









Figurines of warriors
from the tomb of
Hunefer, Thebes,
Egypt, 19th Dynasty













مدرسة الملكة في لندن
البريطانية
التي تسمى اليوم

Model of a regiment
of Indian soldiers
from the
First World War



مروج فضلة من مشاة نوبين





نماذج فضيلة من مشاة نوبين
عسكر مملوك
قوة لفرسان النبوة

Model of a regiment
of nubian 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

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.

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 enslaving 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 the fame 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. Sensusret 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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The author

Professor Yasser Metwally