Establishment of empire: Military campaigns in Syria–Palestine

As with Nubia, Egypt’s relations with its Asian neighbours in Syria–Palestine (which the Egyptians called Retjenu) before the New Kingdom were dominated by trading interests. The 160-kilometre stretch of the Sinai desert formed a natural border with Palestine. From Middle Kingdom times onwards Egypt constructed a network of fortresses along this border, both to protect its north-eastern border and to facilitate its access to the valuable resources of Asia. Some of the materials that Egypt obtained from mining and trade expeditions included turquoise, gold and copper from Sinai, silver from Anatolia and cedar from Byblos in Lebanon (Egypt lacked timber of any quality for building purposes). A particularly valuable resource was lapis lazuli (a semi-precious stone of deep blue colouring used in jewellery) which reached Egypt from Afghanistan via well-established trading networks.

Egypt’s policy in Syria–Palestine during the New Kingdom

From the time of Ahmose’s expulsion of the Hyksos, the issue of border protection became an important priority. New forts were constructed on the eastern border to create a buffer zone between Egypt and its neighbours. The survival and consolidation of the new dynasty in Thebes also relied on maintaining the wealth that came from trade with the north (much of which had previously been in Hyksos hands). As we have already seen, the gleeful cataloguing of the rich booty in the aftermath of the Hyksos defeat is important evidence that economic interests, as much as political ones, dictated Egypt’s policy in Syria–Palestine.

The political situation in Syria–Palestine was much more complex than that in Nubia at this time. Beyond the Sinai, home of the nomadic Shasu Bedouin tribes, lay the settled and developed city–states of Palestine, including important towns such as Megiddo and prosperous trading ports such as Byblos. It is important to remember that control of Kadesh was the key to the control of Syria. It was a well-fortified town at the headwaters of the Orontes River. It was also strategically and economically the most important gateway linking the trading ports of the Phoenician coast with Syria and the kingdoms beyond. In our period these kingdoms included Naharin (the home of the Mitanni and the dominant power in the region during the early New Kingdom), Babylonia and Assyria. Later in the period, it included the emerging Hittite power.

Syria–Palestine during the New Kingdom consisted of what Redford aptly calls ‘a welter of jockeying states’. There was competition and conflict, both between the powerful kingdoms of the north and the smaller towns of Syria–Palestine. They all fought for territory, resources and access to trade. The Mitanni wished to expand into Syria at the same time that the Egyptians, under the Thutmosid pharaohs, began to establish their own sphere of influence in the region. The smaller, vulnerable towns were tied to the more powerful states by a complex network of alliances and treaties. In effect, they became vassals of these greater powers. They received protection from enemy attack in return for supporting their overlords.

For discussion

- What were the main features of Egyptian policy in Syria–Palestine?
- Why was policy in Syria–Palestine different from that in Nubia?
- What role did diplomacy play?
Then Avaris was despoiled, and I brought spoil from there: one man, three women; total four persons. His majesty gave them to me as slaves …

Then Sharuhen was besieged for three years. His majesty despoiled it and I brought spoil from it: two women and a hand. Then the gold of valor was given me, and my captives were given to me as slaves.

After this [that is, Nubian campaign] his majesty proceeded to Retjenu [Syria–Palestine] to vent his wrath [anger] throughout the lands. When his majesty reached Naharin … he found that foe marshalling troops. Then his majesty made a great slaughter of them. Countless were the living captives which his majesty brought back from his victories.

He brought the ends of the earth into his domain: he trod its two extremities with his mighty sword, seeking battle; but he found no-one who faced him. He penetrated valleys which the royal ancestors knew not, which the wearers of the double-crown had not seen. His southern boundary is as far as the frontier of this land [that is, Nubia], his northern as far as that inverted water [that is, Euphrates River] which goes downstream instead of going upstream.27

Campaign against the Shasu Bedouin: I followed King Okhepernere [Thutmose II], triumphant; there were brought off for me in Shasu very many living prisoners; I did not count them.

27 Egyptians were used to the Nile flowing north, but the Euphrates flowed in a southerly direction
The first 21 years of his reign were the years of co-regency with Hatshepsut; year 22 was a continuation of the reign but it represented the first year of his independent reign; he reigned for a further 32 years, dying in year 54.

28 The first 21 years of his reign were the years of co-regency with Hatshepsut; year 22 was a continuation of the reign by it represented the first year of his independent reign; he reigned for a further 32 years, dying in year 54.
7 AMENHOTEP II

Campaigns of years 2, 7 and 9

Three campaigns have been identified for this reign. However, their sequence and the events within them are not clear from surviving texts. These include stelae erected by the king at Karnak, Memphis and at Elephantine and Amada in Nubia. However, they include the conquest of rebellious towns in the region of Kadesh, including the town of Takhsy whose ringleaders were brutally punished as follows:

When his majesty returned with joy of heart to his father, Amun, he slew with his own weapon, the seven princes [captured] in Takhsy. They were placed head downward at the prow of his majesty’s barge … Six of those captives were hung on the wall at Thebes. Another was taken up-river to Nubia and hung on the wall of Napata, in order to announce the victories of his majesty in all the lands … of the Negro.

Amada Stela of Amenhotep II

Other military activity includes actions against a number of Syrian towns including Shemesh-Edom, Niy, Ugarit, Hasabu and other places whose exact location remains unknown. It seems that the northernmost extent of these campaigns was probably the town of Alalakh on the northern bend of the Orontes River. The last year of campaigning seems to have been confined to the area of Palestine.

8 THUTMOSE IV

Thutmose IV had at least one campaign into Syria–Palestine. A Karnak inscription contains a list of offerings to Amun ‘which his majesty captured in Naharin … on his first victorious campaign’.

This is supported by the tomb biography of a bodyguard named Amenhotep who accompanied the king: ‘Attendant of the king on his expeditions in the south and north countries: going from Naharin to Karoy [near the Fourth Cataract] behind his majesty, while he was on the battlefield.’

Biography of Amenhotep

Three main stages of Egyptian policy

Egypt’s contacts with this region during our period are characterised by three broad stages of development as shown in Figure 19.

29 For a useful survey and attempted reconstruction of the sequence of campaigns and events—and the general reign of Amenhotep II—see Forbes, ‘Akheperure: The 2nd Amenhotep’, pp. 37–52
Stage 1: From Ahmose to Hatshepsut: Border protection

It has been suggested that the very long periods of time Ahmose spent in laying siege to Avaris and Sharuhen may help to explain why, from Amenhotep I to Hatshepsut, there are few if any references to assaults on cities in Syria–Palestine in the context of foreign warfare.30 However, Thutmose I’s activity in Syria–Palestine, is regarded as having laid the foundations for a major change in Egypt’s relations with that region. We know from the records that he was the first pharaoh to fight a battle against the Mitanni at the Euphrates River. He left behind a stela to mark the event. This campaign appears to have been more in the nature of a raid, rather than any planned strategy of conquest. Betsy Bryan has suggested that the reason why Thutmose I did not make a more permanent impression in Syria–Palestine may have been because he ‘encountered enemies and military technology beyond the capability of Egypt’s armies, which almost certainly had fewer chariots than the Mitanni at the time’.31 His successor Thutmose II might have been inclined to develop his father’s northern policy but his reign was too short (a maximum of three years, perhaps less) and his main concern appears to have been the consolidation of Egypt’s control of Nubia.

We do not have evidence for Asiatic campaigns during the reign of Hatshepsut. However, she makes conventional claims such as ‘her arrow is among the northerners’ and ‘my eastern frontier is on the marshes of Asia, and the Montiu [‘people across the sand’, that is, Sinai] of Asia are in my grip’. It is possible that her co-regent, Thutmose III, conducted a campaign late in the joint reign to capture the town of Gaza, on the border of Egypt and Palestine.

Stage 2: Thutmose III: Creation of the empire

Thutmose III pursued the most active and certainly the most successful policy of expanding Egypt’s borders during the New Kingdom.32 J. H. Breasted, the great American Egyptologist, called him ‘the Napoleon of Ancient Egypt’, a reference both to his military abilities and to his physical stature.33 In the first twenty years of his independent reign, he conducted seventeen campaigns into Syria–Palestine. The records of these campaigns were preserved in a range of sources. Royal sources include the official military log or day book called the Annals, and a number of victory and dedication stelae. They also include pylon inscriptions erected at sites such as Karnak and as far away as Napata in Nubia. Private sources, useful for corroborating the official ones, include the important tomb biography of Amenemheb, a general who served under Thutmose III on his many campaigns.

What is particularly worth noting about Thutmose III’s campaigns is not just his personal bravery in battle, but also his command of military strategy, tactics and logistics. Strategy refers to the long-term planning, that is, the overall objectives of a campaign or series of campaigns; tactics refers to the specific methods used to achieve short-term objectives, for example, in a specific battle. Logistics deals with the equipping and supplying of an army while it is on campaign.

If Thutmose III made much of his great success at Megiddo, it was only the first step in a long military career whose broad aim was to secure Egyptian dominance in Palestine and beyond. While his military ambition had been inspired by the campaigns of his grandfather Thutmose I, his strategy of further conquest in Syria was no doubt formulated in response to developments in the north. The most significant of these developments was the growing power of the Mitanni whose expansionist policy southwards coincided with Egypt’s own northern expansion. Syria and Palestine became the battleground for supremacy. On the eve of the Battle of Megiddo, it seems clear that the large coalition of forces marshalled against Egypt was led by the Prince of Kadesh with Mitanni backing (see Sequence chart of the Megiddo campaign).

30 Redford, _Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times_, pp. 48–9, footnote 284
31 Bryan, ‘The 18th Dynasty before the Amarna Period’, p. 23431
32 For a full account of the reign of Thutmose III, see Forbes, ‘Menkhepere Djehutymes
33 Napoleon was reputedly a very short man; Thutmose III’s height was originally thought to have been only 5 foot 3 inches (1.6 metres) based on an incorrect measurement of his mummy—in reality, he was probably of average height for his time
Specific details of some of Thutmose's campaigns are lacking; many so-called ‘campaigns’ were probably no more than tours of inspection to inspire fear and collect the annual tribute. Highlights of the most important campaigns are included in the overview in Table 3. A study of these campaigns reveals development of a strategy based on four major phases.

**TABLE 3**  Main phases of the campaigns of Thutmose III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Campaign number</th>
<th>Year/s of reign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Secure and control Palestine as a buffer zone between Egypt and the north</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gain control of the Phoenician coast and its ports north to Arvad, to secure supply lines</td>
<td>2–5</td>
<td>23–29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gain control of Syria by striking inland to capture Kadesh</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Extend Egypt’s influence to the Euphrates by defeating the Mitanni</td>
<td>8–17</td>
<td>31–42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain control of previous areas conquered by:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• regular tours of inspection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• military reprisals against rebels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• development of an administrative policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Route followed by the army of Thutmose III

The Egyptian army, led by Thutmose III, marches north from Thebes, passing through Sharuhen and Gaza in southern Palestine en route to Megiddo ‘to smite those who attacked the borders of Egypt for there was rebellion against his majesty’. They arrive in the town of Yehem and Thutmose addresses his officers telling them that he has learned of a major coalition of enemy forces preparing to attack Egypt ‘… that wretched foe of Kadesh has come and entered into Megiddo … He has gathered together a force of all the princes of all the foreign lands … as well as those from as far as Naharin’.

2 The Council of War

‘His majesty ordered a consultation with his valiant army, saying “Now, tell me [what you think]?” They said. “How will it be to go on this road which becomes narrow, when it is reported that the enemies are waiting there [beyond and they] are numerous? Will not horse go behind horse and soldiers and people too? That means our advance guard will be fighting while the rearguard waits here in Aruna unable to fight. There are two other roads here that we can take. One is to our east and comes out at Taanach. The other is on the north side of Djefti, so that we come out to the north of Megiddo. May our valiant lord proceed on whichever of these roads [that is, Taanach or Djefti] seems best to him, but do not make us go on that difficult, [Aruna] road.”’

3 Thutmose III chooses the Aruna Road

But Thutmose rejected their advice saying: ‘I swear, as Re loves me, as my father Amun favours me … I shall proceed on this Aruna Road. Let any of you who wish, go on the other roads. Let those of you wish, follow me. Or the enemy will say “Has his majesty gone on another road because he is afraid of us?” Then his officers said to his majesty: “We are followers of your majesty wherever your majesty goes! A servant always follows his lord.”’
4 The military genius of Thutmose III

‘Thutmose III was at the head of the army as it marched along the Aruna Road.’ His choice of the Aruna Road was shown to have been a clever tactical decision, because his army was able to ‘come out of the pass, without meeting a single enemy’. The enemy had clearly expected the Egyptians to arrive at Megiddo by either the southern road or the northern road and had been forced to divide and deploy their forces accordingly. ‘Their southern wing was at Taanach, and their northern wing on the north side of the Qina Valley.’ So the enemy, taken by surprise would have to redeploy their forces as quickly as possible to prepare for the Egyptian attack. The Egyptians meanwhile posted sentries and pitched camp to prepare for battle on the following day.

5 The Battle of Megiddo

Thutmose III led his army into battle early the next morning. ‘His majesty set out in a chariot of fine gold, decked in his fine armour, like strong-armed Horus, lord of action; like Montu of Thebes, his father, Amun, strengthening his arms.
The southern wing of the [Egyptian] army was on a hill south of the brook of Kina, the northern wing was at the north-west of Megiddo, while his majesty was in the centre.’ It would seem from the account of the battle that the enemy offered only token resistance, so they were either heavily outnumbered or had not been able to regroup in time to meet the Egyptian advance. ‘Then his majesty overwhelmed them at the head of his army, and when they saw this, they fled headlong to Megiddo in fear, abandoning their horses and their chariots of gold and silver. The people inside the city hauled them up, pulling them by their clothing inside the city.’

6 Booty and plunder

At this point, the army of Thutmose showed an unfortunate lack of discipline. Instead of following up their advantage by attacking the fleeing enemy and capturing the city, they stopped to collect the abandoned belongings of the enemy from the battlefield. ‘They captured their horses, their chariots of gold and silver; they lay stretched out like fish on the ground. The victorious army of his majesty counted their possessions. The whole army celebrated, praising Amun for the victory he had granted to his son. They presented the booty they had taken, [including] hands, of living prisoners, of horses, chariots of gold and silver.’
Stage 3: Amenhotep II and Thutmose IV: Maintenance of the empire

The most significant development in this stage is the change in Egyptian foreign policy from warfare to diplomacy, characterised by treaty and foreign marriage. The foreign policy of the first ten years of the reign of Amenhotep II was concerned with consolidating the achievements of his father Thutmose III. This was achieved through military campaigns to suppress rebellion in the north and the wholesale deportation of rebellious populations, for example, the town of Gezer in Palestine. The seven ringleaders of the Takhsy rebellion were put to death and their bodies hung from the temple walls at Thebes and Napata.

However, as the reign progressed a newer and greater threat arose in the north—serious enough to challenge the power of both Egypt and of Mitanni. This threat came from the Hittites, a people from Anatolia (modern Turkey) in the far north-west, who had themselves embarked upon a period of

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34 For a useful survey and attempted reconstruction of the sequence of campaigns and events—and the general reign of Amenhotep II—see Forbes, ‘Akheperure: The 2nd Amenhotep’, pp. 37–52
aggressive military expansion. The Mitanni found themselves caught between two foes—the Hittites in the west and the Egyptians in the south. Negotiations for an alliance between Egypt and Mitanni were begun late in the reign of Amenhotep II and the evidence suggests that a treaty between Egypt and Mitanni was signed in his reign.35

The alliance with Mitanni was renewed and cemented during the reign of Thutmose IV with the marriage of the king to the daughter of king Artatama I of Mitanni. This treaty brought to an end the years of military campaigning in Syria–Palestine and was followed by sixty-five years of peace between the two powers.

For discussion

- How did the political make-up of Syria–Palestine differ from the situation in Nubia? How did this affect Egypt’s policy in Syria–Palestine?
- Which pharaohs were most active in Syria–Palestine and what did they aim to achieve?
- Why did Thutmose III regard Megiddo as one of his most important achievements?
- What do the major campaigns of the military career of Thutmose III reveal about his:  
  – abilities as a military tactician?  
  – leadership qualities?  
  – contribution to the creation of an empire?
- How has Egyptian policy in Syria–Palestine changed by the end of this historical period?
- What conclusions can you draw about the usefulness and reliability of the sources available for this topic?

Activity: Written response

1 Locate the following places on the map of Egypt and her neighbours in Figure 4: Sharuhen; Byblos; Megiddo; Kadesh; Orontes River; Euphrates River; Naharin. Explain why each was important in this period.

2 Summarise the information in this section on military campaigns in Syria–Palestine, by using the following table. The first one has been done to help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pharaoh</th>
<th>Location of battle/s</th>
<th>Relevant details</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmose</td>
<td>Sharuhen</td>
<td>Three-year siege against remnants of Hyksos army</td>
<td>Biography of Ahmose son of Ebaana</td>
<td>North-eastern frontier protected southern Palestine, forms buffer zone between Egypt and Retjenu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Explain the major phases of development in Egyptian foreign policy in Syria–Palestine during this period.

4 Using the Sequence chart of the Megiddo campaign of Thutmose III construct a simple recount of the battle.

5 Trace the changing nature of Egypt’s relations with the Mitanni from the first battles against them under Thutmose I to the conclusion of a peace treaty and the diplomatic marriage, under Thutmose IV. Explain the reasons for the change.

Activity: Extended response

Using the table you have completed and other relevant information, plan and write an answer to the following: EXPLAIN the major developments in Egypt’s relations with Syria–Palestine during the early New Kingdom.

Hint:
- identify the key phases of Egypt’s relations with Syria–Palestine
- explain the contributions of significant pharaohs
- use relevant evidence to support your explanation
- refer to relevant historiographical issues.

35 For example, there were no further military campaigns in Syria–Palestine after year 9 of his thirty-year reign; Bryan, ‘The 18th Dynasty before the Amarna Period’, p. 252, also comments on the way in which the former language of imperialism, e.g. ‘that foe of Naharin’ gives way to more moderate language of official inscriptions, e.g. the neutral term ‘Asiatics’