

A Survey of the Military Role of the Sherden Warriors in the Egyptian Army during the Ramesside Period

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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 attack of Sherden on Egypt, they were captured, impressed into the Egyptian army and became one of the best troops employed by the Egyptians during the Ramesside period.¹ Military reliefs from the reigns of Ramesses II and Ramesses III always show the Sherden warriors as infantry carrying either swords or spears and round shields, and sporting their famous horned helmets, fighting alongside Egyptian troops in battle or functioning as part of the royal bodyguard.² This paper surveys and discusses the significant military role of the Sherden warriors in the Egyptian army during the Ramesside period.

The Employment of the Sherden Warriors in the Egyptian Military Service and their Settling inside Egypt during the Ramesside Period

In the second year of Ramesses II's reign, Egyptian forces successfully stanching a raid by an unspecified number of Sherden warriors. This event is described on a rhetorical stela of Ramesses II from Tanis as follows:

whose renown crossed the sea... the unruly Sherden whom no one had ever known how to combat, they come boldly [sailing] in their warships from the midst of the sea, none being able to withstand them. [But he plundered them by the strength of his valiant arm, being brought to Egypt] – Ramesses II.³

Moreover, Aswan stela of year 2 of Ramesses II mentions:

¹ A.H. GARDINER, *AEO* I, 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.

² C. MANASSA, *The Great Karnak Inscription of Merneptah. Grand Strategy in the 13th Century BC*, *YES* 5, Yale, 2003, p. 78; R.G. ROBERTS, "Identity, Choice, and the Year 8 Reliefs of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu", in C. Bachhuber, R.G. Roberts (eds.), *Forces of Transformation. The End of the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean (Proceedings of an International Symposium held at St. John's College, University of Oxford)*, Oxford, 2009, p. 61-63.

³ K.A. KITCHEN, *Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II King of Egypt*, Warminster, 1982, p. 40-41; *KRI* II, 290, 1-4; *KRITA* II, 120.

He has destroyed the warriors of the Sea, the Delta slumbers and can sleep.⁴

After the Egyptian forces successfully repelled the invasion, Ramesses II sensed a greater military opportunity beyond his victory, and employed the Sherden captives as auxiliary forces.⁵ Indeed, as early as the Battle of Kadesh in Ramesses II's year five, Sherden warriors were incorporated in the Egyptian army.⁶ Sherden warriors had been employed as auxiliary troops by the Egyptian army since the reign of Ramesses II and would continue to serve as imperial soldiers as late as the reign of Ramesses III at least.

It seems that Sherden warriors had been settled by Ramesses II in some fortresses and camps inside Egypt for developing their military abilities inside the Egyptian military organization. According to Ramesses II, various transplanted foreigners were resettled in *nḥtw*-strongholds,⁷ which may have been located along the Sinai. The use of the *nḥtw*-strongholds to house foreigners is likewise paralleled in the reigns of Thutmose III and Ramesses III.⁸ The records of the Nineteenth Dynasty demonstrate that at least two *nḥtw* were built along the Ways of Horus.⁹ Ramesses II bragged of settling foreigners within *nḥtw* strongholds in which he boasted of transplanting northerners to the south, southerners to the north, easterners to the west, and westerners to the east.¹⁰ The presence of Sherden warriors in fortresses in Middle Egypt, well away from the Delta or Canaan, is attested in several non-literary Egyptian sources, a few decades later after their first appearance in the Egyptian military service.¹¹ During the reign of Ramesses III, there was a *nḥtw* at the mouth of the Faiyum called "Ramesses, Ruler of Heliopolis, Beloved of his Army", in which Sherden warriors were garrisoned.¹² P. Grandet has suggested that Sherden warriors were settled in this region of Middle Egypt to protect the vulnerable entry point from the west *via* the Faiyum region, where this area was liable to penetration by hostile Libyans.¹³ In the reign of Ramesses V (ca. 1144 BC), we find Sherden and others settled in Middle Egypt in the lists of the great Wilbour Papyrus.¹⁴ Furthermore, there is a reference to *nḥtw*-strongholds of Sherden in two undated stelas from Ihnasya el-Medina.¹⁵ Inscriptions are likewise attested from the very end of the Twentieth Dynasty or the beginning of the Twenty-first Dynasty for a commander of the great *nḥtw*-strongholds "fortresses" of the Sherden (*h3t p3 nḥt(w) 3 Š3rdnn3*) and a

⁴ KRI II, 345, 3; KRITA II, 182.

⁵ K.A. KITCHEN, *op. cit.*, p. 40-41; E. CLINE, D. O'CONNOR, "The Mystery of the 'Sea Peoples'", in D. O'Connor, S. Quirke (eds.), *Mysterious Lands*, London, 2003, p. 112-113.

⁶ KRI II, 11, 1-15.

⁷ The term *nḥtw* "stronghold" refers to fortresses within Egyptian territory or along the Ways of Horus, see E.F. MORRIS, *The Architecture of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom*, Leiden, 2004, p. 820-821.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁹ KRI I, 7, 5-8, 16; KRI II, 826, 2-5.

¹⁰ KRI II, 206, 14-16.

¹¹ For the Sherden fortresses in Middle Egypt, see K. JANSEN-WINKELN, "Der Beginn der Libyschen Herrschaft in Ägypten", *BN* 71, 1994, p. 79-97; G. CAVILLIER, "'Shardana Project': Perspectives and Researches on the Sherden in Egypt and Mediterranean", *Syria* 87, 2010, p. 339-345; A.J. SPALINGER, *The Transformation on an Ancient Egyptian Narrative: P. Sallier III and the Battle of Kadesh*, Wiesbaden, 2002, p. 361, 264.

¹² KRI V, 270, 11-12.

¹³ P. GRANDET, *Le Papyrus Harris I (BM 9999) II*, *BiEtud* 109, Cairo, 1994, p. 203-204.

¹⁴ K.A. KITCHEN, "Ramesses III and the Ramesside Period", in E.H. Cline, D. O'Connor (eds.), *Ramesses III. The Life and Times of Egypt's Last Hero*, Michigan, 2012, p. 17.

¹⁵ W.M.F. PETRIE, *Ehnasya 1904*, London, 1905, p. 22 and pl. 27, nos. 1-2.

Ramesses II.²¹

Many Egyptologists as A.J. Spalinger,²² J.H. Breasted,²³ P. Montet,²⁴ and C. Aldred²⁵ have argued from the various reliefs of the Battle of Kadesh that the Sherden warriors with round shields and horn-crested helmets were forming most of the contingent of the royal bodyguard during the battle [fig. 1-4]. It has been remarked that 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 chariots attack, and the Hittites then attacked the nearby camped Amun division, causing the defenders to abandon their positions. Ramesses II, fighting among his bodyguard and 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. The significant military role of the royal bodyguard is noticeable in the accounts 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. Therefore, Ramesses II have been rescued in the battlefield, thanks to the valor of his bodyguard, which consisted mostly of Sherden warriors, after the escape of his officers and soldiers during the most critical moments of the battle, as he stated in his account.²⁶

On the other hand, a Sherden warrior is depicted cutting off the left hand of a slain Hittite charioteer in the battle reliefs at the temple of Ramesses II in Abydos.²⁷ Accordingly, it seems that another part of the Sherden warriors had fought in the battle as infantry units or as chariot “runners” – the footsoldiers that accompanied a chariot corps into battle fought against the opposing skirmishers, captured enemy chariots, and performed other duties in support of the main chariot force [fig. 5].²⁸

The Sherden Warriors at the Battle of Ramesses II against Dapur

The battle of Ramesses II against Dapur in Syria is depicted in both of Luxor and Ramesseum temples.²⁹ In Luxor version (forecourt, north side, upper register), Ramesses II is depicted advancing on foot, without body-armour, firing arrows at the fortress-town of Dapur, itself described as “in the land of Hatti”, i.e. part of the Hittite territorial possessions in Syria. On Ramesses’ side are both Egyptian infantry and Sherden warriors, with their horned helmets, long-swords and spotted circular shields, assaulting the fortress-town. In the city, some of the local soldiery are shown resisting, shooting back with bow-and-arrow; others have been shot, one or two appear to hurl egg-shaped missiles, and another offers a censer with three burning flames [fig. 6-7].³⁰ In the Ramesseum version (Hypostyle Hall, east wall, south half),

²¹ A.H. GARDINER, *AEO* I, p. 194-195.

²² A.J. SPALINGER, “The Battle of Kadesh: The Chariot Frieze at Abydos”, *Ägypten und Levante* 13, 2001, p. 171.

²³ J.H. BREASTED, *The Battle of Kadesh. A Study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy*, Chicago, 1903, p. 42-43, pl. 6.

²⁴ P. MONTET, *L'Égypte au temps des Ramsès 1300-1100 avant J.-C.*, Paris, 1995, p. 271.

²⁵ C. ALDRED, *The Egyptians*, London, 1984, p. 151.

²⁶ M. RAAFAT ABBAS, “The Bodyguard of Ramesses II and the Battle of Kadesh”, *ENiM* 9, 2016, p. 113-123.

²⁷ A.J. SPALINGER, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

²⁸ For the military duties of the chariot “runners” inside the Egyptian army, see A.R. SCHULMAN, “The Egyptian Chariotry: a Reexamination”, *JARCE* 2, 1963, p. 89-90.

²⁹ PM² II, 333 (202), 438 (18); W. WRESZINSKI, *Atlas zur altaegyptischen Kulturgeschichte* II, Leipzig, 1935, pls. 77-80, 107-109.

³⁰ PM² II, 333 (202), I, 1-3; W. WRESZINSKI, *op. cit.*, pls. 77-80; *KRI* II, 172-173; *KRITA* II, 45-46.

Ramesses II is depicted moving away from the doorway and advancing upon Hittite chariotry. It is remarkable that the assault troops are native Egyptians with only one Sherden present [fig. 8-9].³¹ A.J. Spalinger argued that the depiction of the Sherden warriors in this scene indicates that they appear to have been tough warriors, if only because they are shown fighting in a highly exposed position at the walls of the enemy's fortress. But they too have become visual icons.³²

The Sherden Warriors at the Libyan War of Merenptah

In the fifth year of Merenptah's reign, Egypt had been attacked by a coalition of Libyans and Sea Peoples at the border of western Delta. This event is described in some of Merenptah's records such as the Great Libyan War Inscription of Merenptah at Karnak, the Cairo Column, the Libyan War Stela from Kom el-Ahmar, Menuf (Athribis Stela), and the Triumph-Hymn (the Israel Stela at Cairo Museum). According to these records, king Merey, the son of Dedy of the Libyans, formed a coalition with several groups of the Sea Peoples (Sherden, Teresh, Shekelesh, Ekwesh and Lukka), that pushed forward into the Delta. As soon as Merenptah discovered what happening, he mounted a military campaign against the invaders and defeated them after six hours of fighting, at the border of western Delta.³³

Pap. Anastasi II (verso 1-2) dating to the time of Merenptah mentions:

Sherden of the Great Green (Sea) that are the captives of His Majesty, l.p.h. They are equipped with all their weapons in the court and bring a tribute of barley and provisions for their chariotry, as well as chopped straw.³⁴

This section cleared that Merenptah had followed his father's example knowing the military importance of the Sherden warriors whom served inside the Egyptian army. Hence, the significant military role of the Sherden warriors during the Libyan War of Merenptah had been mentioned in another section of Pap. Anastasi II (verso 5,1-3) as follows:³⁵



|^a mš' nḥt iw ḥbnw.f



|^b m nḥt ḥr wsr



³¹ PM² II, 438 (18), III; W. WRESZINSKI, *op. cit.*, pls. 107-109; KRI II, 173-174; KRITA II, 46-47.

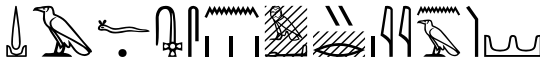
³² A.J. SPALINGER, *Icons of Power. A Strategy of Reinterpretation*, Prague, 2011, p. 152.

³³ For the Libyan war of Merenptah, see KRI IV, 2-12; KRITA IV, 2-10; J.H. BREASTED, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest III. The Nineteenth Dynasty*, Chicago, 1906, p. 238-253; A.R. SCHULMAN, "The Great Historical Inscription of Merneptah at Karnak. A Partial Reappraisal", *JARCE* 24, 1987, p. 21-34; C. MANASSA, *The Great Karnak Inscription of Merneptah. Grand Strategy in the 13th Century BC*, YES 5, Yale, 2003; A.J. SPALINGER, *War in Ancient Egypt*, Malden, 2008, p. 235-238; Fr. SERVAGEAN, *Mérenptah et la fin de la XIX^e dynastie*, Paris, 2014, p. 37-45.

³⁴ A.H. GARDINER, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, BiAeg 7, Brussels, 1937, p. 20; R.A. CAMINOS, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, London, 1954, p. 64.

³⁵ A.H. GARDINER, *op. cit.*, p. 14-15; R.A. CAMINOS, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45.

|^c h3 .sn ht r ĩsdrktyw



|^d dzf.sn Mryn



|^e n3 Šrdn in.n.k hr hpš.k



|^f h3kw.sn mhwt h3swt.

|^a The victorious army came after he has triumphed, |^b in victory and power. |^c It has set fire to Isderktiu³⁶ |^d and burnt the Meryna (Maryannu).³⁷ |^e The Sherden whom thou hast taken by your strong arm |^f have plundered the tribes of foreign lands.

A.H. Gardiner argued that Sherden are mentioned as contingent of the Egyptian army in this section of Pap. Anastasi II.³⁸ Similarly, F.J. Yurco assumed that Merenptah may have impressed Sea Peoples captured in his Libyan war of year 5 against the Libyans and the Sea Peoples.³⁹ Moreover, J.H. Breasted stated that this section of Pap. Anastasi II indicates that Sherden warriors fought as auxiliary troops in the Egyptian army against the Libyans.⁴⁰

The Sherden Warriors at the Wars of Ramesses III

The battle reliefs of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu show that the Sherden warriors had played a significant military role in the different wars of this warrior king as auxiliary troops [fig. 10]. The Sherden warriors are depicted fighting against the Libyans at the First Libyan War dating to the fifth year of Ramesses III's reign [fig. 11-12].⁴¹ This first invasion was an alliance of the Meshwesh, the Libu, and the Seped. The scenes show the Egyptian army including Egyptians with *khepesh* swords and shields; Nubians with throw sticks (or cudgels), spear and axe; Nubian archers; other warriors from Asia and the Sea Peoples (mixed

³⁶ R.A. Caminos (*op. cit.*, p. 46) stated that Isderktiu is probably mentioned only here in the Egyptian texts. I think, despite the lack of a human determinative, that Isderktiu is an ethnical name for a group of people who attacked Egypt with the coalitions of Libyans and Sea Peoples during the fifth year of Merenptah's reign.

³⁷ The Maryannu were a class of warriors whose expertise in handling chariots and caring for horses were an ancestral tradition which made them the nobility or the aristocracy of the Canaanite societies during the Late Bronze Age (R.T. O'CALLAGHAN, "New Light on the Maryannu as Chariot Warrior", *JKF* 1, 1951, p. 309-324; H. REVIV, "Some Comments on the Maryannu", *IEJ* 22, 1972, p. 219; D.B. REDFORD, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, New Jersey, 1992, p. 193-195). I think that the Maryannu warriors who fought with the Libyans against the Egyptians during the Libyan war of Merenptah were mercenaries like the Sea Peoples groups; it seems more probable that some of the Maryannu warriors emigrated with some groups of the Sea Peoples from the Levant to North Africa across the Mediterranean Sea. Afterwards all of these groups were mercenaries for the Libyans in their invasion in the fifth year of Merenptah's reign (M. RAAFIAT ABBAS, "The Maryannu in the Western Desert during the Ramesside Period", *Abgadiyat* 8, 2013, p. 128-133).

³⁸ A.H. GARDINER, *AEO* I, p. 194.

³⁹ F.J. YURCO, "Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign", *JARCE* 23, 1986, p. 215, n. 71.

⁴⁰ J.H. BREASTED, *Ancient Records of Egypt. Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* III. Nineteenth Dynasty, Chicago, 1906, p. 210, n. c.

⁴¹ THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, *Medinet Habu I. Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III*, OIP 8, Chicago, 1930, pls. 17, 18.

with the bow as he advances; before him are his bodyguard and Sherden warriors [fig. 20].⁴⁸

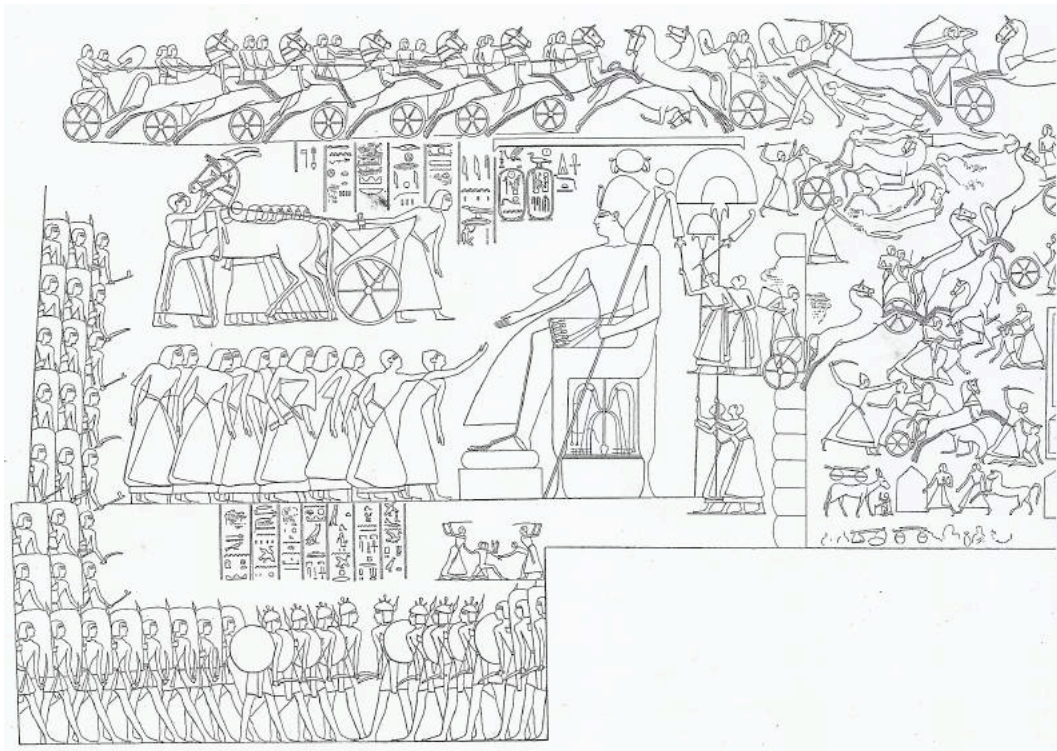


Fig. 1. Ramesses II learns of the Hittite attack and under him is depicted his bodyguard which consisted of Egyptian soldiers and Sherden warriors (Luxor temple; J.H. Breasted, *The Battle of Kadesh. A Study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy*, Chicago, pl. IV).



Fig. 2. The Sherden warriors of the bodyguard of Ramesses II at the battle of Kadesh (temple of Ramesses II at Abydos; © Mohamed Raafat Abbas).

⁴⁸ THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, *op. cit.*, pl. 94; J.H. BREASTED, *op. cit.*, p. 69.



Fig. 3. The Sherden warriors of the bodyguard of Ramesses II at the battle of Kadesh (temple of Ramesses II at Abydos; © Mohamed Raafat Abbas).

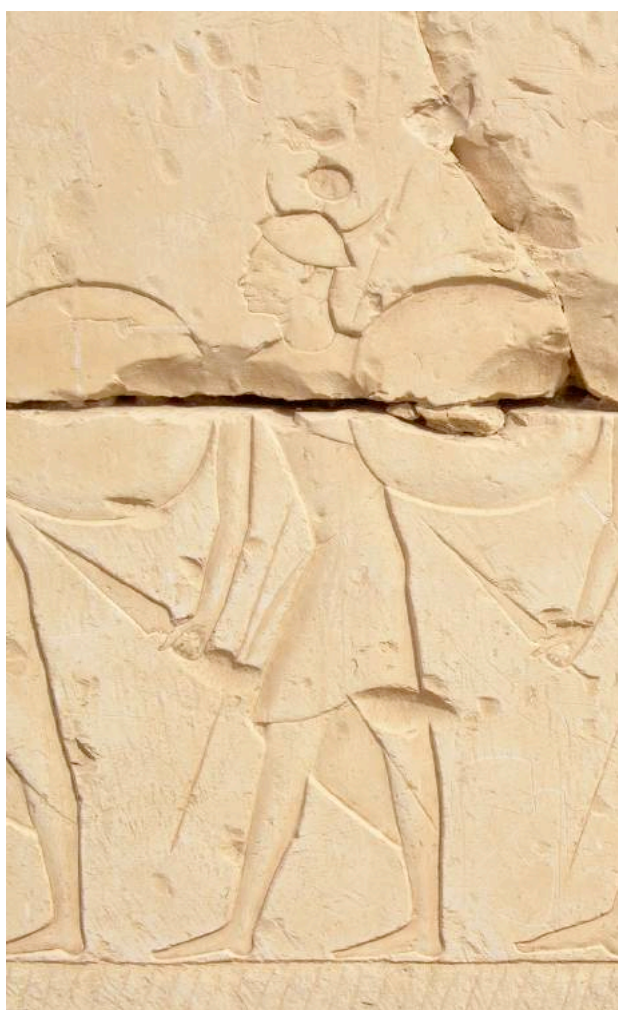


Fig. 4. A Sherden warrior at the battle of Kadesh (temple of Ramesses II at Abydos; © Mohamed Raafat Abbas).



Fig. 5. A Sherden warrior cutting off the left hand of a slain Hittite charioteer at the battle of Kadesh (temple of Ramesses II at Abydos; © Mohamed Raafat Abbas).

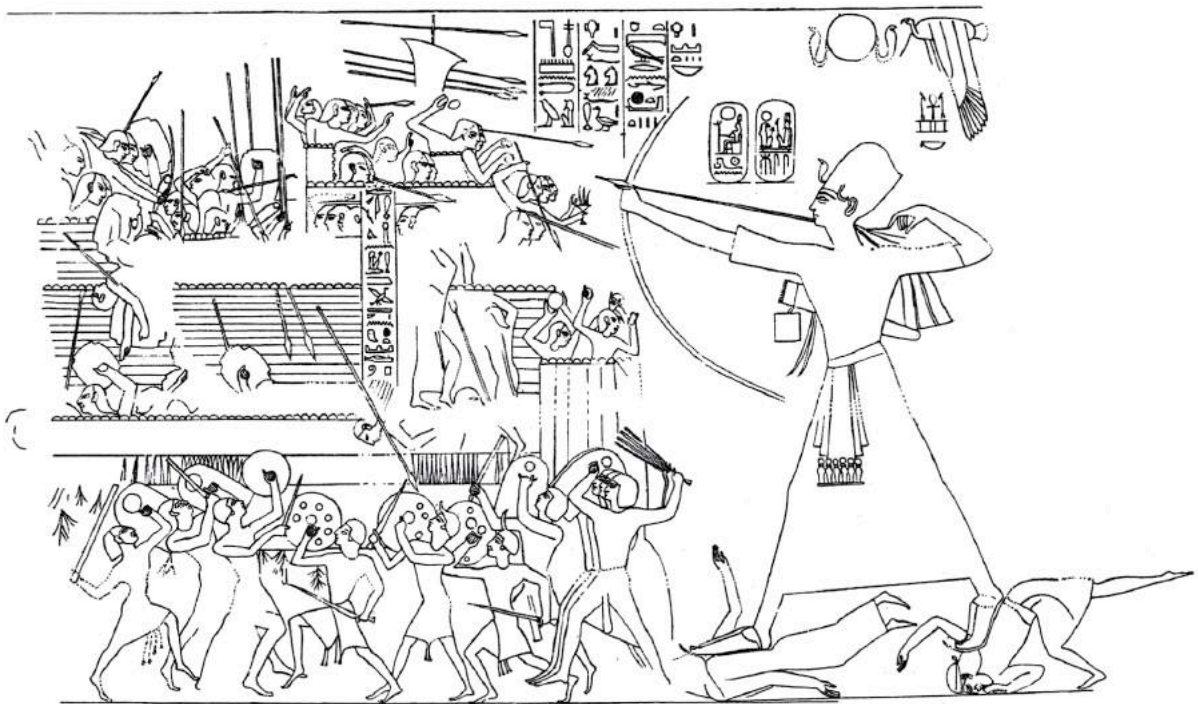


Fig. 6. Ramesses II and his army attack the Hittite fortress of Dapur (Luxor temple; W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altaegyptischen Kulturgeschichte* II, Leipzig, 1935, pl. 78).

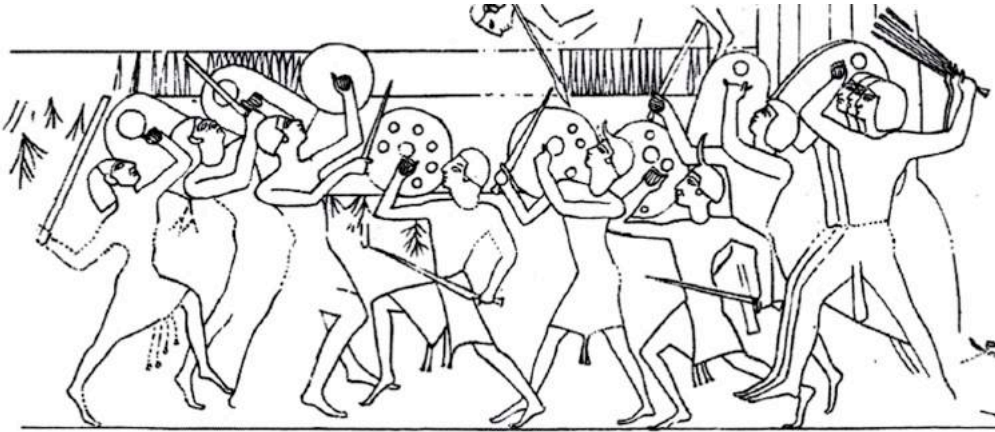


Fig. 7. Sherden warriors fighting beside the Egyptian soldiers at the battle against Dapur in the reign of Ramesses II (Luxor temple; *ibid.*, pl. 78).

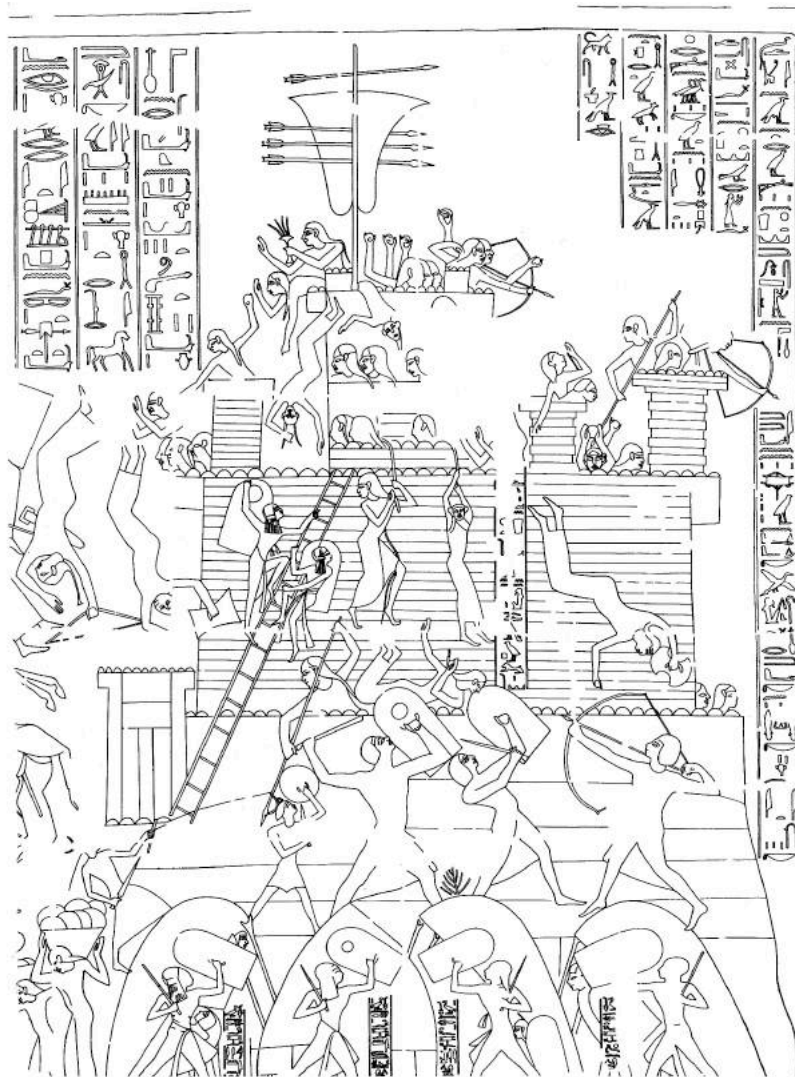


Fig. 8. The attack of the Egyptian army on the Hittite fortress of Dapur in the reign of Ramesses II (Ramesseum temple; A.A.-H. Youssef, Chr. Leblanc, M. Maher, *Le Ramesseum IV. Les batailles de Tounip et de Dapur*, Cairo, 1977, pl. XXII).



Fig. 9. A Sherden warrior at the left accompanied by Egyptian soldiers in fighting at the walls of the Hittite fortress of Dapur (Ramesseum temple; *ibid.*, pl. XXII).

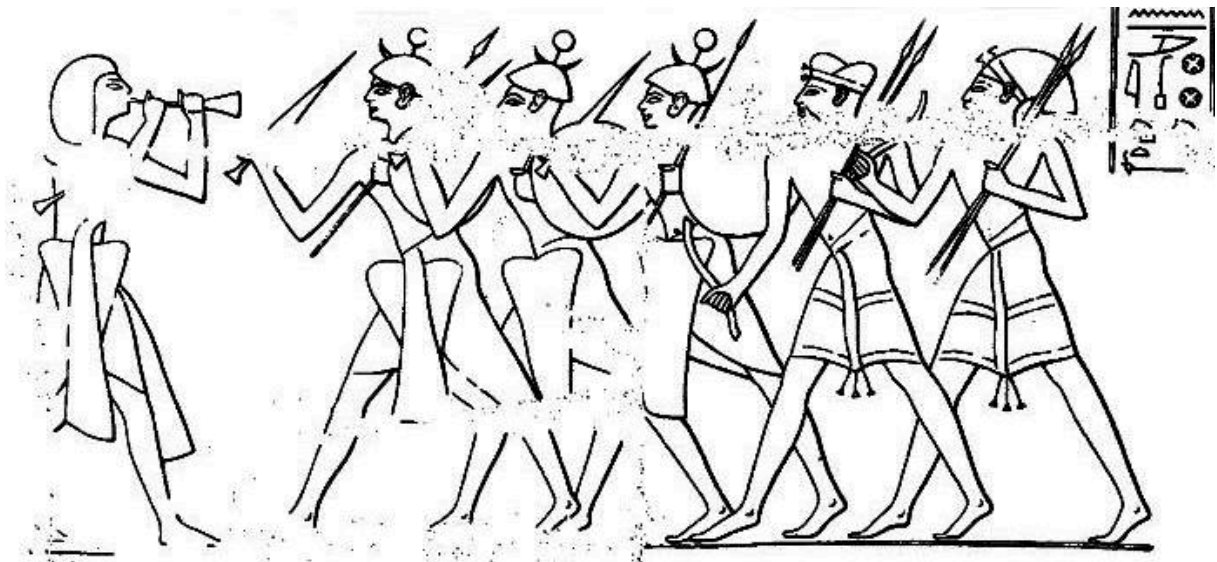


Fig. 10. Three Sherden warriors with other two Shasu warriors at the Egyptian military service as auxiliary troops during the reign of Ramesses III (temple of Medinet Habu; The Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu II. Later Historical Records of Ramses III*, OIP 9, Chicago, 1932, pl. 62).

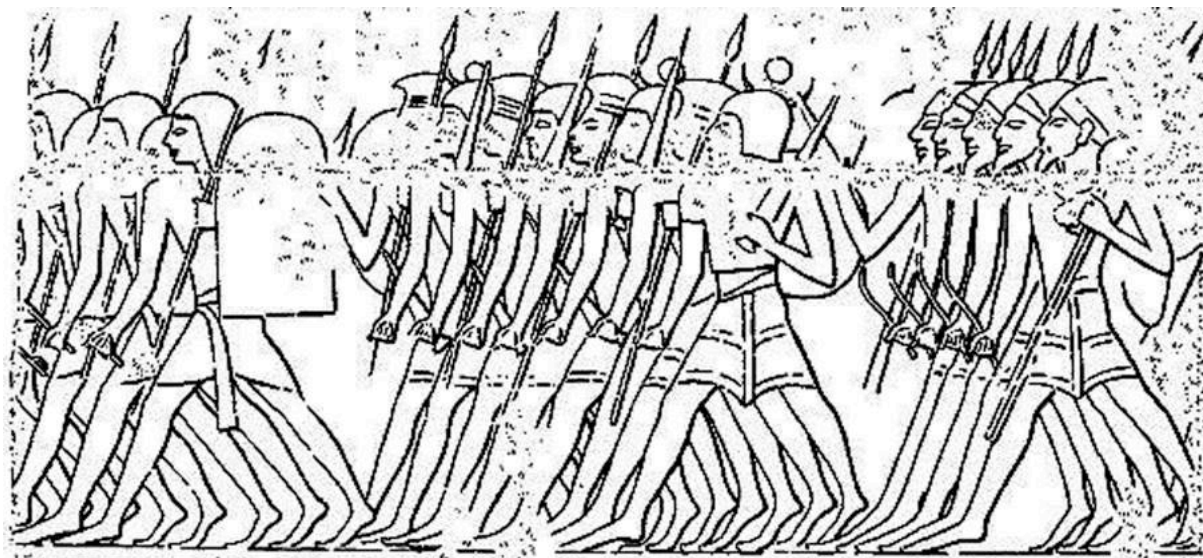


Fig. 11. Sherden warriors on the march to the First Libyan War of Ramesses III with other foreign auxiliary troops and Egyptians (temple of Medinet Habu; *The Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu I. Earlier Historical Records of Ramses III, OIP 8*, Chicago, 1930, pl. 17).

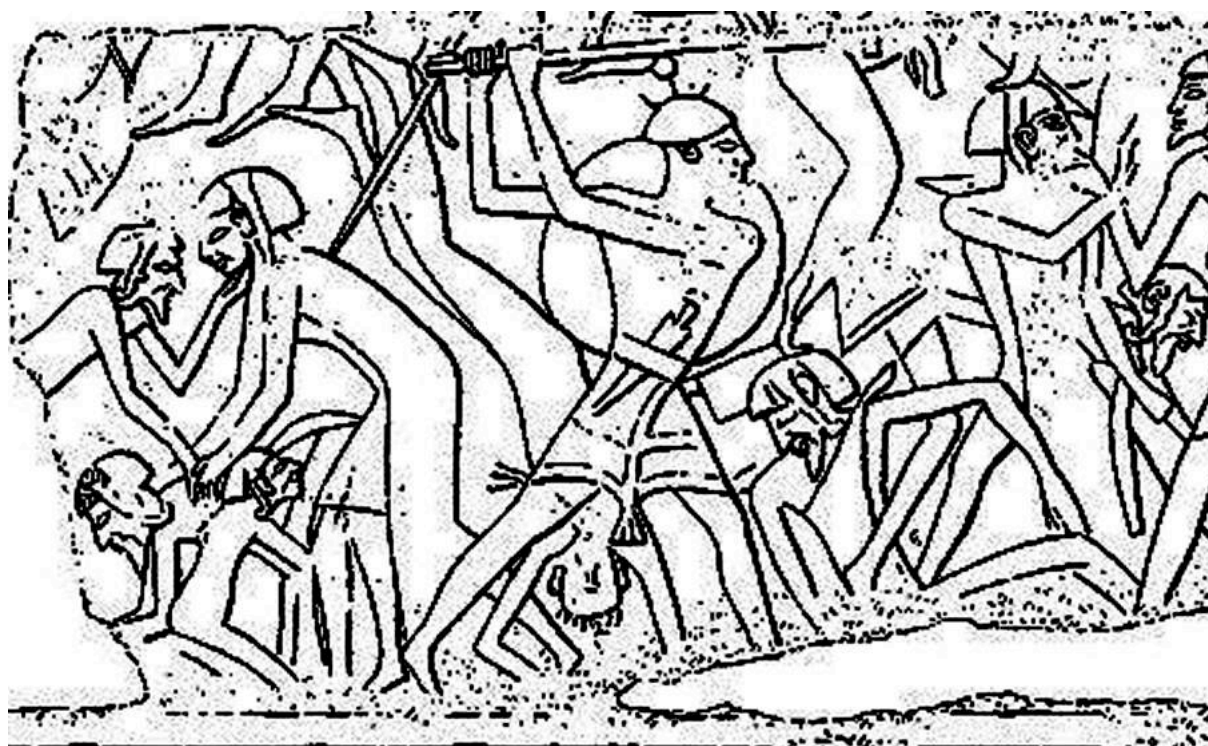


Fig. 12. Sherden warrior fighting against the Libyans during the First Libyan War of Ramesses III (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 18).

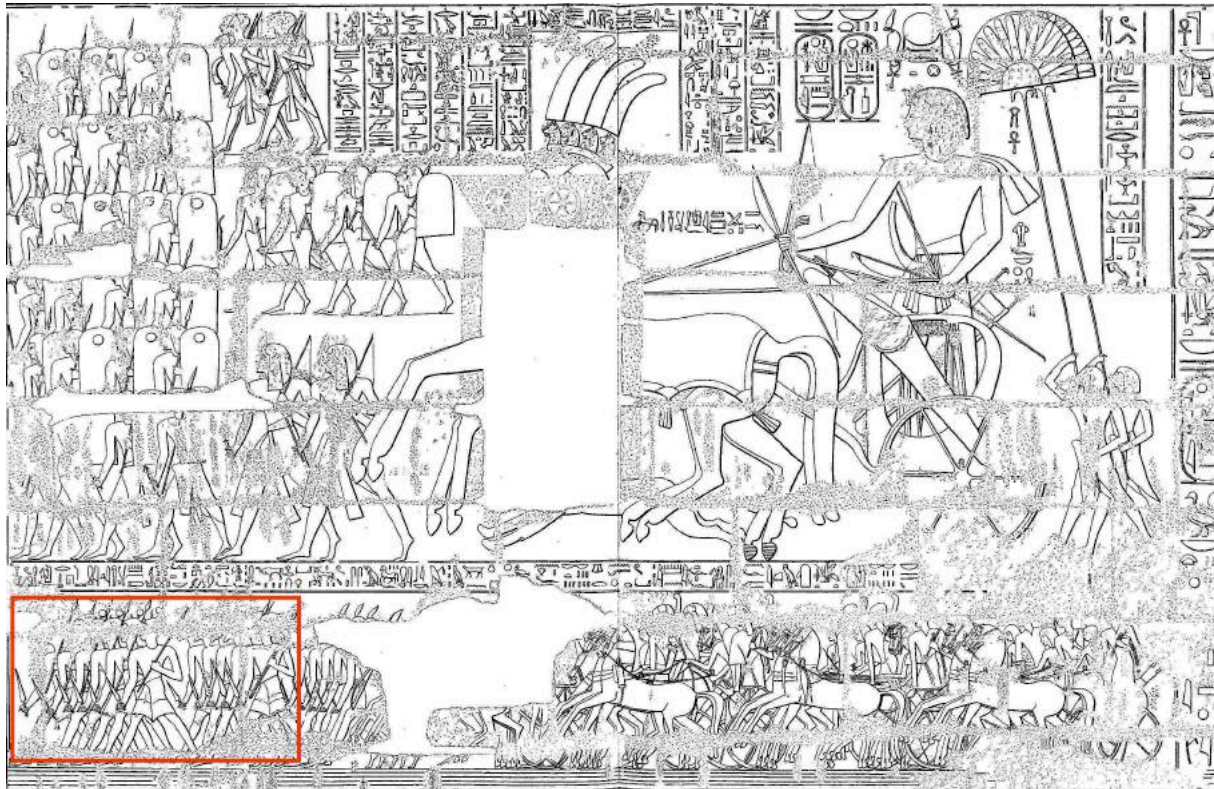


Fig. 13. Sherden warriors accompanied by Ramesses III, the Egyptian troops and the other foreign auxiliaries on the march to Djahy (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 31).

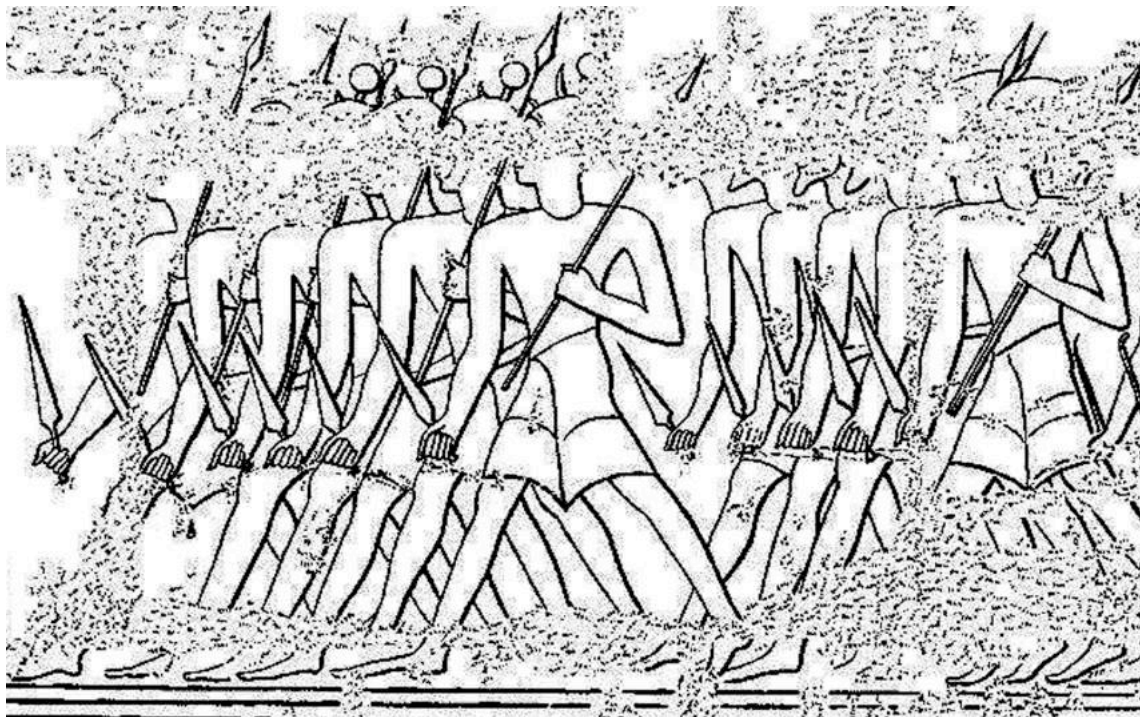


Fig. 14. Sherden warriors on the march to Djahy against the Sea Peoples with other foreign auxiliaries in the Egyptian army during the reign of Ramesses III (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 31).

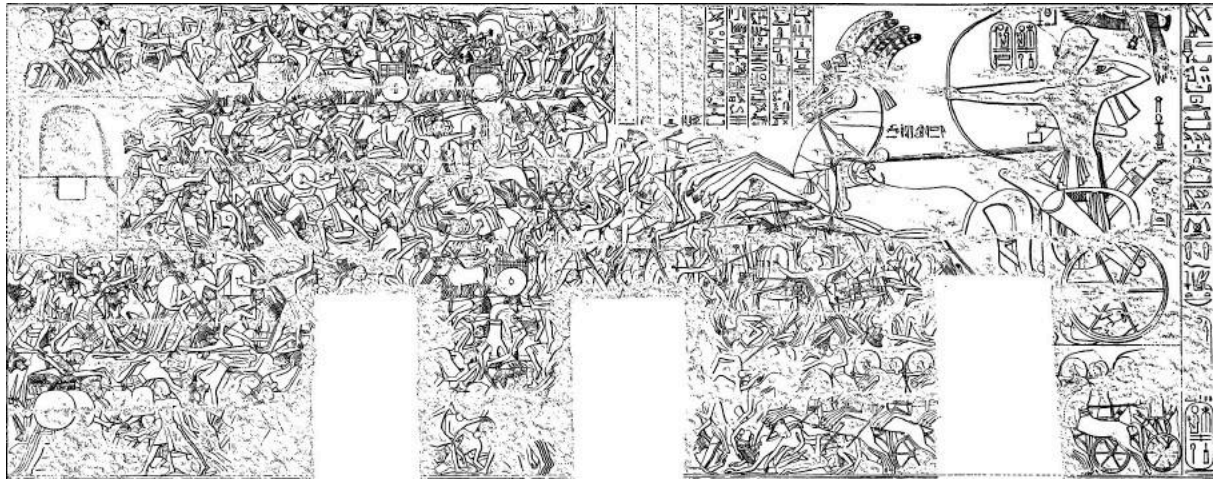


Fig. 15. Ramses III in the battle with the land forces of the Sea Peoples accompanied with his Egyptian troops and Sherden auxiliaries (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 32).

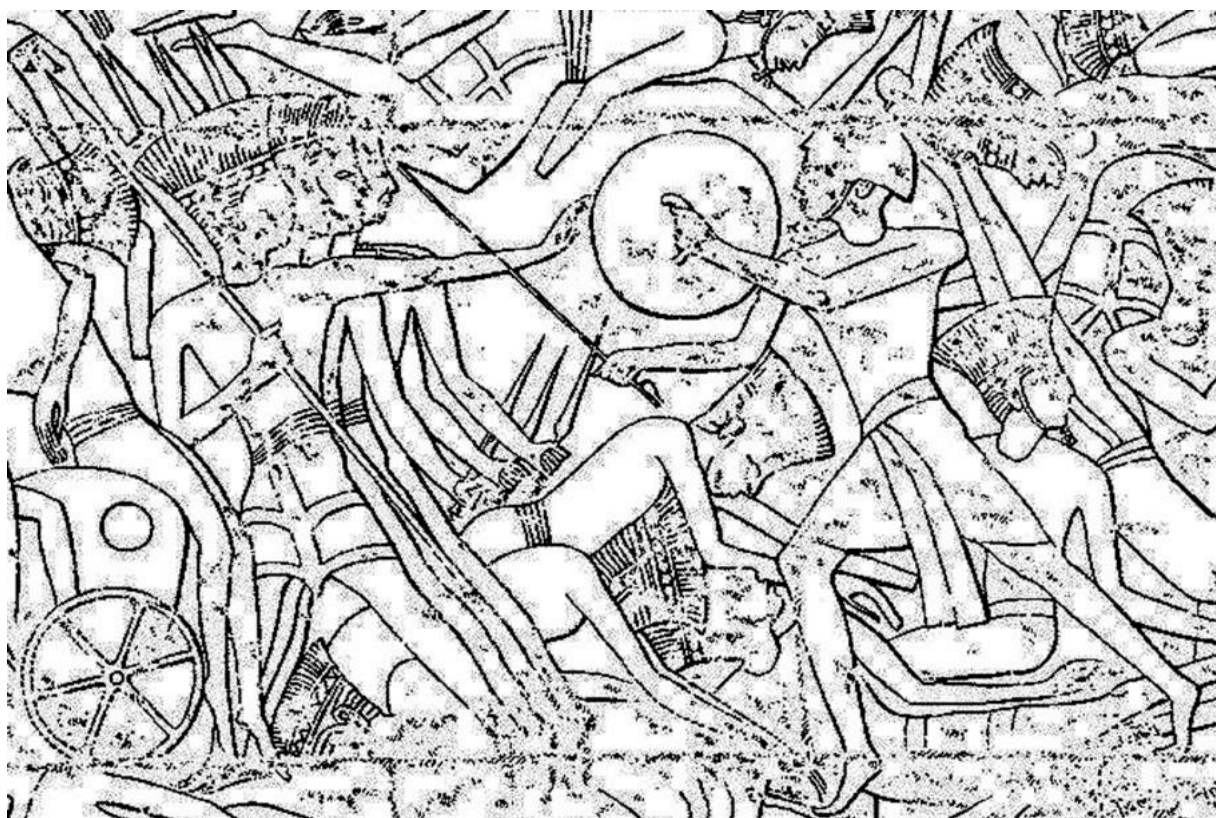


Fig. 16. A Sherden warrior belonging to the Egyptian army fights against the Sea Peoples in the Land Battle of year 8 of Ramses III (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 32).

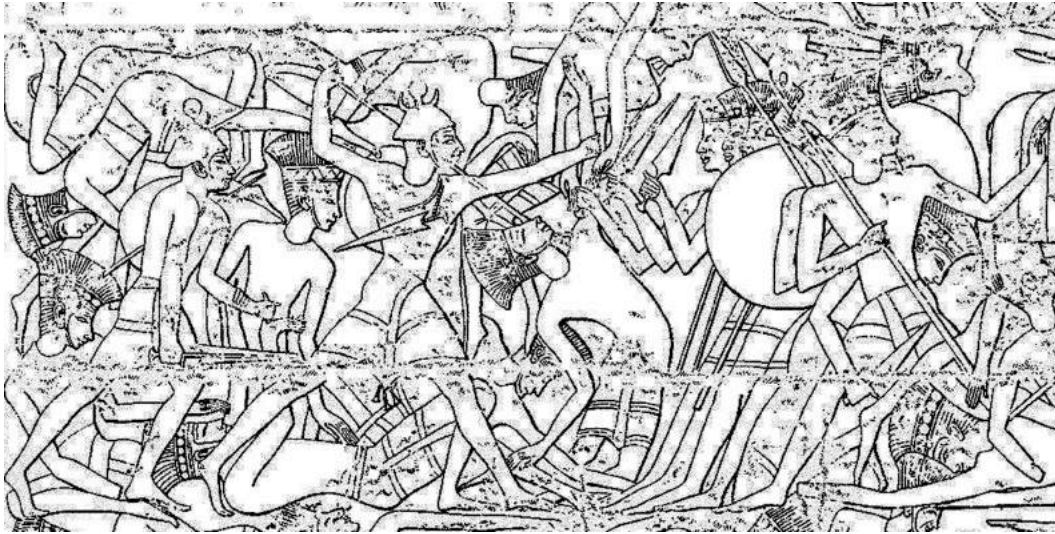


Fig. 17. Sherden warriors belonging to the Egyptian army fight against the Sea Peoples in the Land Battle of year 8 of Ramesses III (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 32).

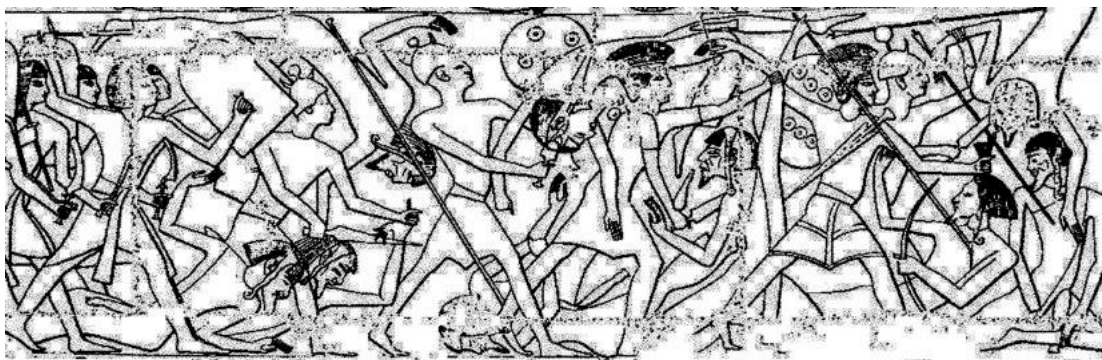


Fig. 18. Sherden warriors fight beside the Egyptian troops and other foreign auxiliary troops against the Libyans in the Second Libyan war of Ramesses III (temple of Medinet Habu; The Epigraphic Survey, *Medinet Habu II. Later Historical Records of Ramesses III*, OIP 9, Chicago, 1932, pl. 72).

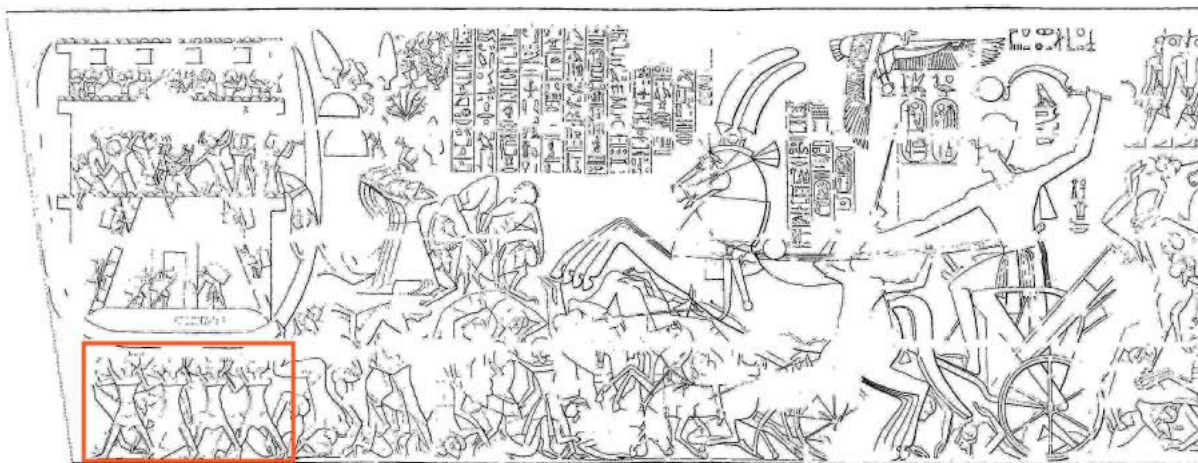


Fig. 19. Ramesses III storming the town of Tunip accompanied by his Egyptian and auxiliary Sherden troops (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 88).

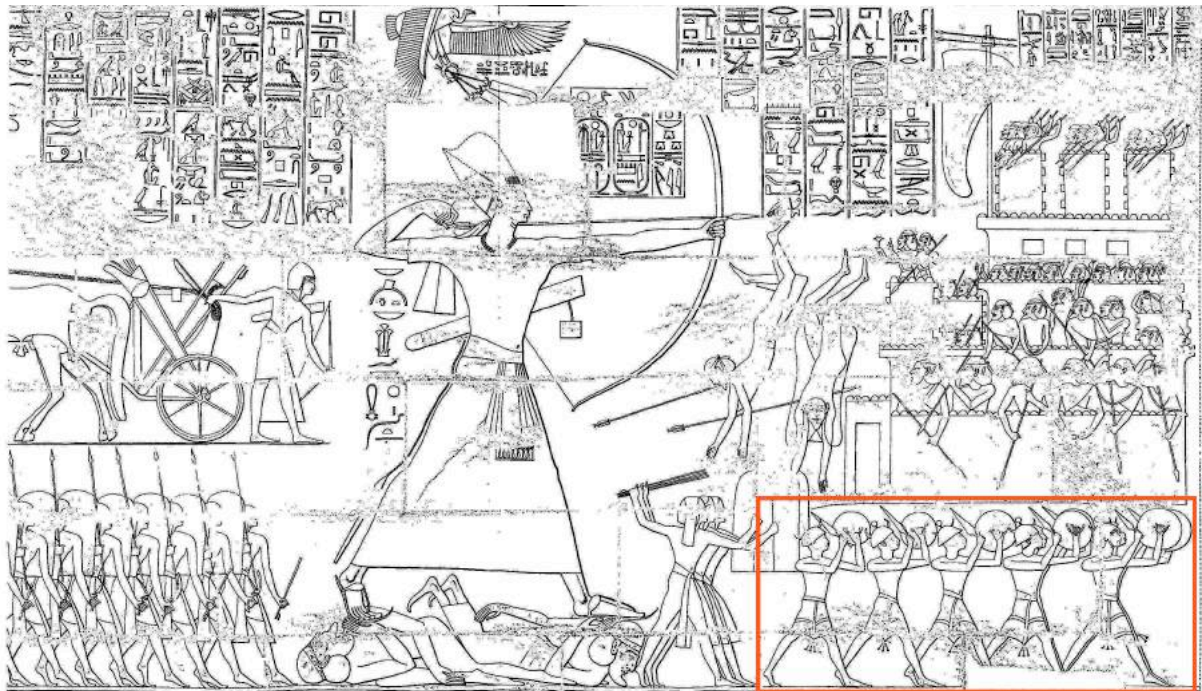


Fig. 20. Ramesses III storming a fortress in Amurru accompanied by his Egyptian and auxiliary Sherden troops (temple of Medinet Habu; *ibid.*, pl. 94).