

ANCIENT HISTORY

Account for the expansion and impact of the Egyptian empire in this period.

During the New Kingdom period, the Egyptians were able to devise a number of ways for maintaining a hold over their foreign conquests, deal with the pressure on their northern provinces from the Mitanni and Hittites, as well as make extensive political and commercial contacts with other states in the Near East, East Africa and Aegean region. This expansion enabled the creation of an 'empire', although historians such as Gardiner have referred to this vast area would be better defined as the creation of Egypt's 'sphere of influence'. It was undertaken due to an awakening of Egyptian nationalism, the need for security, economic needs, religious policy and the growing pressure for each pharaoh to achieve 'glory'. It had significant effects not only upon the regions it controlled, but additionally, on Egyptian society itself in relation to a huge growth in its wealth. In fact, the expansion was so revolutionary, it marked what Wilson described as a rapid transitional stage in Egyptian society and its culture, from an agricultural society to an 'empire'.

Security was a major concern even in the early period of the 18th Dynasty, and even Kamose's actions may have been prompted by this concern. He captured a message sent from Hyksos to their ally, Kush, asking for help to fight against Kamose. The Hyksos dominated Lower Egypt for about 200 years, until Kamose instigated the process of launching the war of revenge against them. When he came to the throne, he sailed north with a powerful army and raided deep within Hyksos-held territory. Ahmose, his successor, conducted three campaigns against the Hyksos capital, Avaris, before it fell and forced the Hyksos out of Egypt, thereby ending a century of foreign rule. He also put down several rebellions in Egypt. He was then able to extend Egypt's influence as far north-east as the fortress Sharuhén. These campaigns to protect Egypt from external threats were the key instigator for the later further expansion of the 'empire', and "provided the Egyptians with the incentive and the means towards world expansion and...to a great extent determined the character of the New Kingdom." (Breasted)

However, Egypt's expansion was based on more than just a need for security, especially when the original danger lessened. For some pharaohs, "the taste for warfare and the pre-emptive strike...had developed into an appetite for imperial adventures" (Aldred). There is evidence to suggest this deliberate expansion process. According to an inscription on the island of Uronarti, Amenhotep I "ascended the river to Kush, in order to extend the borders of Egypt". In addition, Thutmose III's Annals state his first victorious expedition was to "extend the boundaries of Egypt with might". Thus, the later pharaohs did not only expand because they needed to, but for their own personal ambitions. Each wanted to prove himself better than his predecessor, and thus ensure continued support from the people. The expansion process can hence be seen as having the effect of encouraging later pharaohs to continue it, rather than just maintain the land they already held and halting uprisings from the people they controlled.

This idea led to the formation of the image of the kings as warrior and conqueror, so much so that the prestige and power of later rulers were dependant on maintaining this appearance of a successful military leader. Though the image had endured from about 3000 BC, archaeological evidence conveys that it truly came to fruition in this period, establishing that Egypt's security and the maintenance of its 'empire' depended on a brave, skilled military leader such as Ahmose or Thutmose III who held divine support and approval. New Kingdom Egypt was united under a nationalistic support base and its 'empire' extended greatly, aided by the superhuman warrior pharaoh image to a great extent. Thus, for every pharaoh, some show of strength was needed, whether the pharaoh was a true warrior-king or not, and this usually this led to at least a raid or minor campaign that extended the Egyptian influence. This was seen in the reign of Thutmose I, who led his troops in a year-long campaign beyond the 1st Cataract as far as the island of Argo, opening the way for Egyptians to extend their control in Upper Nubia. The biography of Ahmose,

son of Ebana, stated this campaign was to “crush the rebellion in the highlands, in order to suppress the raiding of the desert region,” but it also gave Thutmose I the image of a “panther”, an opportunity to show his military skills against the Nubians while still expanding the boundaries.

Military conquest played a central role in the expansion of the New Kingdom, and the need for permanent military campaigning had a huge impact on the structure and operation of the Egyptian army and led to the establishment of a permanent, professional, well-trained armed force which the autobiography of Ahmose, son of Ebana emphasises. The advanced tools of war it adopted, mainly taken from the Hyksos, and the skills it gained, struck terror among the rebellious North and South lands, allowing Egypt's influence to further expand. In times of peace, some troops were left behind to garrison foreign cities and states, permitting Egypt to have continued control over the territories they conquered. The expansion offered great career opportunities for ambitious Egyptians who could be rewarded with land, slaves, and even the ‘gold of valour’ promotion, as noted by Ahmose son of Ebana, and could lead to powerful positions in the bureaucracy. Thus, it is evident that the army was influential in Egypt's successful expansion and that the expansion provided benefits to New Kingdom society.

Once the 18th Dynasty was established, Egyptian policy towards Nubia was dictated by both political and economic necessity. Politically, it was designed to protect Egypt's southern border from further threat, but it was also important economically, as Egypt's campaigning was designed to guarantee safe access to the resources of the region. It was not long before the conquest of Nubia became paramount to Egypt's prosperity. Nubia was not only rich in gold, but was the connecting link between Egypt and tropical Africa, the source of ivory, ebony, leopard skins, ostrich feathers, incense, cattle and slaves. The New Kingdom pharaohs believed that the vital trade in gold and exotic products could only be maintained if the whole of Nubia and all connecting desert routes were controlled by Egypt. These economic needs as a reason for expansion is evidenced by the fact that Egypt's earliest contacts with Nubia in Old Kingdom times were mostly trading and mining expeditions to exploit their valuable resources. Such was its importance to Egypt that, when Thutmose I gained Nubia, a special administrator was chosen as ‘Prince of Kush and Overseer of the Southern Lands’.

Expansion into Syria-Palestine, with its prosperous cities and plains, busy commercial ports and trade routes leading to the wealthy Tigris-Euphrates lands, was an important step. As well as providing an important buffer zone between Egypt and its neighbours, the survival and consolidation of the new dynasty in Thebes also relied on maintaining the wealth that came from trade with the north. Thutmose I was able to cross the Euphrates into Mitanni territory, and the stela he placed there proclaimed his victory through emphasis on the booty collected. This gleeful cataloguing the aftermath of the Hyksos defeat is important evidence that economic interests, as much as political ones, dictated Egypt's expansion policy in Nubia Syria-Palestine. This had internal benefits, as Egypt became wealthy, which also allowed for further expansion.

The wealth that flowed into Egypt enabled the kings to enhance their status by generous endowments to the gods. In Amun-Re's name, the kings began to ‘extend the frontiers of Egypt’. He was credited with each victory of his ‘son’, and was thus rewarded for his divine help. This is evident in Thutmose III's coronation inscription, which states “He has victory by my arms, in order to widen [the boundaries of Egypt]”. His temple was extended and gained great wealth, as Amun's priests expected and received the lion's share of the booty from each campaign, instigating their rise in influence, which eventually peaked under Hatshepsut's rule. This rise in influence led to more campaigns, as conquest and expansion was also seen as the pharaoh creating ma'at out of the isfet beyond Egypt.

Ultimately, it is evident that Egypt expanded because of a number of factors, which ranged from security to political, economic and religious needs as the period progressed. It additionally provided many benefits, both internal and external, such as creating jobs, promoting wealth and a stronger professional army. By examining these together, the success of the period can be seen, not only in how far its ‘empire’ was expanded, but the impacts this had both inside and outside Egypt.