

ANCIENT EGYPT – Military History

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The Egyptian Military went through different developmental phases, in the three millennia and more of the integrity of the Egyptian state. There were, understandably, advances in weaponry, administration, and battle strategy.

Weaponry In the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 B.C.E.) soldiers were basically peasants recruited off the land, and supplied by their local *nomarchs* (regional government administrators) with the basic tools of military trade: *shields, spears, cudgels, bows and arrows*. It wasn't until the so-called Second Intermediate Period of Egyptian history (1650-1550 B.C.E.) that foreign intervention introduced a new kind of weaponry to the Egyptians. The invasion of the Hyksos, an Asiatic nomadic culture which became the Fifteenth Egyptian Dynasty, ruling the nation, brought many novelties to Egypt--new plants and animals, loan words, the culture of the horse, and horse and chariot weaponry which added to the Egyptians' military power store. With the addition of the composite bow--horn and hide added to the bow strings--the Egyptian army entered its later, and most effective, New Kingdom stage, during which, with the innovation of the *khopesh* (sickle sword) and pretty impenetrable scale armor (for the Pharaoh) the national army was a formidable aggressive force.

Administration During the Old Kingdom the army of Egypt was recruited and administered by the regional *nomarchs*, or provincial governors. (The recruits were peasants and artisans, and their army disbanded at the end of conflict.) The final defeat of the Hyksos (see above) meant the gradual development of the Egyptian army into a full-time standing force, consisting of infantry, charioteers, and a navy of large ships (for the time) which however served mainly for transport and supplies, rather than for combat. The fully developed army, of the New Kingdom (1550-1069 B.C.,E.), was a national force under the direction of a Supreme Commander, well organized divisions, and highly organized battle plans.

Battle strategy It should be noted that from the Old Kingdom at its height, the army of Egypt was chiefly employed to protect the boundaries of the nation, and not to undertake foreign actions. (To the early Egyptians it seemed evident that their country was the finest land in the world, and that there was no reason to go beyond its borders.) The army, therefore, was at that period largely involved with constructing fortresses and patrolling the national borders. After their conflicts with the Hyksos, the Egyptians adopted innovative battle strategies, made possible by the growingly sophisticated use of swift and light chariots, tougher and lighter battle armor, and new combinations of infantry with cavalry assault. While the Egyptian army saw considerable internal action, maintaining civil and provincial order, it could boast a remarkably successful three millennia long record of avoiding foreign military entanglements.

Readings

Wise, Terence, *Ancient Armies of the Middle East*, Oxford, 1981.

Hamblin, William, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, London, 2006.

Discussion questions

Is a culture's general state of development measurable in terms of its military development? Does military development go hand in hand with cultural development?

In the New Kingdom, the Egyptian army was strengthened by the incorporation of a new weapon, the *khopesh*, which developed out of the battle-axe. What generates such innovations? What do they make possible?

What was the function of the ancient Egyptian navy? How did it co ordinate with Egyptian land forces? What truth is there in the frequent claim that the Egyptians were not a 'seafaring people'?