

The Bodyguard of Ramesses II and the Battle of Kadesh

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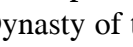

THE BATTLE OF KADESH (c. 1286 BC)¹ was the most famous military clash in the ancient history and the first major conflict in the ancient world to be described in detail. In the fifth year of his reign Ramesses II led his army across the Egyptian frontier at Tjaru and then marched for a month through Gaza, Canaan and Galilee into Lebanon and then up the Beqa Valley, to reach the height overlooking the Syrian city of Kadesh some fifteen miles away. He sent a division of elite troops (the Nea'rin) northwards along the Phoenician coast, while the main army, divided into four main divisions (named Amun, Re, Ptah and Seth), marched through Canaan and Upi to approach Kadesh from the south. Meanwhile, the Hittite king Muwatalli had assembled an army from Hatti and 16 of its provinces and allies which, according to Egyptian estimates, consisted of 2,500 chariots and 37,000 infantrymen, more than doubles the size of the Egyptian forces.

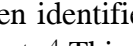
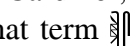
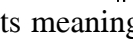
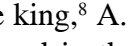
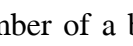
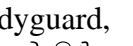
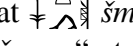
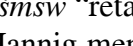
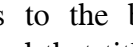
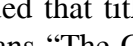
Before the beginning of conflict between the hostile armies at Kadesh, a surprise attack by Hittite chariots overran the Egyptian Re division as it was marching north. The Re division was almost totally destroyed by the Hittite chariot attack, and the Hittites then attacked the nearby camped Amun division, causing the defenders to abandon their positions. Ramesses II, fighting among his bodyguard, trying to prevent a disaster, led an almost single-handed chariot attack upon the Hittite eastern flank, causing large losses and breaking up the attack.² This paper discusses the significant military role of the bodyguard of the warrior pharaoh Ramesses II in this famous battle.

¹ For the datation, see Fr. SERVAJEAN, *Quatre études sur la bataille de Qadech*, CENiM 6, Montpellier, 2012, p. I; and M. GABOLDE, "Astronomy and Chronomogy. Concerning P.J. Huber", *JEH* 4, 2011, p. 172-177.

² For the events and the historical analysis of the Battle of Kadesh, see: J.H. BREASTED, *The Battle of Kadesh: A Study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy*, Chicago, 1903; Ch. DESROCHES-NOBLECOURT *et al.*, *Le grand temple d'Abou Simbel: La Bataille de Qadech*, Cairo, 1971; R.O. FAULKNER, "The Battle of Qadesh", *MDAIK* 16, 1958, p. 100-111; A.H. GARDINER, *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II*, Oxford, 1960; H. GOEDICKE, "Considerations on the Battle of Kadesh", *JEA* 52, 1966, p. 71-80; *id.* (ed.), *Perspectives on the Battle of Kadesh*, Baltimore, 1985; Ch. KUENTZ, *La Bataille de Qadech*, Cairo, 1928; R. TEFNIN, "Image, écriture, récit: À propos des représentations de la Bataille de Qadech", *GM* 47, 1981, p. 55-76; Cl. OBSOMER, "Récits et imaginaires de la bataille de Qadech. En quoi Ramsès II transforma-t-il la réalité ?", in L. van Ypersele (ed.), *Imaginaires de la guerre. L'histoire entre mythe et réalité*, *Transversalités* 3, 2003, p. 339-367; P. GRANDET, *Les pharaons du Nouvel Empire: une pensée stratégique (1550-1069 avant J.-C.)*, 2008, p. 200-230; Fr. SERVAJEAN, *Quatre études sur la bataille de Qadech*, CENiM 6, Montpellier, 2012.

The Concept of the Royal Bodyguard in the Egyptian Texts

During the reign of the Hieracleopolitan dynasties of the First Intermediate Period and the stable times of the Twelfth Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom, term  *šmsw* “retainers” has been identified with the concept of the royal bodyguard in the Egyptian texts for the first time. R.O. Faulkner believed that  *šmsw* “retainers” seem originally to have been a non-military class of personal attendants on the king or personages of high degree. But in the anarchy that followed the collapse of the Old Kingdom the “retainers” of a nomarch came to bear arms, and apparently constituted his household troops or bodyguard.³

Term  *šmsw* has been identified in most of the dictionaries of the ancient Egyptian language as retainers or servants.⁴ This meaning had been accepted by many Egyptologists as A. Badawi, H. Kees,⁵ A.H. Gardiner,⁶ and R.O. Faulkner.⁷ On the other hand, many Egyptologists have argued that term  *šmsw* “retainers” refers to the concept of the royal bodyguard, as well as its meaning of retainers or servants. In *Wb*, term  *šmsw* refers to the bodyguard of the king,⁸ A. Erman stated that the “retainers of the king”  *šmsw* were the royal bodyguard in the Middle Kingdom.⁹ E.A.W. Budge argued that word  *šms* means to be a member of a bodyguard or a follower, also he remarked that word  *šmsw* means bodyguard, as well as servants, attendants, and followers.¹⁰ Furthermore, Budge noted that  *šmsw nsw* refers to the bodyguard of the king.¹¹ D. Jones observed that term  *šmsw* “retainers” refers to the officials who played the role of the bodyguard of the king.¹² R. Hannig mentions in his ancient Egyptian language dictionary that term  *šmsw* refers to the bodyguard, as well as the meaning of retainers.¹³ Additionally, A. Fakhry argued that title  *hry šmsw n hm.f* “The Overseer of the retainers of his majesty” means “The Commander of bodyguard of the king”, in the time of the Eighteenth dynasty.¹⁴ Accordingly, many Egyptologists agree that term *šmsw* “retainers” has been identified with the concept of the royal bodyguard in the times of the First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom, and the Eighteenth Dynasty of the New Kingdom.

Other Egyptologists have argued that term *šmsw* “retainers” refers to the concept of the royal bodyguard in the Ramesside period as well. In his translation of the texts of Ramesses II on the Battle of Kadesh, J.H. Breasted concluded that *šmsw* refers to the contingent of the royal bodyguard, this was clear in the section that mentioned the siege of the Hittites to the bodyguard of Ramesses II, who stayed protecting him during the fighting, where we read “the foes of the vanquished chief of Kheta surrounded the bodyguard of his majesty, who were by

³ R.O. FAULKNER, “Egyptian Military Organization”, *JEA* 39, 1953, p. 38-39.

⁴ *Wb* IV, 485.

⁵ A. BADAWI, H. KEES, *Handwoerterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache*, Cairo, 1958, p. 247.

⁶ A.H. GARDINER, *Egyptian Grammar*, Oxford, 1966, p. 595.

⁷ R.O. FAULKNER, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford, 1962, p. 267.

⁸ *Wb* IV, 486.

⁹ A. ERMAN, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, New York, 1971, p. 103.

¹⁰ E.A.W. BUDGE, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* II, New York, 1978, p. 742.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, New York, 1978, p. 392.


¹² D. JONES, *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom* II, *BAR-IS* 866/2, 2000, p. 991.


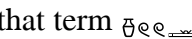
¹³ R. HANNIG, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen: Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800-950 v. Chr.)*, *Kulturgeschichte der antiken Welt* 64, 1995, p. 823.

¹⁴ A. FAKHRY, “Tomb of Paser (no. 367 at Thebes)”, *ASAE* 43, 1943, p. 392.

his side”.¹⁵ Similarly, both of W.F. Edgerton and J.A. Wilson noted that *šmsw* means mostly the bodyguard of the king in the Ramesside period, as well as their philological meaning of retainers.¹⁶

In his dictionary of Late-Egyptian, L.H. Lesko suggested that *šmsw* refers to the bodyguard of the king, in the historical texts of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu,¹⁷ as well as its philological meaning of retainers and servants.¹⁸

Therefore, term  *šmsw* “retainers” is the principal philological concept of the royal bodyguard in the Egyptian texts, from the time of the Hieracleopolitan dynasties of the First Intermediate Period, until the Ramesside period of the New Kingdom.

Finally, there is another term referring to the concept of the royal bodyguard in the Egyptian texts during the Ramesside period. This term has been mentioned only in the time of Ramesses II, in his texts on the Battle of Kadesh, beside the principal term  *šmsw*. It has been noted that term *šmsw* refers to the bodyguard of the king in these texts,¹⁹ but A.R. Schulman concluded that term  *wdpw m hnw* “household butlers” or “butlers of the residence” which has been mentioned in these texts, was also referring to the bodyguard of the king or a part of them at least, according to their military role.²⁰

The Military Role of the Royal Bodyguard in the Texts of the Battle of Kadesh

The significant military role of the royal bodyguard was noticeable in the texts of Ramesses II on the Battle of Kadesh, according to their valor in defending the king, and saving his life in the critical moments of the battle as mentioned before.²¹

The texts of Ramesses II referred to the military strategic role of the royal bodyguard, before the beginning of conflict at Kadesh. The royal bodyguard accompanied the king personally in his marching to Kadesh, before the arrival of the divisions of the Egyptian army to the battlefield. The royal bodyguard was at the head of the Egyptian army, while all the divisions of the army were marching behind the king and his bodyguard by a several miles. In the meanwhile, the Hittites and their allies were ready for fighting and hidden at the North-East of Kadesh.²² The “Poem”²³ of the Battle of Kadesh referred to this event as follows²⁴:

¹⁵ J.H. BREASTED, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, Vol. III: *The Nineteenth Dynasty*, Chicago, 1906, p. 147; cf. KRI II, 21.

¹⁶ W.F. EDGERTON, J.A. WILSON, *Historical Records of Ramses III. The Texts in “Medinet Habu”*, Vols. I and II, SAOC 12, 1936, p. 8, n. 15a.

¹⁷ L.H. LESKO, *A Dictionary of Late Egyptian* III, California, 1982, p. 153; cf. KRI V, 11, 31, 83.

¹⁸ L.H. LESKO, *op. cit.*, p. 153-154.

¹⁹ Ch. KUENTZ, *op. cit.*, p. 161, 177; KRI II, 10, 21, 119; KRITA II, 3, 4, 17.

²⁰ A.R. SCHULMAN, “The Royal Butler Ramessesesemperre”, *JARCE* 13, 1976, p. 123; cf. KRI II, 84; KRITA II, 11.

²¹ P. MONTET, *L’Égypte au temps des Ramsès: 1300-1100 avant J.-C.*, Paris, 1995, p. 271.

²² K.A. KITCHEN, *Pharaoh Triumphant: the Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt*, Warminster, 1982, p. 53-55; J.H. BREASTED, *The Battle of Kadesh: A Study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy*, Chicago, 1903, p. 25-27.

²³ The “Poem” is the name given to one of the literary records or accounts of the victory of Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh. It survives in eight copies, inscribed on the walls of the pharaoh’s temples at Abydos, Karnak, Luxor, Abu Simbel, and the Ramesseum, and on the papyri of Raifé, Sallier III, and Chester Beatty III. See:

This section cleared that Ramesses II has pushed rapidly forward to the battlefield. Even the division of Amun can no longer keep pace with him, and he accompanied only by his personal bodyguard. The other divisions are already far outdistanced; there is a gap of about a mile and a half between the division of Amun and that of Ptah, while the rear of the column, the division of Seth, is straggling so far behind that the author of the document, not knowing where it was, can only say it was marching somewhere “along the road”.²⁷

A surprise attack by Hittite chariots overran the Egyptian Re division as it was marching north. The Re division was almost totally destroyed by the Hittite chariot attack, and the Hittites then attacked the nearby camped Amun division, causing the defenders to abandon their positions. The Hittites now advanced on Ramesses II, cutting through the division of Re, and the king quickly sent his vizier to bring forward the division of Ptah.²⁸ The other literary record of the Battle of Kadesh known as the “Bulletin” claims that Ramesses II and his bodyguard had been surrounded by Hittite troops as follows²⁹:



|^a Īw p3 ħrw ḥsy n ḥt(3) ĩw ḥn' mš'.f nṯ ḥtrw.f



|^b m mītt ḥ3swt 'š3t nty ḥn'.f.



|^c Wd3yw.sn t3 mšdt [nty ḥr] rsy n Kdšw



|^d 'ḥ'.sn 'k m ḥnw p3 mš' n ḥm.f



|^e ĩw.sn ḥr mš' ĩw bw rh.sn.



|^f 'ḥ' n bšd n p3 mš' nṯ ḥtrw n ḥm.f r ḥ3ty.sn



|^g m ḥd r p3 nty ḥm.f ĩm.



|^h Īst ĩnh p3 ħrw n n3 ḥr n ḥt(3) n3 šmsw n ḥm.f nty r gs.f.

|^a The despicable Fallen one of Hatti came with his troops and his chariotry, |^b and also the numerous foreign lands that were accompanying him. |^c They crossed the ford (just) South of Kadesh, |^d then they entered in amongst His Majesty's troops |^e as they marched unawares. |^f Then His Majesty's troops and chariotry quailed before them, |^g on their way North, to where

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁸ *KRI* II, 26-27; *KRITA* II, 5; A.H. GARDINER, *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II*, Oxford, 1960, p. 9; J.H. BREASTED, *op. cit.*, p. 32-34.

²⁹ *KRI* II, 117-119; *KRITA* II, 17.

His Majesty was. |^h Then the foes from the Fallen one of Hatti surrounded His Majesty's bodyguard³⁰ who were by his side.

The previous section of the Poem indicates that the royal bodyguard was the only troop that was by the side of the king in the critical moments of fighting. Hence, Ramesses II has blamed the officers and soldiers of his army, in other parts of the Poem, because they had left him to fight lonely in the battle.

Moreover, the reliefs of the battle showed that the Hittite attack on the Egyptian camp were received by the pharaoh's heavy infantry guard, stationed around the camp, who pulled them from their chariots and dispatched them with swords and spears [fig. 1].³¹

However, Ramesses II did not hesitate an instant in attempting to cut his way out, and to reach to his southern columns. With only his bodyguard who happened to be at his side, as stated in his famous Poem, he mounted his waiting chariot, and boldly charged into the advance of the Hittite pursuit as it pushed into his camp on the west side.³²

Therefore, Ramesses II rescued in the battlefield, according to the valor of his royal bodyguard, which consisted mostly of the Sherden soldiers,³³ after the escaping of his officers and soldiers during the most critical moments of the battle, as he stated in his accounts,³⁴ where we read in his Poem: "I being alone, no high officer with me, no charioteer, no soldier of the infantry, no groom".³⁵ On the other hand, we find that Ramesses II has favored the brave role of the royal bodyguard in fighting by his side, in other section of his Poem, as follows³⁶:



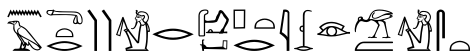
|^a Ntsn n3 gmyw m hnw p3 hrwyw [hn' ktn]



|^b Mnn3 p3y kr'w.i



|^c m-dī n3y wdpw m hnw nty r gs.i



|^d n3 mtryw r 'h3 ptri gm.i st.

|^a It was they whom I found amidst the strife, with the charioteer |^b Menna, my shield-bearer,

³⁰ K.A. Kitchen (*RITA* II, 17) has translated the word *šmsw* here by "subordinates" and not by "bodyguard", but I set here its translation as "bodyguard".

³¹ J.H. BREASTED, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³³ P. MONTET, *op. cit.*, p. 271; H. WILSON, *People of the Pharaohs: From Peasant to Courtier*, London, 1997, p. 182.

³⁴ K.A. KITCHEN, *Pharaoh Triumphant: the Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt*, Warminster, 1982, p. 60-61.

³⁵ *KRI* II, 63-64; *KRITA* II, 9.

³⁶ *KRI* II, 83-84; *KRITA* II, 11-12.

|^c and with my household butlers³⁷ who were at my side, |^d those who are my witnesses regarding the fighting.

Furthermore, we find the king mentions in the first sections of the Poem of Kadesh his bodyguard independently beside his infantry and chariotry, which may give an indication to their valor and significance military role in the battle, as follows³⁸:



|^a *Mḥd mšꜥ.f hrw ḥꜣ [...] f nt ḥtrw*



|^b *inḏ šmsw.f nḥm mnḥꜣt.f iw ib.f mḏ ḏw n ḥmt.*



|^c *Ḥry nsw bḏty (Wsr-mꜣ't-R'-Stp-n-R') sꜣ R' (mry-Ḳmn-R'-mss) ḏi nḥ.*

|^a Rescuer of his infantry on the day of battle, great protector of his chariotry. |^b Bringing his bodyguard³⁹ (safe home), saving his troops, his heart (steady) as a mountain of copper. |^c (Such is) the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Wesermaetre Setepenre, the son of Re, Ramesses II, given life.

Finally, I have to state that the royal bodyguard of Ramesses II in the Battle of Kadesh were consisting of the Egyptian soldiers who were holding round-topped shields, and the Sherden warriors with round shields and horn-crested helmets [fig. 2-7].⁴⁰ The Sherden were amongst the Sea Peoples who attacked Egypt in the Ramesside period, but they were first mentioned in Egyptian records during the reign of Amenhotep III, in the Amarna letters, where Sherden are spoken of as belonging to an Egyptian garrison at Byblos. Sherden raiders had attacked the Nile Delta some time before Ramesses II's northern campaign. After the attacking of Sherden on Egypt, they being captured and were impressed into the Egyptian army and became one of the best troops employed by the Egyptians. Hence, they appeared amongst the Pharaoh's bodyguard in the famous Battle of Kadesh. Additionally, at the beginning of Ramesses II's poetical account on the Battle of Kadesh, he tells how "he made ready his army, his chariotry and the Sherden whom his majesty had captured"; here the exclusive mention of this foreign people show the important part they already played in the Egyptian army.⁴¹

³⁷ I have stated before that A.R. Schulman noticed that term *wḏpw m ḥnw* "household butlers", which is mentioned in this section, refers to the bodyguard of the king or a part of them at least, according to their military role. See: A.R. SCHULMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

³⁸ *KRI* II, 10; *KRITA* II, 3.

³⁹ K.A. Kitchen (*RITA* II, 3) has translated the word *šmsw* here by "followers", but I set here its translation as "bodyguard".

⁴⁰ J.H. BREASTED, *op. cit.*, p. 42-43, pl. 6.

⁴¹ A.H. GARDINER, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* I, Oxford, 1947, p. 194ff; *KRI* II, 11, 290; J.H. BREASTED, *A History of Egypt: From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, 2nd edition fully revised, New York, 1946, p. 449.

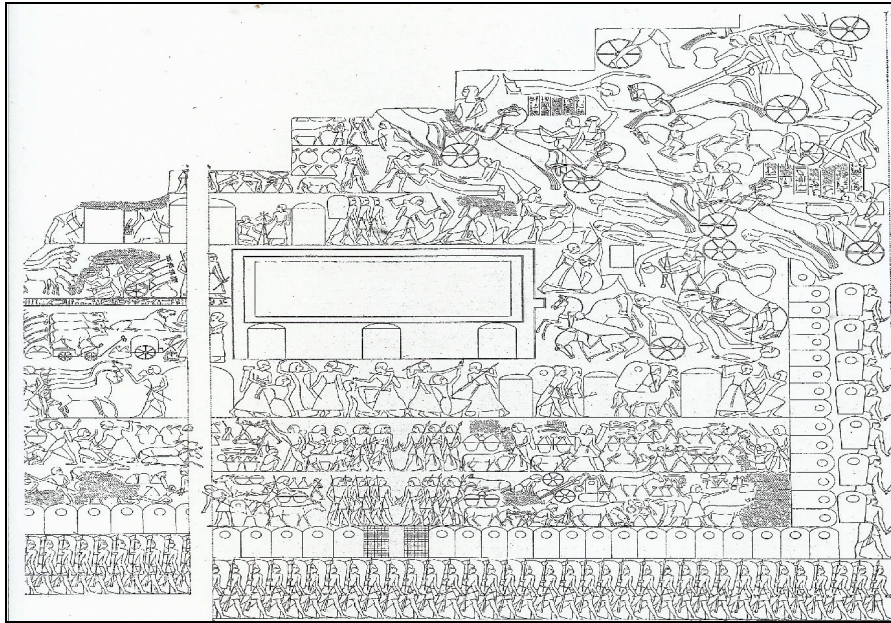


Fig. 1. The fighting between the Egyptians and Hittites at the Egyptian camp, Ramesseum temple (J.H. Breasted, *The Battle of Kadesh*, Chicago, 1903, pl. I).

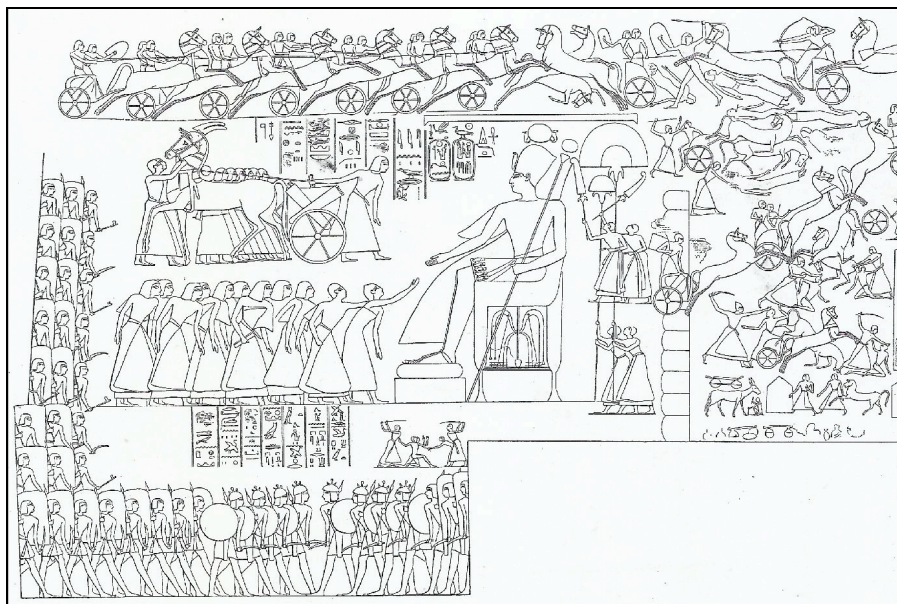


Fig. 2. Ramesses II learns of the Hittite attack and under him depicted his bodyguard which consisted of the Egyptian soldiers and Sherden warriors, Luxor temple (*ibid.*, pl. IV).

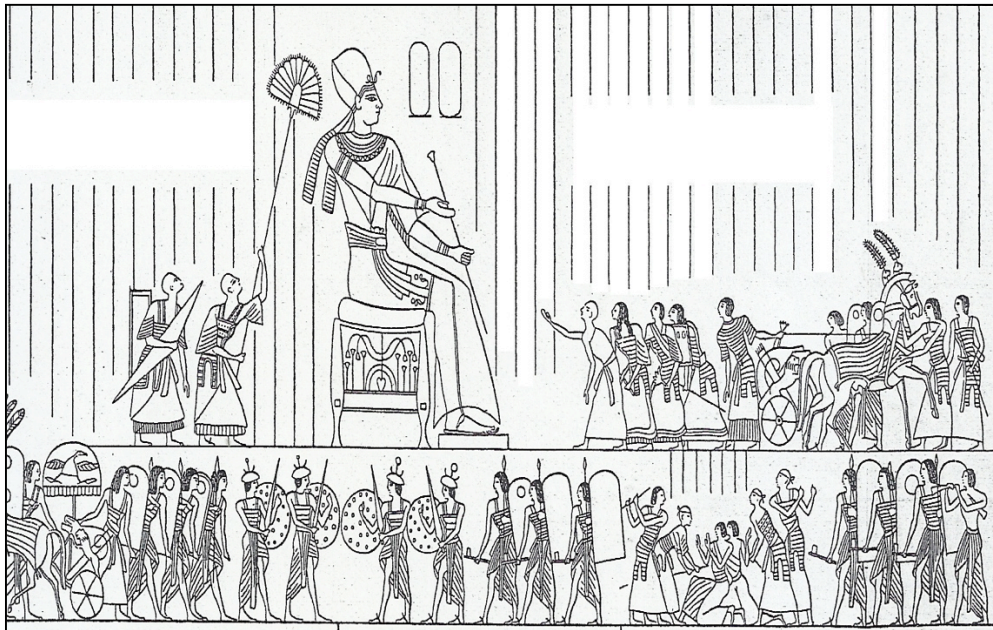


Fig. 3. Ramesses II learns of the Hittite attack and under him depicted his bodyguard which consisted of the Egyptian soldiers and Sherden warriors, The Great temple of Abu Simbel (*ibid.*, pl. VI).



Fig. 4. The Sherden soldiers of the bodyguard of Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh, temple of Ramesses II at Abydos (C. Aldred, *The Egyptians*, London, 1984, p. 151).



Fig. 5. The Sherden soldiers of the bodyguard of Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh, temple of Ramesses II at Abydos (Photo by Mohamed Raafat Abbas).



Fig. 6. The Egyptian and Sherden soldiers of the bodyguard of Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh, temple of Ramesses II at Abydos (Photo by Mohamed Raafat Abbas).

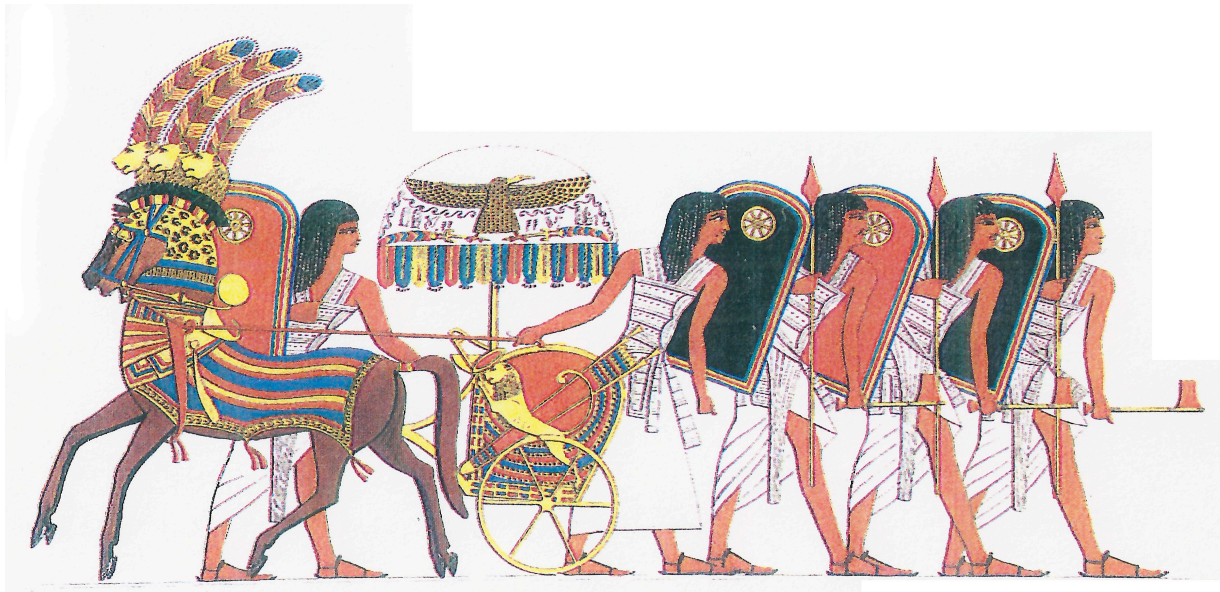


Fig. 7. Egyptian soldiers from the members of the royal bodyguard of Ramesses II with the royal chariot at the Battle of Kadesh, Ramesseum temple (T.G.H. James, *Ramesses the Great*, Cairo, 2002, p. 114).