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ANCIENT EGYPTIAN JOINT OPERATIONS IN THE LEBANON UNDER THUTMOSE III (1451-1438 BCE)

Most people are aware that the Ancient Egyptians conducted military operations in Syria-Palestine, some may have heard mention of King Thutmose III at the Battle of Megiddo, but few will have heard about how Egyptian naval forces influenced events ashore during Thutmose III's subsequent operations in the Lebanon.¹

The history of Syria-Palestine aptly demonstrates the strategic advantage that lay with the maritime powers that controlled these waters. During the Late Bronze Age, Thutmose III's ability to maintain sea control in the Eastern Mediterranean enabled him to effectively project Egyptian military power ashore in the Lebanon. It is a truism, confirmed during the Crusades, World War I, and the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, that armies cannot operate effectively in the Syria-Palestine littoral without fleets controlling the adjacent Mediterranean Sea.

By the time of Thutmose III the Egyptians had a long established overland trade route across the Sinai, coupled with a strong influence over the cities of southern Palestine. They also had a mature maritime trading relationship with the coastal cities of the Lebanon, especially Byblos (about 32 km north of modern Beirut).



Eastern Mediterranean Area of Operations c. 1450 BCE²

Thutmose III's first campaign (Year 23 of his reign) commenced with a long gruelling march through the Sinai and Palestine. His army subsequently defeated a coalition of city states and towns under Mitannian (north east Syrian) leadership, at the Battle of Megiddo.³ Much tribute was collected and local rulers made contributions that helped to supply the Egyptian armies in the field. Three

mopping-up campaigns over subsequent years (Years 24 to 28) solidified Egypt's position as it paved the way for a more permanent occupation of Palestine.⁴ Stabilisation of the region remained elusive however, as the Mitanni continued to exercise power and influence among the local princes of the Lebanon and Syria. One of these, the Prince of Kadesh, led an anti-Egyptian coalition based around the Orontes River and Naharin (the region around the upper Euphrates River in Syria). Indeed, following the Battle of Megiddo, the Mitanni and their supporters became formidable opponents whose insurgency tactics achieved local political successes against the less flexible Egyptian armies.

Thutmose III needed to change his strategy. Whereas the Egyptians could sustain small garrisons in Palestine and much larger forces from Egypt in order to coerce allies and defeat rebels, they were not capable of projecting Egyptian military power into the Lebanon or Syria over land. Not only would an army transiting through Palestine be a logistics burden for the cities and towns that it passed through, it was subject to potential attacks from anti-Egyptian insurgents. In addition, the transit time through Palestine would reduce the effective campaigning seasons for the Egyptian forces to such an extent that they would be incapable of operating against the Mitanni heartland in north east Syria. Sea power provided the answer.

Thutmose III's fifth to eighth campaigns (Years 29 to 33) in Syria-Palestine are classic examples of expeditionary operations.⁵ While the Egyptians controlled the east Mediterranean Sea they were able to project power ashore, utilising mobility, access, flexibility and reach, to effectively 'fire' the Egyptian army at 'targets' on shore across the Lebanon and into north east Syria. 'Fighting remained land based, but was now dependent upon the sea routes off the coastline of Lebanon, with Byblos and other ports serving as major staging points and supply depots.'⁶

The city of Tunip was sacked during Thutmose III's fifth campaign (Year 29). Some 329 of Tunip's soldiers were captured, with many to be hired later as Egyptian mercenaries. Large quantities of silver, gold, bronze, and copper were taken as plunder. Two ships were also captured off the coast and their cargoes taken back to Egypt. 'Afterward his majesty returned (from the campaign) travelling by boat to Egypt, to his father Amon-Re (in Luxor), his heart in joy.'⁷ The Egyptian fleet was central to the successful conduct of this campaign.

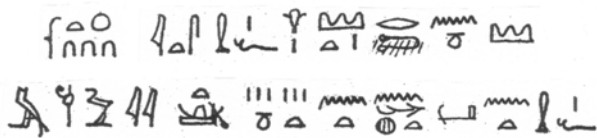
On his sixth campaign, having established port facilities on the Lebanese coast, Thutmose III was able to travel from Egypt with his fleet and conduct expeditions to deter the rulers of Kadesh, Sumur and Arvad. Other cities were



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coerced to let their sons be raised in Egypt, to be Egyptianised. The seventh campaign was directed at the coastal cities of the Lebanon, starting by capturing and plundering the port city of Ullaza. Thutmose III then sailed along the coast, obtaining the submissions and tribute from the princes of each city and town on route. 'Now every harbour at which his majesty arrived supplied sweet bread and other assorted breads, with oil, incense, wine, honey and fruit ... they were abundant beyond everything, beyond that which was known by his majesty's forces.'⁸ After assessing the harvest of Syria, and taking a proportion into the Egyptian treasury, Thutmose III sailed back to Egypt.



Year 30. Now his majesty was in the land of Retjenu (Syria) upon the sixth naval expedition of his majesty's victory.⁹

Having subdued the coastal cities of the Lebanon, Thutmose III was now able to embark upon his eighth and perhaps his greatest campaign (Year 33). He led an Egyptian expedition to conquer the Mitanni strongholds in north east Syria. After travelling by sea from Egypt through the port of Arvad, the expedition marched north to Aleppo and then into the land of Naharin. The king of Mitanni and the rulers of allied city states were defeated in a series of battles at Naharin, Wan (west of Aleppo), and Carchemish. 'Now his majesty travelled north capturing the towns and laying waste the settlements of that foe of wretched Naharin.'¹⁰ Three princes, 30 of their wives, 80 warriors, and 606 slaves (men, women and children) were taken prisoner.

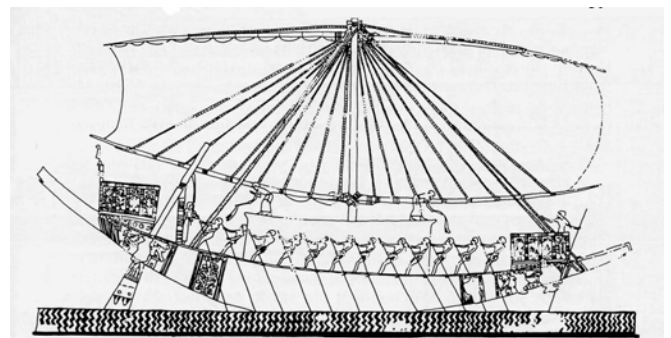
The Egyptian expedition to Naharin included a bridge of boats that was used to cross the mighty Euphrates River. 'Now my majesty travelled to the ends of Asia. I caused many ships to be constructed of cedar on the hills of the God's Land (Lebanon), in the presence of the mistress of Byblos, they being placed on chariots (carts) pulled by oxen. They travelled before my majesty to cross that great river that flows between this foreign land and Naharin.'¹¹ It is most likely that the Egyptian naval forces were responsible for this early feat in military engineering. Rapid movement of relatively small forces on land was the key to the successful conduct of these operations.

Thutmose III's campaign now turned south: sailing downstream on the Euphrates, the Egyptians attacked the cities of Niy, Sendjar, Takhsy and once again Kadesh.¹² Travelling south through the Orontes valley, the Egyptian expedition returned to the Lebanese coast. Thus the capability of the Egyptian forces to project power deep into Mitanni territory was demonstrated. Not only did the king of Mitanni give tribute to Thutmose III, but the major powers of the day recognised the might of Egypt. The Babylonian, Assyrian and Hittite kings now sent tribute to the Egyptians in the Lebanon. The following year more Syrian cities surrendered to the Egyptians adding to the list of tribute, while tribute was also received from the ruler of Cyprus.

The campaigns of Thutmose III provide an early example of the problems that must be overcome when conducting

expeditionary operations. Expeditionary operations are usually most effective when they are limited to distant campaigns of short duration, against varied opponents, and with clear aims. They are by their nature also politicised. They are not efficient if they are used as a substitute to the taking and holding of land by occupation forces. While the Egyptians, under Thutmose III, were able to garrison and occupy Palestine they did not have the military or economic capabilities or the political will to permanently occupy all of Syria. After Thutmose III's eighth campaign, the forces of the Mitanni and their allies adopted a typical insurgency strategy against the Egyptians. They refused to pay tribute and revolted when and where the Egyptians were weak, while their rulers submitted when the Egyptian expeditions arrived in force. Syria was neither in peace nor at war, while cities in revolt and Egyptian reprisal campaigns almost became annual events. Thutmose III's successors inherited this unsatisfactory strategic situation in Syria, with Amenhotep II having to fight at least two campaigns in the region.

The Mitanni rulers of city states may have been morally justified in opposing Egyptian political domination of trade in Syria-Palestine, but the Egyptians themselves most likely saw their intervention as one of creating order where there was chaos. Thutmose III probably thought he acted as a force for good in the region. Sea power underpinned much of the 'Egyptian Empire', while the associated control of sea trade generated the wealth and luxury that characterised an Egyptian 'Golden Age'.



Sailing vessel from the Tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes¹³

¹ King Thutmose III ruled Egypt for some 54 years, from 1479 to 1425 BCE. Historical background may be found in I. Shaw, (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 218-271, and esp. 243-248.
² Map created by the author.
³ The campaigns are described in D. Redford, *The Wars in Syria and Palestine of Thutmose III*, Brill, Leiden, 2003, pp. 185-244.
⁴ A. J. Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, p. 83.
⁵ Expeditionary operations are military operations that can be initiated at short notice, consisting of forward deployed, or rapidly deployable, self-sustaining forces tailored to achieve a clearly stated objective in a foreign country. Royal Navy, *BR1806: British Maritime Doctrine*, 3rd ed, TSO, London, 2004, p. 257.
⁶ Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, p. 110.
⁷ Translations from 'The Annals of Thutmose III' are found in K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1907, pp. 684-734, translated from hieroglyphs by the author.
⁸ Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, pp. 692-693.
⁹ Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, p. 689.
¹⁰ Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, pp. 697.
¹¹ From the 'Gebel Barkal stela of Thutmose III', in K. Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1955, pp. 1227-1243.
¹² The locations of many of these cities are disputed, but some scholars believe Niy was situated on the Euphrates. The cities of Sedjar and Takhsy would then have been located between the Euphrates and the Orontes Rivers. The Prince of Kadesh probably did not expect the Egyptian expedition to approach his city from the north.
¹³ N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-Mi-Re at Thebes II*, Egyptian Expedition Publications Vol. XI - Plates, New York, 1943, plate LXVIII.

