

ANCIENT HISTORY

Research Investigation – Economic Exchange: Trade, Foreign Tribute, Unit of Value (Deben – Ramesside Period)

In many ways the early rulers of the Ramesside period looked back to the great days of the 18th Dynasty when Egypt enjoyed immense prosperity and its empire was at its height. Ramesside Egypt was administrated mostly as a well organised bureaucracy, led by the pharaoh who held all the power, under the pharaoh was a number of officials who made up the upper and lower ranks of the nobility; the vizier was the head of this rank. The vizier carried out the business of government. The backbone of the Egyptian economy was agriculture, for the mass of the population life was dominated by this cycle. They relied on the annual flooding of the Nile to deposit a rich layer of silt for farming staple crops such as grain and wheat for which the economy depended on. Other economy stimulants were produce such as cattle, wine and linen.

Many of the jobs in Egypt fuelled its economy and made it stronger for example, the Egyptians were had skilled accountants also known as scribes who were responsible for inflicting severe for crimes such as tax evasion. There are tomb scenes that provide evidence of the collection of taxes by scribes which show farmers being beaten for committing this offence. In addition the Egyptians also had farmers who produced a wide range of fruit and vegetables that were used for not only domestic utilisation but were a valuable trading commodity.

Trade domestically in Egypt involved a sophisticated barter system that used a scale based on metal weights. The main standard or unit of currency was the copper Deben, which was the value used for exchangeable commodities. Any item available for exchange was priced as a certain number of copper Deben. Domestic trade was centralised around the Nile as it was the main highway linking the villages and towns, it can be established from evidence that some small traders set up on quays close to where they docked their boats. Official trade was conducted by male traders known as “shuty”; these traders were employed by private persons and even temples. The traders’ job was to sell goods and exchange goods to acquire goods in which the master requested.

The Ramesside Society brought many advantages to Egypt's economy; it brought the country into closer contact with its neighbouring empires and it was due to this that peaceful trade was established, booty was brought back from conquered territories and tribute was collected from dominated kingdoms. All of these factors increased Egypt's wealth creating a stronger empire.

Egypt's most important neighbours were Syria and Palestine as well as the kingdoms of the Hittites and the Babylonians. Interactions between these countries differed throughout the Ramesside period the main relations that took place revolved around diplomacy, conquest and trade. Egypt had carried out trade with neighbouring countries since old kingdom times, but during the Ramesside period trade was expanded enormously mostly due to military success. Egypt often would often take part in trade with foreign countries and it was carried out through royal missions that were performed by the pharaoh or an appointed representative. As an outcome of its trade Egypt saw a growth in of foreign goods for example silver and ivory from Syria merchants and traders expanded to towns that had been conquered by military action and as a result new and exotic goods began to arise in Egypt.

The resources that made their way into Egypt during the new kingdom were not only due to peaceful trading activity but were due to warfare as well. Egypt collected valuable booty from conquered towns and cities in the aftermath of successful military campaigns, the commodities that were claimed were in the form of animals (such as the horse which were not found in Egypt before the new kingdom), other live stock, grain, oils and even slaves. With the conquering of foreign

towns, Egypt would require that the town to pay a tribute. A tribute or a tax would be demanded by Egypt as a payment to maintain peaceful relations in the future. this tribute may be a portion of their annual produce, raw materials, manufactured goods or rare commodities native to that area for example cedar from Palestine (because Egypt did not possess quality timber for ship building, housing or furniture this became a valuable tribute). The Egyptian word used for tribute was “inw” meaning “things brought” and referred to a number of things:

- Compulsory payment of annual taxes by the conquered towns
- Diplomatic gifts exchanged between other empires or countries
- Goods exchanged through international trade.

The Egyptian economy remained afloat throughout the 19th dynasty up until it began to decline during the ruling of Ramesses III, it becomes apparent after his reign and is noticeable domestically and abroad. This decline is evident from records from the workers village of Deir-el-Medina which recount the events of a number of strikes that took place due to the rations they were supplied being in debt. It was however the lack of temple building that caused the most concern during this time as it did not provide a sufficient amount of jobs, like it had in the past and it is thought that the decline of building was likely due to diminished resources as well as corrupt and inefficient administration. Egypt's control over foreign possessions such as Syria, Palestine and Nubia were greatly weakened by the attack of new empires who were gaining more power and destroying empires such as the Hittites. Egypt was beginning to lose its title as a super power and began to be seen as inferior in its neighbouring countries eyes.