

ANCIENT EGYPT – Political history

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Contents

Part I : Government

Part II : Military

GOVERNMENT

Overview For over three millennia the government of Egypt, which first became a united kingdom in 3150 B.C.E., remained relatively stable and true to its original character. The tagline ‘theocratic monarchy’ fits well enough, for this vast period of rule, and though the government experienced significant challenges both within and from without, it remained intact and serviceable for, to take an example, much longer than the long lasting Roman Empire.

The King or Pharaoh While there was a pre dynastic monarchic period, perhaps itself three thousand years in duration, we know rather little about its culture, or about a certain renowned Scorpion King, one of its salient leaders. Our significant understanding of the culture dates from the First Dynasty, 3100-3050 B.C.E., when a king named Narmer (or Menes) unified Upper and Lower Egypt into a single kingdom. The King himself was understood to be the gods’ direct instructional channel for leadership, in all the details of governing. While there were times, in later dynasties, when the King or Pharaoh’s power was compromised by foreign invasion, (especially by the Hyksos), or decentralization from within the country, by and large the King or Pharaoh’s power remained unchallenged through to the reign of Queen Cleopatra, the last Egyptian leader (d. 30 B.C.E.). It might be mentioned, as evidence that the Egyptian King was no figurehead, that one of his chief duties--the *Egyptian Cattle Count*-- was to travel throughout his vast land, assessing the wealth of his kingdom, and especially its agricultural condition, which would be the basis for the treasury’s very substantial annual tax revenue.

Chief government officials The King or Pharaoh had one of two viziers, often relatives and always ‘closely connected to the King,’ who carried out the highest level of administrative decision making. Under this level were *scribes*--indispensable educated readers/writers/accountants, *nomarchs* (governors of provinces); *temple officials*--under whom, at later periods of high temple growth, many social services concerning health, banking, infrastructure projects were gathered; and, after 1570 B.C.E., a sizeable and active police force. The vast temple, pyramid, and precinct structures, from which we are likely to take our first impressions of ancient Egypt, were financed, supervised, and architected through the prosperous temples which were scattered throughout the country. Interwoven with the civilizing and control mechanisms of the temple, there was--especially after the Hyksos invasions of the 13th dynasty (1783-1640 B.C.E.)--a sizeable *military build up*, by which the government could assure itself protection against foreign predations.

Economics and revenue A population of 2-5 million (the best guess out there) had to suffice for financing a huge empire, increasingly under assault from the outside world. The vast majority

of the ancient Egyptian population were peasants on the land, and it was they who coughed up the produce that filled the state granaries, and eventually bankrolled the vast military and constructual projects of the government. Thanks to abundance of such revenues one speaks--to pick an example--of the 12th dynasty of the Middle Kingdom (2040-1802 B.C.E.) as the Golden Age of the ancient Egyptian government, in which art and diplomacy flourished, and self-glorifying monuments grew like trees from the gardens of the capitol, Thebes.

Readings

Grimal, Nicolas, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1992.

Clayton, Peter, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, London, 1994.

Discussion questions

Discuss the function of the police force--which among other things oversaw morals--in the ancient Egyptian state. Who was chosen for the force, and what kind of training did they get?

What do you see as the relation between religion and government in ancient Egypt? Do you believe the people believed that their ruler was also a god? What would have led them to that belief?

In the first millennium B.C.E. the Egyptians began to adopt a coinage system--as distinct from the different barter systems they had previously used. What effect on governing would this shift to coinage from barter have?

MILITARY

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 coordinate with Egyptian land forces? What truth is there in the frequent claim that the Egyptians were not a 'seafaring people'?