THE SIEGE OF MEGIDDO

In the last in a series of articles exploring myths and tales from ancient Egypt, Dr. Joyce Tyldesley considers the dramatic story of the siege of Megiddo, as told by the Eighteenth Dynasty warrior-king Thutmose III.

Thutmose III (c.1479-1425 BC) spent the first twenty-two years of his reign in the shadow of his dominant co-ruler, the female pharaoh Hatshepsut. Immediately after her death he embarked on a series of campaigns designed to strengthen Egypt’s eastern influence. In so doing he was following the example set by his grandfather, general Thutmose I, who had marshalled his troops eastwards to the banks of the Euphrates River. At least sixteen seasonal campaigns would follow over the next twenty years.

The details of these campaigns, the Annals were recorded in daybooks by scribes who travelled with the army to witness events first-hand. Later, when the empire was secure, they were copied onto the walls of the Karnak temple of Amun. As Thutmose himself explains: “His Majesty ordered that the great victories, granted to him by the grace of the god Amun, be recorded within the temple that he had built for his father Amun. The inscription was to record every campaign, and to give details of the booty and tribute recovered from the foreign lands.”

This writing has an immediacy and a believable realism which other, more formally composed texts, lack. By Egyptian standards, and particularly when compared to the exaggerated battle stories told by Ramesses II, these are surprisingly modest compositions.

The Stone Temple Wall
Thutmose III, like all the Thutmoside kings, was devoted to Amun, the ‘Hidden One’, the great god of Thebes and father of kings. Amun was revered as the inspirational force who guided the fate of the victorious Egyptian army, and his Karnak temple complex became a permanent building site as successive kings competed to erect impressive monuments to their god (see opposite, bottom).
Pre-New Kingdom temples had undoubtedly been impressive structures but they were primarily built of mud-brick and, as most have long-since crumbled away, we have few opportunities to look at the scenes that decorated their walls. The new custom of building temples in stone provided the gods with permanent homes, and the kings with a permanent propaganda tool. While the innermost temple walls were decorated with appropriate religious scenes, other walls were used to display scenes of victory and military might which emphasised the king’s religious duty to preserve maat by destroying Egypt’s enemies.

Our sudden ability to ‘read’ the stone temple walls can give the misleading impression that only in the New Kingdom did Egypt’s kings show an interest in persecuting foreigners. This is far from the truth. Battles leave little archaeological evidence, but from Predynastic times onwards we have images that show Egypt’s kings smiting their traditional enemies: the Nubians (southerners), the Libyans (westerners) and the Asiatics (easterners) (see opposite). Nor should we fall into the trap of assuming that the battlefield was now Egypt’s only point of contact with foreigners. International trade remained important throughout the New Kingdom. The Uluburun wreck, the well-preserved remains of a merchant ship that sank off the coast of Turkey c. 1300 BC, confirms this. The cargo of the ship included goods from at least seven different cultures: copper from Cyprus; tin from either Turkey or Afghanistan; Baltic amber; Syrian ivory; Canaanite pottery; African ostrich eggs; Egyptian luxury goods.
A New Threat
Hatshepsut’s reign had been one of peace, stability and international trade. Now, however, Egypt was threatened by developments outside her borders. Nubia, once Egypt’s most dangerous foe, was now governed by an Egyptian viceroy, and paid copious taxes into the Egyptian treasury. To the west the ‘Libyans’, the diverse nomadic tribes of the eastern Sahara who had so vexed the Old Kingdom chief of Yam and the Middle Kingdom court of Amenemhat I, were keeping a low profile. But to the east Thutmose was faced with the task of controlling a collection of semi-independent fortified settlements with no real cultural or geographic unity and no particular reason to feel loyal to Egypt.

Whoever controlled the Levant and her ports would control the sea-based trade routes that underpinned the Mediterranean Bronze Age economy. And, as Thutmose recognised, a controlling interest in the Levant would effectively halt the expansion of Egypt’s more ambitious eastern neighbours. Beyond the Euphrates the nation-state of Mitanni was gaining in power and influence in northern Mesopotamia. Of more immediate concern to Thutmose was the threat posed by Qadesh. The Prince of Qadesh, or so the spies reported, was busy spreading discontent amongst Egypt’s former allies and a rebel coalition was even now camped outside the walled Canaanite city of Megiddo (modern Tell el-Mutesellim, northern Israel).

The Battle
Crossing the Sinai Peninsula the Egyptian army made for Gaza, a city loyal to Egypt since the start of the Eighteenth Dynasty. From there they attacked and took Yehem, a fortified city occupied by a group of enemies headed by the prince of Qadesh. Victory allowed the Egyptians to march eastwards across the Carmel mountain range to Megiddo (see map on p. 20). Here, Thutmose’s generals advised caution:

“Do not make us march along the dangerous mountain pass.”
Ignoring this advice, Thutmose decided to avoid the two long, relatively easy but entirely predictable routes. He would lead his troops in single file along a narrow, winding mountain road. His bravery would inspire his troops to follow him:

“Do not worry, men. Your valiant king will guide your steps as you take the narrow mountain path.”

This unexpectedly daring tactic allowed Thutmose to creep up on the enemy, camped outside the city walls. Such tactical brilliance is not unknown amongst Egypt’s kings, and many official tales tell how the valiant king is demonstrably braver and more astute than the battle-hardened generals who often, ill advisedly, try to curb his enthusiasm.

The battle was easily won. As Thutmose tells us

“Overcome by the glorious sight of the king and his brave men, the cowardly foes turned and ran towards Megiddo, their faces ashen with fear.”

But then, contrary to orders, the Egyptians paused to loot the abandoned enemy camps, and to cut hands from the corpses that littered the battlefield. Unfortunately, while the Egyptian army was distracted, the city gates were shut.

The Siege

This was very irritating, but by no means a disaster. Thutmose knew that all he had to do was to sit tight and wait:
as he controlled access to supplies, he had the upper hand. And after seven long months hungry Megiddo surrendered and

“the loathsome foreign princes left the city and came crawling on their bellies to kiss the ground before His Majesty.”

Thutmose gathered a rich reward. With the collapse of the coalition he now had full control of Palestine and most of Syria. The Egyptian Empire had been born. Over a thousand years later, when the writer of the Book of Revelation wrote of the last great battle, he would set it here, at Megiddo.

Egypt would never attempt to absorb her eastern territories as she had Nubia. There would be no eastern viceroy, and the region would remain divided into a series of city-states whose kings and chiefs were allowed to retain their hereditary titles. These local rulers were, however, expected to confirm their allegiance to Egypt by supplying plentiful ‘gifts’ of tribute. Their young children were sent as unofficial hostages to Egypt where they either entered the royal school or the royal harem. Sons, suitably brainwashed in the Egyptian way of thought, might eventually be allowed home to rule. Their sisters remained in Egypt as wives of the king.

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