

The Development of Horses in Ancient Egypt - Giddyup!

Horses revolutionized transportation, trade, and warfare. Central Asia, an ideal environment for horses to thrive, was the location of the first domestication of horses about forty-five thousand years ago. Settlers from the East brought horses to Ancient Egypt in the Eighteenth Century BCE. Egyptians used horses for war, hunting, and ceremonial purposes. The great war chariots revolutionized warfare, fueling a new golden age. Meanwhile, they did not use horses for everyday transportation or farming purposes.

Domestication of Animals

The domestication of animals was a landmark moment in the development of human civilization. Animals served a variety of benefits. They provided food, companionship, labor, transportation, and protection. Civilization meant warfare. Animals became tools of war as well.

Horses have long been symbols of power, strength, friendship, and grace. They were fundamental tools of warfare until the 20th Century. The importance of horses in warfare is shown in the famous biblical scene of the pharaoh chasing after Moses:

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

A chariot was a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by horses. Historians estimate this scene to have taken place around 1250 BCE. Let us take a deep dive into horses in Ancient Egypt.

Horses and Humans

Horses were alive millions of years ago. They traveled into the Americas over the same land bridge in Alaska that indigenous Americans eventually used as an ancient highway. Stone Age humans found horses fascinating. They were the top animals depicted in cave art.

The first human civilizations did not domesticate horses, even as they took advantage of the services of dogs, sheep, cattle, and other animals.

Horses largely died out at the end of the Ice Age. Horses still thrived on the steppes of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where short grasses and shrubs grow on vast, dry stretches of land. About forty-five hundred years ago, humans in this region began to domesticate horses. Horses proved to be a game changer:

Horses were an order of magnitude faster than many of the transport systems of prehistoric Eurasia, allowing people to travel, communicate, trade, and raid across distances that would have previously been unthinkable.

A fundamental step forward involved the development of the wheel in Mesopotamia, located in the modern-day Middle East. By around 2000 BCE, the war chariot became a fearsome weapon.

Horses Come To Egypt

Ancient Egypt became a united kingdom over five thousand years ago. Horses, however, came thanks to a time they wished to forget.

Horses were not native to Egypt. Semitic people from the East arrived in Egypt in the 18th Century BCE. These "rulers of foreign lands" (*Hyksos* in Greek) began to challenge the authority of the native Egyptians. Egyptians eventually drove them out hundreds of years later.

The Hyksos might have lived in the times of the Bible stories of Joseph and his brothers. Historians are more sure that these "foreign invaders," demonized by later Egyptian leaders, brought horses and chariots with them. Egyptians knew a good thing when they saw it.

Technological Advances

One of the first depictions (about 1525 BCE) of horses in Ancient Egypt is appropriately an image showing how the Hyksos were defeated. Egyptians improved the speedy but dangerous Hyksos war chariots. Egyptians developed a light, swift, and more manageable version.

The Egyptian chariot had two wheels drawn by two horses. Two men rode in the chariot. The driver steered while a warrior could safely shoot arrows and other weapons.

Another technological advancement was the yoke saddle. Stirrups came much later.

Egyptians also did not use horseshoes. Egyptian horses came in different colors, including brown and red. They were smaller than modern varieties.

Chariots revolutionized Egyptian warfare. They provided a mix of mobility, strength, and speed that served the same function as the blitzkrieg in German World War II warfare.

Horses in Egyptian Life

Horses were historically draught animals on farms and for transportation. Horse-drawn carriages and stagecoaches are familiar in American history.

Egyptian horses were expensive to maintain. A horse collar that made it easy to sit on a horse was unavailable. People used mules for transportation and oxen as draught animals.

Horses were status symbols for hunting, fighting, and ceremonial processions. They were symbols of elite status. Depictions of pharaohs often contained horses.

A carefully buried horse from three thousand years ago shows the special relationship that developed between Ancient Egyptians and horses. The tools of foreigners had become a significant part of Egyptian culture, helping them into a new golden age (the New Kingdom).

QUESTIONS:

1. How did horses revolutionize transportation, trade, and warfare according to the passage?
2. Where was the first domestication of horses believed to have taken place, and when did it occur?
3. In Ancient Egypt, what purposes were horses primarily used for, and what significance did they hold?
4. What is a chariot, and how did it contribute to the revolution in warfare in Ancient Egypt?
5. Why didn't the first human civilizations domesticate horses, even though they used other animals for various purposes?
6. What geographical regions allowed horses to thrive and be domesticated, and how did they impact human civilization?
7. How did the development of the wheel and war chariots affect the use of horses in warfare?
8. What role did horses play in Ancient Egyptian society, and why were they considered status symbols?