

8.10 Warfare

Ancient Egypt had a fairly peaceful early history, mainly because the physical features that surrounded ancient Egypt, such as mountains and deserts, acted as natural barriers against invasion. During the Old Kingdom, Egypt had only a small army. During the Middle and New Kingdoms, however, the army grew into a large, well-organised group because the pharaoh's rule was often threatened.

The army and the pharaoh's military role

Ancient Egypt's army was similar to a loosely organised police force. It kept law and order in Egypt, protected the pharaoh and the pharaoh's palace, and guarded borders. The head of Egypt's army was the pharaoh – only he led troops into battle.

One of the pharaoh's main responsibilities was to protect the Egyptian people from attack. Because he was considered to be a god, he had to make his people believe that he was strong enough to protect them. This was one of the reasons why many pharaohs built huge and impressive statues of themselves.

The army included both foot soldiers (those who walked and fought on the ground) and charioteers (soldiers who drove and fought from horse-drawn chariots like the one shown in Source 1). Usually, there were two charioteers in each chariot. One man steered the horses and the other used the weapons (usually a bow and arrow, and a spear). It cost a lot of money to buy a chariot (and horses). Because of this, only wealthy men could become charioteers. Successful charioteers were looked on as heroes.

Life of a soldier

Evidence from ancient Egyptian sources shows that army life was tough. Soldiers had to participate in a very challenging program of weapons training and physical exercise. Soldiers who did anything wrong might be whipped. Often, soldiers had to go on long marches through the desert.



Source 1 The remains of a wall painting showing pharaoh Ramses II charging into battle. The horse-drawn chariot was an important weapon in ancient Egypt.



Source 2 A model of Egyptian foot soldiers from the tomb of Mesehti, an important official in Egypt during the 11th Dynasty (c. 2134–1991 BCE)

Treatment of enemies

Ancient Egyptians could be very harsh in their treatment of enemies they fought and conquered. There are accounts of corpses being mutilated, with body parts, such as arms and heads, chopped off to present to the pharaoh or the gods. But there were also many occasions of mercy. For example, conquered leaders were sometimes allowed to continue to rule their local region as long as they acknowledged the pharaoh as supreme ruler.

Weapons and armour

Soldiers did not wear much clothing, mainly because of the heat. They would usually wear a belt and loincloth, or a short tunic. They did not wear headgear. Some charioteers wore a type of armour on their upper body, made from a series of leather straps. It seems that only the pharaohs wore metal armour, but not all the time. This armour was made from a series of overlapping bronze pieces. Pharaohs would also wear a special headpiece during battle, known as the *khepresh* or blue crown. It was usually made of cloth or leather stained blue and covered with small gold or bronze discs (see Source 1).

Many weapons also served as farming tools. For example, axes might chop down palms as well as enemy bodies. Spears might kill creatures such as lions as well as men. Throwing sticks were useful for hunting birds. Many weapons, such as the mace, had religious importance. Archaeologists have often found weapons in graves alongside the remains of ancient Egyptian bodies.

Weapons used in ancient Egypt

- Flint and bronze knives
- Swords and daggers (made of bronze, and later iron)
- Bows and arrows
- Spears
- Maces (heavy clubs with stone or copper 'heads')
- Battleaxes
- Shields
- Battering rams and scaling ladders (for attacking buildings with high walls)

Source 3 Some weapons used by soldiers in ancient Egypt

keyconcept: Perspectives

Army life

Many men in ancient Egypt chose to join the army as a way to become rich. Wealth would give talented soldiers a chance to improve their social position. After a battle, goods from the defeated army would often be taken and given to officers, priests and worthy soldiers. There are papyrus texts that describe soldiers being given items of gold jewellery. There was also a commonly held belief that the memory and name of a war hero would live forever.

However, not everybody had the same perspective on life as a soldier. Scribes, who often travelled with the army, saw it as an awful existence. Many encouraged young Egyptians not to join the army.

Source 4

Come, let me tell you the woes of the soldier ... He is awakened at any hour ... He is hungry, his belly hurts; he is dead while yet alive ... He may not rest. There are no clothes, no sandals ... His march is uphill through mountains. He drinks water every third day; it is smelly and tastes of salt. His body is ravaged by illness ...

Translated extract from the writing of the scribe Wenemdjamun, in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, vol. 1

For more information on the key concept of perspectives, refer to page 164 of 'The history toolkit'.

Check your learning 8.10

Remember and understand

- 1 Why did the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt only need a small army?
- 2 The army of ancient Egypt had two main types of soldiers. Name them and describe how they fought.

Apply and analyse

- 3 After some battles, ancient Egyptian soldiers cut off parts of people they had killed in battle and presented them to the pharaoh or as offerings to the gods. Why do you think they might have done this?

Evaluate and create

- 4 With a partner, write and perform a role play that demonstrates the different perspectives that might be held about army life by an ambitious young Egyptian soldier and the scribe Wenemdjamun (see Source 4).