce the victory [7]. Victories were dedicated to the gods by reliefs and inscriptions on temple walls [10], by offerings of hacked off limbs of enemies and by donations of a part of the booty to their temples.
Most Egyptian victories were achieved over enemies of little significance, bedouins in the eastern desert, tribes in Nubia or ill organized city states in Canaan. When Egypt came up against major powers its military performance was less admirable. Against the Hittites or Mitanni during the New Kingdom the Egyptians managed to come to understandings which preserved their sphere of influence in Canaan, but during the first millennium BCE they repeatedly collapsed under the onslaught of foreign armies, be they Kushite, Assyrian or Persian, and their country was occupied.

- The navy

Egyptian squadrons composed of speedy keftiu [3], kebentiu from Byblos and Egyptian transports patrolled the eastern Mediterranean.

Unlike the later Greeks who developed special naval techniques (used also by Late Period Egypt), maritime battles by New Kingdom Egyptians and their opponents, the Sea Peoples, were fought by seaborne land troops. The Egyptian deployment of archers and the fact, that Egyptian ships could both be sailed and rowed, gave them a decisive advantage, despite the inferiority of the vessels themselves, which were at times quite sizable carrying up to two hundred and fifty soldiers.

But often the navy was little more than a means for getting land troops to where they were needed. Senusret III reached Nubia by ship.

Soldiers could also be transported at great speed to the Asiatic coast where they came upon the rebellious Canaanites without warning. Thutmose III employed this technique with great success.

Egypt lost its role of maritime superpower after the end of the New Kingdom. Phoenicians and Greeks became the main players in the Mediterranean. Continental powers like the Persians used these sea-faring nations to impose their control on the seas.

Egypt renewed its navy under Necho II, investing heavily in the development of biremes and was possibly among the inventors of the more powerful triremes in its attempt to fight off the Persians. It was unsuccessful and thereafter its fleet was at the behest of the foreign power controlling the country. Dozens of Egyptian ships were incorporated into the Persian fleet fighting the Greeks.

The last of the Ptolemies, Queen Cleopatra VII joined forces with the Roman Marc Anthony, in an attempt to preserve Egypt's independence. But her fleet was defeated at Actium, which spelled out the end of pharaonic Egypt.

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