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LAND OF DESERT AND NILE

The two stallions strained against their yokes, hooves pounding the earth and plumed headdresses bobbing as they galloped ahead. The leather-tired wheels of the light chariot hurtled over the rocky terrain as the king, reins tied tightly behind his waist, drew back the bowstring to launch another arrow into the enemy hordes. The royal chariot charged into a seething scene of absolute mayhem, a towering mound of flailing limbs, terrified enemies trampling their fallen comrades to escape from the oncoming pharaoh and his chariot warriors. Around the king, his infantry waded through the wounded and dying, thrusting with their daggers and spears, pausing only to sever the right hands of the dead enemy soldiers as records of their kills. Egyptian victory was inevitable. Or so the pharaoh Tutankhamun would have us imagine his military exploits . . . but what was the reality of war in the time of Tutankhamun?

On November 26, 1922, Egyptologist Howard Carter looked through the small opening he had just made in the wall sealing the tomb of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh and gazed upon the mortuary treasure of Tutankhamun¹ (see figure 1). Among the fabulously bejeweled and beautifully crafted tomb furnishings were the pharaoh's implements of war—chariots, bows, arrows, daggers, a leather cuirass, and other martial equipment, both ceremonial and more mundanely practical. Carter's discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun catapulted an otherwise obscure pharaoh into international fame, and gave impetus to yet another of the world's recurring cycles of Egyptomania, yet it failed to add significantly to the meager fragments of historical information for Tutankhamun's reign. The famous gold mask of the "boy king" may yet stare placidly across the millennia, but the reign



Figure 1. Asiatic battle scene from Tutankhamun's "Painted Box" (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 61467). Wearing the Blue Crown, the pharaoh Tutankhamun charges against a mass of Asiatic chariotry, where Egyptian soldiers are busy dispatching the enemies with spears and daggers. Symbols of pharaonic kingship and protection hover above the pharaoh, who is followed by fan-bearing officials in chariots. Courtesy of the Griffith Institute, Oxford University.

of Tutankhamun—like those of many who ruled before and after him—was not devoid of military conflict. In fact, the stability of ancient Egyptian civilization and the creation of the magnificent objects buried with Tutankhamun were the fruits of an often effective military strategy.²

Curiously, although Tutankhamun and his immediate predecessors and successors of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth dynasties engaged in a complicated and ultimately successful series of political machinations and military campaigns, the popular conception of Tutankhamun's age is one of religious obsession, nature worship, and even pacifism. This popular mythologizing arises from well-meaning but ultimately inaccurate attempts to explain the behavior of Tutankhamun's predecessor and father, Amunhotep IV/Akhenaten,³ who set his personal imprint on the late Eighteenth Dynasty, an era long termed the "Amarna Period." Akhenaten, famous for his radical innovations in Egyptian religion, moved the administrative and religious centers of Egypt from Thebes (modern Luxor) and Memphis (near modern Cairo) to his new capital, Akhet-aten (near the village of el-Amarna in Middle Egypt). Through his activities at home and abroad, Akhenaten casts his somewhat misshapen shadow across the reigns of all of his Eighteenth Dynasty successors; even Horemhab, at the end of the dynasty, as forceful and important as he was in his own right, devoted no little time and energy to restoring temples that had suffered from Akhenaten's iconoclasm and to uprooting administrative corruption that appears to have flourished in the wake of Akhenaten's political and religious upheaval.

The reigns of Akhenaten's successors Ankh(et)kheperure, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamun, Aye, and to some extent even the reign of Horemhab are all subsumed under the designation "Amarna Period," an era that lasted from circa 1352 to 1295 B.C.E. The so-called religious revolution of Akhenaten, the splendid objects from Tutankhamun's tomb, the peculiarities of much of the art and architecture of the period, and the historical problems have all pushed the military history of the Amarna Period into the background. This ignoring of the seemingly mundane for the apparently esoteric is unfortunate, for the Amarna Period is a fascinating era for the study of military strategy and diplomatic maneuver, a time when great empires vied for power, minor polities sought to align and realign themselves to the greatest advantage, and mighty kings and wily princes went to all lengths to secure alliances and destroy their enemies. Diplomatic niceties meant that the pharaoh often commiserated with a city ruler while pushing the knife into the latter's back—a lack of direct conflict does not preclude a complex military history.

The lives of those engaged in the military affairs of Egypt—from the pharaoh and his chief generals and advisers down to the foot soldiers—were subject to the same polarizing forces that produced the unique character of pharaonic culture. The contrast of the flowing waters of the Nile and the often narrow surrounding margin of cultivation, with the forbidding rocks and sands of the vast deserts beyond, sets its imprint on all aspects of existence along the Nile Valley. By the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E., the deserts surrounding the Nile Valley had begun to approach their modern state of desiccation,⁴ and the waters of the Nile and the oases of the Egyptian Western Desert had already become the foci for much of human activity in northeastern Africa.⁵

Certainly the Nile River and its annual inundation constituted the lifeblood of ancient Egypt—the chief source of water for irrigation and the origin of the black alluvial soil of Egypt's fields—but the now harsh deserts surrounding the Nile Valley also played an important role in the rise of Egyptian civilization. Geographically, the Egyptians divided their country between the lush Nile Valley, which they called *kemet* (the black land), a reference to the rich alluvial soil, and the desert, called *deshret* (the red land). This essentially east–west dichotomy running the length of the Nile Valley was balanced by a north–south division: Lower Egypt, encompassing the Nile Delta to the north, a broad region of fields, swamps, and river channels, and Upper Egypt, the Nile Valley south of Memphis, always a relatively narrow strip of cultivation bounded on the east and the west by desert cliffs. The opposition and balance between the desert regions and the cultivated lands, and those between Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, together created much of the character of Egyptian culture and propelled many of the major events of Egyptian history.⁶

At the dawn of the Predynastic Period, in about 4500 B.C.E., over a millennium before Egypt possessed a single ruler and a centralized state, the cultures of Upper Egypt traded with other peoples who lived in the desert regions to the south and west, where seasonal lakes created an interesting blend of hunting, gathering, and pastoralism. This interaction between the inhabitants of the desert and those of the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley fueled the development of a complex and symbol-oriented culture that would become what we know as pharaonic Egypt.⁷ Over time, the power centers of Upper Egypt became culticly and economically inter-related, even homogeneous.⁸ The final form of a unified Egyptian state was melded in the crucible of interregional conflict from which one man, apparently the ruler of a coalition of the city-states of Hierakonpolis and Abydos, would emerge victorious. In approximately 3150 B.C.E., a ruler

based at Abydos and possibly calling himself Horus Scorpion unified the three main centers of Upper Egyptian culture. Drawing on the centuries-old Upper Egyptian tradition of carving symbolic representations on the desert cliffs, the unifier of Upper Egypt commissioned what may well be Egypt's first historical document, an annotated depiction recording his military victory over his last rival in Upper Egypt.⁹

Less than two centuries later, Narmer completed the Upper Egyptian conquest of the Delta, a region that appears to have become a patchwork of city-states not unlike the contemporaneous political organization prevailing in the Middle East. The Egyptian love of dualism led the dominant Upper Egyptians to portray the conquest as the unification of an Upper Egyptian state and a corresponding Lower Egyptian state, even though predynastic Lower Egypt does not appear to have achieved the political and symbolic sophistication of Upper Egypt.¹⁰ Narmer thus officially began the long history of pharaonic kingship, which would endure for the following three millennia. Modern divisions of Egypt's long history derive in large part from the Greco-Egyptian historian Manetho, who, utilizing earlier Egyptian king lists and other historical sources, divided the history of Egypt into dynasties grouped by city origin and family relationships.¹¹ Prior to the first millennium, three series of powerful dynasties ruled over a unified Upper and Lower Egypt: the Old Kingdom (Dynasties 4–6, 2686–2160 B.C.E.), Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11–14, 2055–1650 B.C.E.), and New Kingdom (Dynasties 18–20, 1550–1069 B.C.E.).

These “kingdoms,” times of centralization and powerful pharaohs, were interspersed with so-called intermediate periods, when the country fragmented into smaller political units. Beginning with the late Predynastic Period, Upper Egypt became the home of a particularly strong concept of centralized governmental authority, and during the various cycles of political weakness in the Egyptian Nile Valley, Upper Egypt was often the point of origin for the reestablishment of a powerful unified government. The period of disunity following the Old Kingdom—the First Intermediate Period (2160–2055 B.C.E.)—came to an end when a highly centralized and pugnacious Upper Egyptian kingdom centered at Thebes extended its authority along the entire Egyptian Nile Valley. The ensuing Middle Kingdom ushered in a four-hundred-year period of relative peace and stability, which ended with a weak Thirteenth Dynasty Egyptian administration first relinquishing control of the northeast Delta to local usurpers, and finally losing that same territory and more to an alliance of those Delta warlords, eastern Mediterranean traders, and foreign invaders from the northeast, the Hyksos.¹²

The Hyksos domination in the north coincided with the loss of Egyptian territories in the southern lands, usually termed Nubia, where the Kerma culture also established an independent kingdom. A powerful Theban-based Egyptian Seventeenth Dynasty, direct successor to the Thirteenth Dynasty, drove out the Hyksos rulers from the Delta and pushed the Kermans far south into Nubia, thereby reestablishing a unified Egypt and initiating the golden age of the New Kingdom. In some ways the New Kingdom is the ultimate and most wide-reaching expression of an Upper Egyptian concept of a militarily aggressive central administration, governed initially by Theban rulers whose ancestors were able to end two periods of disunity in the Nile Valley.

From the beginning of the New Kingdom, in iconic imagery, textual descriptions, and bloody reality, the Egyptian pharaoh became a true “warrior king.” Pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty in particular touted their mastery of weaponry and their skill in horsemanship, as well as their personal bravery in battle.¹³ Claims of physical prowess were also balanced by assertions of mental acumen—not only was the pharaoh strong enough to kill the opposition, he also was clever enough to develop a strategy that would guarantee victory.¹⁴ The emphatically militaristic ideology of pharaonic kingship in the New Kingdom is closely linked to changes in the nature of the Egyptian army. During the Second Intermediate Period, the Egyptian arsenal acquired two new weapons: the composite bow and the chariot. The composite bow enhanced the effectiveness of the two traditional branches of the Egyptian military, the infantry and the navy, and became the key weapon for the new Egyptian chariot corps. Furthermore, the greater diplomatic and military interaction of the Egyptians with more distant foreign groups, a direct outgrowth of the Second Intermediate Period, led to an increased use of auxiliary troops from Asia and Libya alongside the traditional employment of Nubian bowmen. The expansion of the three branches of the Egyptian military—infantry, chariotry, and navy—necessary for the battles against the Hyksos and the Kermans at the end of the Second Intermediate Period created one of the largest professional armies in the ancient Near East.

The reunification of Egypt and the rise of its highly militarized state at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty combined with the memory of foreign invasion to fuel Egypt’s aspirations to conquer territory to the south, modern-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan, and to the northeast, including the regions of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Syria. The pharaohs of the Amarna Period inherited a powerful Egyptian empire, the product of years of campaigning by pharaohs such as Thutmose I and

Thutmose III, who ruled the largest area of Egyptian hegemony in the history of the pharaonic state. Maintaining Egypt's extensive foreign territories required both military strength and diplomatic prowess to confront the problems posed by the very different cultures of Nubia and western Asia. The primarily tribal organization and increasingly mixed native and Egyptian cultures of Nubia and the complex and mutually distrustful city-states of Syria-Palestine necessitated two different forms of colonial administration in the southern and northern realms of Egypt's empire.

Nubia, the land stretching south from the Egyptian border at the administrative center and trade emporium of Aswan, was Egypt's primary source of gold as well as the gateway—by Nile and desert routes—to the trade goods of more southerly regions of Africa, including many of the products necessary for ancient Egyptian religious rituals. Throughout Egyptian history, Nubian political structure vacillated between centralized powers at war with Egypt, such as the Kerman kingdom of the early second millennium, and a colonial system ruled by Egypt.¹⁵ The degree of Nubian independence reflected inversely the strength of pharaonic rule—during each of the highly centralized periods of Egyptian history—the Old, Middle, and New kingdoms—Egypt directly controlled large areas of Nubian territory. The intermediate periods of strife and decentralization within Egypt signaled a withdrawal of Egyptian garrisons and the abandonment of fortifications in Nubia, allowing the growth of independent Nubian states. Despite some of the internal Egyptian troubles during the reigns of Akhenaten and his successors, throughout the Amarna Period, Nubia remained an Egyptian colony with a Nubian “viceroys” and colonial administration. Monuments dating to the reign of Tutankhamun provide some of the most detailed and lively information about Egyptian and Nubian interactions from the entire New Kingdom. But even Egypt's strong colonial system was unable to prevent rebellions by nomadic tribes, which could threaten the all-important gold mining regions and necessitate swift Egyptian military action.

The Egyptian empire of the New Kingdom also extended beyond the northeastern border of the Nile Delta, into the region of Syria-Palestine, which, like all areas beyond the Sinai Peninsula, is often termed western Asia or simply Asia in Egyptological parlance. Much of the military history of the Eighteenth Dynasty is intimately related to Egypt's desire for greater control over the region of Syria-Palestine—won by force of arms under Thutmose I and Thutmose III, but often achieved by indirect means in the latter part of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The humiliation of the Second Intermediate Period fostered an aggressive Egyptian foreign policy,

impatient to identify and neutralize any potential Asiatic threat as far as possible beyond the immediate eastern border of the Nile Delta. As the Eighteenth Dynasty progressed, the maintenance of buffer states in the northeast brought Egypt into contact and often conflict with the powerful kingdoms of the Near East and Asia Minor who might ultimately attempt an invasion of Egypt's northeastern holdings, if not perhaps the Nile Delta itself. The constantly shifting alliances between Egypt and these political entities of western Asia meant that the group posing the greatest threat to Egypt changed over time. The pharaohs of the early Eighteenth Dynasty led numerous campaigns against the kingdom of Mitanni, centered on the upper Euphrates. By the late Eighteenth Dynasty, however, Mitanni no longer posed a significant threat. The fierce military conflicts between Egypt and Mitanni instead became an alliance sealed by the marriage of Mitannian princesses to the Egyptian pharaoh, beginning with Thutmose IV and continuing with his successor Amunhotep III.

During the early Amarna Period a state of relative peace existed in the region of Syria-Palestine. However, the hostile role Mitanni once played gradually passed to the Hittite kingdom, centered at the city of Hattusas (modern Bogazköy) in Asia Minor. The strategy of the late Eighteenth Dynasty rulers toward the Hittites differed from the earlier pharaohs' direct attacks on Mitanni. Diplomatic maneuvering among Egypt, the Hittites, and the satellite states of the two powers during the reigns of Akhenaten and his successors often overshadows the evidence for military skirmishes. Much of this diplomacy took the form of a continuous stream of official written correspondence between the pharaohs of Egypt and the rulers of the major kingdoms and small city-states of Asia Minor and the Near East. While most of these ancient diplomatic letters are now lost, a large group of these missives was discovered at Akhenaten's capital city of Akhet-aten, from which find spot they derive their modern appellation the "Amarna Letters." Through these letters we may reconstruct the complex foreign policy of the late Eighteenth Dynasty toward the kingdoms that bordered on Egypt's northern territories.

In addition to political and military friction they experienced with the powerful and centralized kingdoms to the northeast, and occasional challenges to pharaonic authority in the increasingly Egyptianized lands to the south, the Egyptians of the Amarna Period also faced opposition from less urbanized groups on the borders of Egypt and her dependencies. The Libyans of the Egyptian Western Desert hovered about the fringes of pharaonic society and were both an integral part of life in the oases and an ever-present menace to Egyptian control thereof. Already by the time of

Amunhotep III, the northern coasts of Egypt and the Western Desert were also subject to piratical incursions of Mediterranean groups. Repelling raids by these mobile opponents demanded a set of strategies and tactics different from those the Egyptians employed in their more formal confrontations with the armies of Mitanni, the Hittites, and smaller groups in western Asia. Unlike the often wide-open battlefields of Syria-Palestine, with their set-piece battles on carefully chosen sites ideally suited to the use of massed chariotry, the rough terrain in the hinterlands of Egypt's borders probably relegated the chariotry to an at best subordinate role in many if not most expeditions against opponents such as the Libyans. Egyptian foot archers and infantry played a greater role in campaigns against those groups of "irregular" troops.

The ancient Egyptians did not simply seek imperial glory for its own glamour and prestige, but rather acquired much of their new imperial accolades in the search for internal security through establishment of colonial outposts and the fostering of buffer states beyond their borders. The term "empire" has rather extraordinary baggage for the modern world, and although the ancient empire par excellence is, of course, the Roman Empire, scholars have assigned the designation "empire" to a variety of political entities, ranging from geographically limited and relatively poorly documented city-states (e.g., the "empire" of Sargon) to conglomerations of large geographic extent and overwhelmingly elaborate and highly centralized bureaucracies (e.g., the Soviet empire).¹⁶ The present publication will use the term "empire" when referring to New Kingdom Egypt, as composed of the pharaonic state of Egypt, her junior sister state Nubia, and her dependencies in Syria-Palestine.¹⁷ Likewise we will also employ a mixture of imperial terminology, such as "province," "colony," and "viceroys," some of which derive from the Roman and British empires. The fact that the Egyptians tailored their diplomacy to the local situation, in light of the degree of integration of foreign territories within the Egyptian administration, indicates that the ancient Egyptian empire builders saw themselves not simply as expanding the static borders of Egypt proper, but also were well aware that they were dealing with a multiplicity of geographic, administrative, and cultural considerations, all of which mirror the actions of Rome and late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Great Britain.

In spite of the fact that New Kingdom Egypt appears to have adopted a pragmatic attitude toward the particular regions and circumstances of her empire, ideologically, all actions of aggression and acquisition outside of the traditional realm of Egypt could be termed *sewesekh tashu* (broadening the borders.)¹⁸ In terms of Egyptian religious thought, Egypt is not

only the model of the ordered world but also the most perfectly formed and well-functioning portion of the world. Just as creation exists as a bubble of order within the threatening abyss of chaos, so Egypt was surrounded by foreign groups, all of whom represented potentially dangerous and chaotic forces. By expanding Egyptian control over foreign lands, the territory of the ordered world was thereby enlarged. This can present some problems for the modern historian, because whatever may have been the mundane causes of any conflict, such a conflict would only acquire proper meaning for the ancient Egyptians when they could demonstrate that the struggle in some way produced an extension of the ordered cosmos—in the end, any and all physical or ideological expansion beyond the home territories of Egypt would for the ancient Egyptians be the acting out of “broadening the borders.”

Whether recounted on a temple wall or on a private monument, the military records of the ancient Egyptians served a higher purpose—proof of the triumph of order over chaos. The ancient Egyptians lived in a cosmos governed by the universal duality of *maat* (order) versus *isfet* (chaos).¹⁹ The preservation of *maat*, which included justice and all aspects of cosmic harmony, was the most basic ideological reason for warfare in ancient Egypt. Unlike our concept of objective history, all Egyptian historical texts—particularly military documents—served a theological purpose, whatever degree of historical accuracy they were intended to have. Furthermore, one must remember that most royal military texts and scenes decorated the exterior walls of temples, serving the dual role of historical record and symbolic protection of the sacred space from chaotic forces.²⁰ The religious aspects of their military records did not prevent the Egyptians from accurately reporting the events of the battles they chose to portray.²¹ Occasionally, documents from Egypt’s enemies also provide another point of view, enabling one to reconstruct Egyptian defeats that otherwise went unrecorded. Such outside evidence is most abundant during the Amarna Period, since letters written by rulers hostile to Egypt have survived. Although Egyptian military texts are often characterized as bombastic or purely propagandistic, when viewed properly within the perspective of their greater theological purpose, they may often yield considerable detail about historical events.

The reign of Tutankhamun was the final portion of a pivotal era in the realm of Egyptian military and diplomatic policies. The imperial vision of Thutmose I swept away the old Egyptian approach of limited borders and established far-flung limits of Egyptian influence in western Asia and Nubia. The warfare of his successors, particularly Thutmose III, later

evolved into intense diplomatic maneuvering, particularly under the pharaohs of the Amarna Period, who created a world in which major conflicts between the powers were increasingly unlikely and undesirable, but one in which lower-intensity military actions again became more prevalent. Surprisingly, in spite of much that has been written, Tutankhamun and the pharaohs of the Amarna Period did indeed engage in warfare—both armed conflict and psychological warfare—and the outcome of those battles, as limited in scope as they might appear to modern eyes, nevertheless did, through the lens of the ancient Egyptian worldview, reveal an ever-triumphant pharaoh standing atop the shattered remnants of his chaotic foe.