Warfare in Ancient Mesopotamia

Focus question (use this to guide your interaction with the text):

How did Meso warfare tactics change over time?

The armies of the ancient Near East began as loose groups of foot soldiers who fought with stone weapons. This changed over a period of several thousand years. By the first millennium B.C. (900s-100s B.C.) the armies of empires were large, organized forces that combined several different kinds of fighting units. These latter-day soldiers were armed with a variety of weapons and used animals to strike quickly and powerfully. Throughout the ancient period, however, armies had three primary goals: to defend the homeland, to conquer other lands, and to put down rebellions to preserve empires.

EARLY ARMIES

The first armies were relatively small forces formed by the early city-states. They might protect the people’s crops from raids by nomads or fight with soldiers from another city over control of precious water resources. The impressions made by cylinder seals dating from about 3200 B.C. show that soldiers used the same weapons as hunters—clubs, spears, and bows and arrows. Most weapons were made of stone and wood, but after about 3000 B.C., they began to be made of bronze.

Mesopotamia

By the middle of the third millennium B.C. (2000s B.C.) armies were better organized and equipped. The Royal Standard of Ur, an inlaid panel discovered in southern Mesopotamia and dating from around 2500 B.C., has provided some clues to military advances. It shows an army made of columns of infantry who wore helmets and cloaks and carried spears. The standard also shows that this army included chariots. Early chariots were four-wheeled vehicles pulled by wild asses. These chariots were heavy and slow because their WHEELS were made of solid wood.

The stela of the Vulture, a relief that dates from about 2450 B.C., shows how these early armies fought. This stela shows Eannatum I, king of the city-state of Lagash, leading his army of foot soldiers forward. The soldiers, who are helmeted and carry spears and axes, are formed into a phalanx. This formation
was used throughout the ancient world for more than 2,000 years. In a phalanx, soldiers are grouped into a block and march forward in a tight formation.

Most fighting took place at close range. Armies would form in the open, and the attacking force would march forward with spears held low. Archers, whose weapons had longer range, formed behind the line of battle. They fired on enemy forces to provide cover for their own advancing troops.

The early armies were recruited when needed. A new development in military thinking came under SARGON I, who built the Akkadian empire around 2350 B.C. Sargon had a permanent army, a small, well-trained force that helped him win his conquests. This army was completely dependent on the king—even for food. In this way, Sargon hoped to ensure the complete loyalty of his soldiers. He also changed military strategy, favoring the use of several groups of soldiers spread out across the field of battle rather than large numbers in phalanxes.

HITTITE POWER

Around the 1500s B.C., a new force arose in the ancient Near East. This was the Hittites of Anatolia (present-day Turkey). The Hittites were able to build an empire largely because of their use of two innovations in technology. They began using iron weapons, and they turned chariots into a more important fighting force.

The Hittite Army

Like Sargon, the Hittites had a permanent army. A Hittite king would call on this army in situations that did not require large numbers of troops or that needed a quick response. If more troops were needed, he drafted civilians into the army. He could also call on individuals who had been given land in exchange for the pledge to serve when needed. Allies and conquered territories were also encouraged—or required—to supply troops.

The Hittite army was highly organized, with officers of various ranks commanding units of different sizes. As commander in chief, the Hittite king took an active role in all military decisions. Discipline was strongly enforced. Officers and soldiers alike were required to inform the king of disloyalty or desertion. In fact, an officer who failed to hand over a deserter had to die with him.
The most important and prestigious branch of the Hittite army was the chariotry. Designed to provide a moving platform for archers, chariots took an active part in combat. Hittite chariots were superior to those of other peoples. They had light spoked wheels and were pulled by horses—which were stronger and faster than asses. As a result, the Hittite chariotry was faster than other chariot forces of the time.

**ARMIES OF EMPIRES**

In the first millennium B.C., several large empires were formed in the ancient Near East. Well-armed and well-organized armies made the creation of these empires possible.

**The Assyrian Empire**

The first of these mighty empires was that of Assyria. By the 600s B.C., this empire of warriors held the area from the Nile River in the west to Iran in the east and from Arabia in the south to the Caucasus Mountains in the north. Like the Hittites, the Assyrians had a highly organized military structure. The king was commander in chief of the army, and below him were various ranks of officers. Every Assyrian male had an obligation to perform military service when called upon. Assyrian queens may have played a part in military affairs as well.

The size of the Assyrian army steadily grew over the centuries. By the 600s B.C., the army numbered in the hundreds of thousands, making it perhaps the largest standing army of the ancient Near East. As Assyria conquered new territories, it pulled males from these new lands into its army. The Assyrians also employed large numbers of mercenaries (soldiers for hire, often from other nations).

The Assyrian army consisted of infantry, chariotry, and cavalry. The foot soldiers were divided into heavy and light infantry. The heavy infantrymen, who wore shields and chest armor, carried double-bladed pikes and swords. The light infantry had no armor and only wicker shields. Because these soldiers carried lighter equipment, they could move more quickly. Because they were armed with bows, they could strike from a distance.

Under the Assyrians, the cavalry replaced the chariotry in importance. The cavalry, composed of soldiers on horseback, was cheaper to maintain than a chariot force and provided a greater proportion of quick, mobile fighters per horse. Horses could also be used in more uneven terrain than could chariots. Changes in the design of bridles made it possible for cavalry troops to use weapons more
effectively while riding. The number of cavalrymen steadily increased until they largely replaced the chariot force.

Another important part of the Assyrian army was its engineers. These soldiers specialized in such tasks as building bridges and roads to ease the army’s advance into new territory. They also worked on the battering rams and other machines used to break down the walls and gates of enemies’ cities.

Although they had strong armies and skilled engineers, Assyrian rulers knew that sieges and pitched battles required time, energy, and manpower. Whenever possible, they preferred trying to persuade the inhabitants of an area to surrender without a fight. First they tried diplomacy. If that failed, the Assyrians surrounded a city and shouted to the people inside, encouraging them to surrender. Refusals were followed by attacks, often against a few small cities at first. Once a city was captured, the Assyrians committed extreme acts of cruelty and brutality. They looted and burned buildings and raped, mutilated, and murdered their victims. Ancient artworks show the severed heads of defeated soldiers hanging from trees as a warning to others. News of this brutality was often effective in persuading other areas to surrender rather than suffer the same fate.

### Historical Propaganda

Historians often have difficulty determining the size of ancient armies. Written records are questionable because they may reflect the views of either the victors or the vanquished, and both sides had reason to exaggerate. Victors might overstate the size of their enemy to make their victory appear even greater. The defeated would do the same, making a defeat seem more justified because of the overwhelming odds. Thus, sources claiming that Hittite armies contained 25,000 chariots are almost certainly untrue. Feeding and maintaining so many horses during a military campaign would have been next to impossible. What was the real size of these and other military forces? Historians can only guess.

---