



Trade and Conflict in Ancient Egypt

Transcript

Presenter: Ancient Egypt is the richest and most advanced civilisation of the ancient world, but how did Ancient Egypt become so powerful? Egypt had a reliable food supply from fertile fields that were irrigated by the annual flooding of the Nile River. Because of this, unlike many of the societies around it, Egypt enjoyed periods of great stability, so agriculture was the foundation of Egypt's economy.

Scattered along the banks of the Nile were marketplaces where local merchants and foreign traders did business. Goods came from all over the region. The Egyptians conducted trade with people in Africa, the Mediterranean and across the Red Sea, in present day Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Syria. The main exports were grain, papyrus and linen, but they also traded slaves, spices, glass, jewellery, trinkets and precious metals.

Egypt was able to dominate trade relationships, because their trading partners needed grain in times of famine, and while Egypt was self-sufficient, the people loved to have luxury, imported goods. Products imported from the Mediterranean included pottery, wine, olive oil, bronze work and marble from Greece.

These societies didn't use currency for trade. Instead goods were bartered. They would exchange goods for other goods. A donkey might be exchanged for ten bags of grain, for example.

Another trading partner was the land of Punt, believed to have been in present day Ethiopia. It was considered by Egyptians as a remote and exotic place. Goods that came from the land of Punt included frankincense and myrrh for the incense trade, herbs, spices, leopard skins, dogs and even baboons. The main imports from Nubia, located in present day Sudan were slaves, gold, building stone, ebony, ivory, ostrich feathers and eggs, cattle, monkeys and even giraffe tails, which were used to make fly swats.

But at different periods in its history, Egypt's relationship with neighbouring countries grew troubled. Pharaohs rose and fell, and trade relationships sometimes soured. At times Egypt became involved in conflicts over trade and territory issues.

During the period known as the New Kingdom, the Egyptian empire expanded. Warlike tribes increased in size and military strength, leading Egypt to view them as a threat to their power in the region. Egyptian pharaohs waged a series of military campaigns against various enemies, including the Mitanni from Mesopotamia in the northeast, and the Hittites in Palestine and Syria. But the two best documented battles recorded in New Kingdom Egypt were the Battle of Megiddo and the Battle of Kadesh.





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When Thutmose III became pharaoh, one of his first objectives was to retake Megiddo, a key city on the trade route between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Megiddo was controlled by the King of Kadesh, who was handed his power by the Mitanni kings of Mesopotamia. The Hittites, the Mitanni and some Canaanite battle states formed the coalition of Kadesh.

Battle states were states or territories under the political control of the more powerful kingdom, in this case, Egypt. Battle states commonly grew tired of submitting to Egypt's authority and sometimes tried to unite to mount a revolt.

Thutmose thoroughly trained his troops for battle. They used axes and hatchets, spears and arrows with bronze heads. Their shields were made of wood and ox hide. Egyptian charioteers had years of practice to ensure they could hit targets at high speed. Nubian slaves were forced to serve in the army, and the Nubians were reputedly expert archers.

With 12 000 men under his command, Thutmose set off across the desert. The natural barrier that protected Egypt from invaders was now an obstacle. The desert took weeks to cross. They had 2 500 animals with them for transportation and food. Meanwhile, at Megiddo the King of Kadesh had raised an army of 10 to 15,000 men. Thutmose had a choice of three routes into Megiddo. He chose the most dangerous route, through a valley so narrow that his troops would have to walk single file.

Thutmose's generals pleaded with him to take a less dangerous path. Thinking his enemy would use this same logic, he took the risk. Thutmose was right in his assessment. The King of Kadesh placed his infantry along the two easier routes and just a few scouts on the path from the south. Thutmose's army met little resistance on the way to Megiddo, advancing quickly.

With most of the King of Kadesh's army far away, his remaining troops hastily organised themselves to defend Megiddo. The next morning the Egyptians attacked. Their superior numbers and efficient organisation meant they broke the enemy line almost immediately. The Kadesh coalition fighters retreated into the walled city, closing the gates behind them. Instead of continuing the attack, the Egyptian army ransacked the abandoned camps. After the gates were closed people in chariots were pulled over the fortified walls using ropes made from garments that had been tied together.

Thutmose's army, missing the opportunity to take the city quickly, laid siege to the city. Thutmose built a moat and a barricade around Megiddo, trapping the people inside the city walls. It would last for seven long months.

When the starving inhabitants finally surrendered, the Egyptians looted the city. Thutmose's army took around 350 prisoners, almost a thousand chariots, a mass of weapons and over 25,000 head of livestock. The city itself and its citizens were spared.





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With the war won, Thutmose gave gifts to the gods to thank them for a successful war campaign. Offerings, which included gold, gems and other costly items were collected on behalf of the gods by the powerful priests of Amun. Egypt also imposed their system of tribute or taxes on conquered peoples to boost the Egyptian economy and to prevent defeated enemies from rebuilding their armies.

So how do we know about this battle? It happened a long time ago. Most of what we know comes from the writings of the military scribe Tjaneni, who documented the battle. The events were also inscribed on the walls of the Hall of Annals in the Temple at Amun. We need to keep in mind that this account is given from the Egyptian perspective and seeks to glorify the reign of Thutmose III.

The other best known campaign in Egypt's colourful history is the Battle of Kadesh, waged by Ramesses II. The outcome of the battle remains contested, because historical sources provide us with conflicting information. So what do we know? Ramesses II wanted to retake the city of Kadesh, held by the Hittites. The Hittites were a people who had been threatening to overrun Egypt for decades. They had settlements in Palestine and Syria.

And who was Ramesses II? Ramesses II wanted to be remembered as the greatest pharaoh of Ancient Egypt. He ruled over the largest empire, built new temples, and rebuilt existing ones. As Ramesses' 20,000 strong army advanced north, Muwatalli II, leader of the Hittites, sent two spies pretending to be innocent travelers to accidentally stumble upon the Egyptian army and give them false information regarding the whereabouts of the Hittite army.

They told Ramesses that the Hittite army was far away in the north. Ramesses raced to Kadesh hoping to capture it quickly, but in fact the Hittite army was lying in ambush ready to attack just east of the city. Stretched along the road through the Orontes Valley, the first division of Egypt's army reached Kadesh. They established camp and waited for the other divisions advancing from the south.

That night Ramesses' men captured two Hittite scouts in Kadesh. After being beaten and tortured, the scouts confessed and gave up their army's real position and plan, but it was too late for the Egyptian army. The Hittites crossed the Orontes River, surrounded Egypt's second division and cut off their escape routes. Muwatalli led the chariot force, an infantry, as they attacked the Egyptians. His first division destroyed, Ramesses was saved by another division who came up behind the Hittites and forced them into the river.

Despite being caught by surprise and suffering great losses, the Egyptians retained the battlefield. The battle continued the next day, but neither side was able to win decisively. Ramesses decided to retreat with his severely diminished army. Meanwhile, the Hittites pushed south to Damascus to stop Egypt from reestablishing control in the region.





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What were the outcomes of the Battle of Kadesh? Enemies captured in battle by the Egyptian army joined the slave labour force that worked on grand Egyptian monuments constructed during this period. Some prisoners of war also became soldiers in the Egyptian army.

While both leaders claimed victory in the Battle of Kadesh, historians view it as the beginning of the end of the golden age of the Egyptian empire. Egypt lost its influence over Hittite territory and was stopped from further expansion into modern day Syria.

Ramesses also signed a treaty with the Hittites, possibly the first major peace treaty in history, evidence that there was no clear victor. Despite this, Ramesses ordered that a biased Egyptian version of events be recorded on the walls of the Temple of Karnak at Luxor in an effort to save his reputation.

Ramesses died at the age of 90 and fathered more than 150 children. Today his incredibly well-preserved mummy is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

