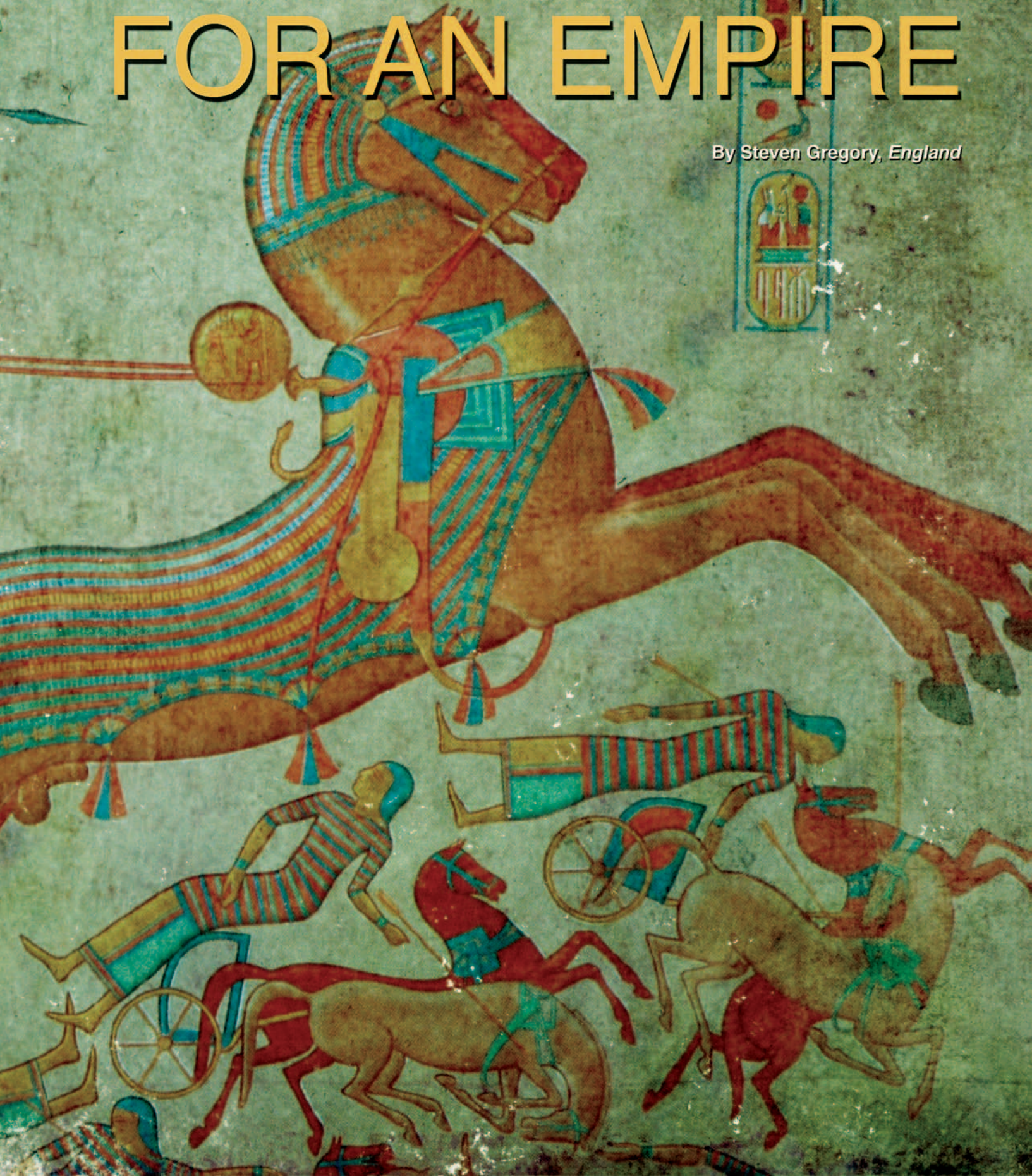




THE HORSE & CHARIOT IN EGYPT'S DRIVE FOR AN EMPIRE

By Steven Gregory, *England*



DECORATED WITH SEEMINGLY TIMELESS IMAGES OF WARRIOR KINGS RESPLENDENT ABOARD CHARIOTS BRISTLING WITH WEAPONS AND DRAWN BY TEAMS OF PROUD HORSES, THE VAST MONUMENTS OF THEBES, PRESENT DAY LUXOR, PROCLAIM THE POWER, WEALTH, AND PRESTIGE OF THEIR CREATORS. BUT JUST A FEW GENERATIONS EARLIER, AROUND 1560 BC, THE SCENE WAS QUITE DIFFERENT. THE THEBAN RULERS OF THE LATE SEVENTEENTH DYNASTY WERE UNDER THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTROL OF THE FOREIGN HYKSOS KINGS WHO HAD ESTABLISHED THEIR POWER BASE AT AVARIS IN THE EASTERN DELTA, AND WITH THE THREAT OF THE NUBIAN KINGDOM ENCROACHING FROM THE SOUTH THE OUTLOOK FOR THEBES APPEARED BLEAK; AND THIS IS THE SITUATION PRESENTED BY THE STELAE OF KING KAMOSE.

The Theban council was content to control its piece of Egypt, the lands from Aswan to Asyut, but the king thought them foolish and cowardly. Declaring that he would rescue Egypt and drive out the foreigners, Kamose sent his infantry across the desert routes to seek out the enemy while he led his main force, the battle fleet, down the Nile to Avaris where he inflicted a heavy defeat on the Hyksos king, Apophis. Delighted with his success, Kamose boasted of the booty he had captured: precious metals, weapons, wood for shipbuilding, incense, and honey. Amongst the prizes listed we find the first literary reference to chariot teams to survive from the ancient Egyptian records, and that Kamose valued them highly is suggested by their prominence in the list – second only to the capture of the Hyksos women.

Kamose had been victorious but the Hyksos remained, and the struggle for independence was taken up by his successor, Ahmose I. The events which followed are recounted in texts decorating the tomb of Ahmose Son of Abana at el-Kab, a naval officer who served under Ahmose I and his successors Amenhotep I, and Thutmose I. Ahmose Son of Abana mentions that while campaigning with King Ahmose against the Hyksos he “followed on foot while the sovereign rode about on his chariot”. However, the rest of his stories emphasise the Egyptian reliance on ships in



military campaigns. The warrior Ahmose tells how he was often rewarded with gifts of slaves, land, and gold for his exploits, and boasts that while fighting with King Thutmose I in Syria he captured a chariot team and its driver. The king rewarded him with gold again, and he was given the driver as a slave – but he did not get the chariot team!

These accounts suggest that while the Egyptian kings of the period certainly valued the horse and chariot it was as an item of prestige, a prize of great value but not yet a technology which had a significant role in Egyptian military strategy. In fact the horse was perhaps something of a novelty as there are no surviving records to suggest that

they were used in Egypt during earlier periods. First domesticated in Russia during the fourth millennium BC, the earliest records for the ridden horse in Western Asia appear in pictorial images from Babylonia and, by c 1800 BC, there are accounts of trained horses being used in Syria, but still very much a royal prerogative there.

Over time the development of equestrian technology led to the emergence of an elite class of chariot warrior, the ‘*maryannu*’, among the Hurrian peoples of the kingdom of Mitanni in northern Mesopotamia and northern Levant. The exact location of the Hyksos homeland is unknown, but seems certain to be somewhere in the Levant and they were likely influenced by the growing



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▲ The war chariot of Ramesses III in the care of his attendants as depicted on the north outer wall of his temple at Medinet Habu



equestrian culture. Once in Egypt, the Hyksos affinity with the horse is clear from the occasional inclusion of equids in their burials – a distinctly un-Egyptian custom but a tradition of the lands to the north east. Thus what little evidence remains suggests that as the Hyksos migrated into Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, c 1650-1550 BC, they brought their equestrian skills and technology with them, introducing new methods of transport and warfare to what was, by tradition, a riverine nation.

The Egyptian's skill was in sailing and fighting from their ships, attributes well suited to the Nilotic landscape as indicated by Ahmose Son of Abana in his description of the Theban advance

southward into Nubia. There the king, Thutmose I, slaughtered the Nubian foe before sailing home to Thebes with the enemy hanging, head downwards, from the bow of his ship 'The Falcon'. Yet with a growing desire for territorial conquest in the Levant, different strategies needed to be adopted in order to compete against adversaries located in a different environment and who were themselves well equipped with chariotry, as is apparent from the records of Thutmose III.

Inscriptions on the walls of the Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak tell how around 1456 BC, in his 23rd year as king, Thutmose III campaigned into the Levant. The tale hints that the Egyptians had equestrian elements in their ranks as at one point in the march through difficult terrain the pass was so narrow that "horse walked after horse". Eventually the army emerged onto the plain before the city of Megiddo where the king found the combined forces of the region's city states aligned against him. On the day of battle the king set out to meet the foe riding upon his "chariot of fine



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▲ The eastern approach to the temple of the God, Amun, at Luxor & the colonnades constructed by king Amenhotep III

gold, well equipped with weapons of war". The attack was decisive, the enemy was routed and, fleeing back to their city, "they abandoned their horses and chariots of gold and silver". Thutmose recorded the capture of enemy chariots and more than 2,000 horses after the battle.

Thutmose III campaigned for many years in the Levant with great success, as did his son, Amenhotep II, whose Great Sphinx Stela recounts his prowess as a charioteer. The text describes how, even as a child he loved his horses and became skilled at controlling them. Later he practised archery by shooting arrows into copper targets from his moving chariot. Amenhotep's Memphis Stela records how he rode his chariot in battle, on one occasion crossing the River Orontes to capture two chieftains and six warriors of the Hurrian elite including their chariots and teams of horses; a further campaign describing the capture of 210 horses and 300 chariots. These stories testify to Egypt's own advances towards mastery of chariot warfare, at least within the ranks of elite warriors.

Chariotry became an integral part of the Egyptian army; an army which, under the kings of the early Eighteenth Dynasty, met with successes which led to complete political and economic control in the Levant. Thus with the acquisition of equestrian technology comes the expansion of territorial control and, ultimately, the establishment of the Egyptian Empire of the New Kingdom. 🇪🇬

Photos by Kevin Birtles - Steven Gregory

▼ Scenes on the west outer face of the First Pylon at the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu showing the king using his chariot on a hunting expedition



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