

The Rise & Fall Of Insect Empires

*And their surprising similarity
to human empires...*

The Jewish people know about empires. We have witnessed and withstood the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Communists and others. Indeed, every year during the Three Weeks, culminating in Tisha B'Av, we relive the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, the loss of sovereignty and the suffering that ensued under the rule of domineering empires.

However, even history's most barbaric empires—including modern-day ISIS's empire-in-the-making—can't compare to the barbarism of the insect empires beneath our feet, where mass killings, enslavement, brainwashing, exploitation of the weak and a host of other “niceties” are everyday occurrences.

Read about the terrifying yet fascinating world of insects and how their dominions compare to the likes of Pharaoh's in Ancient Egypt, Caesar's in Rome, Stalin's in the USSR, jihadists past and present, and others.



ISIS, the jihadist group whose fighters now control a vast swath of territory in Syria and Iraq, punctuated its astonishing rise with the declaration on June 29, 2014, of an Islamic state, a new “caliphate” to which Muslims everywhere must pay obedience. A new empire is taking shape before our eyes. This Islamic war of conquest is not significantly different than other Islamic tribal hordes in history riding over the horizon to take power, replete with unspeakable barbarities, tyranny, enslavement and subjugation of the surviving populace. It is a reminder of how much history has been permeated with wars of bloody conquest.

Humans have no monopoly on conquest, however. Long before people learned to conquer, insects were building empires with wars of aggression, enslavement and oppression. The human race claims dominion over the Earth, but even the most horrific and fantastic human exploits pale when compared to those of the warrior legions at our feet.

Earth’s original empire is the empire of the insects—an empire that still reigns supreme.

Invaders!

In the South African bush, *Microtermes* live in terror. This species of termites is hard working. They inhabit fallen branches that they carve into homes using soil and saliva. They are good neighbors... but they must be vigilant. For they live in the neighborhood of the *Matabele* ant (named after the Matabele tribe, a particularly fierce tribe of Zulu warriors).

At nearly 20 millimeters (0.79 inches) in length, these powerful predators are one of the world’s largest ants and are twice the size of a termite. A single *Matabele* ant delivers one of the most painful stings to humans, and a few such stings can put a man in bed for most of the day.

However, they are not interested in humans. They feast on termites and are always on a search for more...

A *Matabele* scout searches near a rotted branch. A termite guard near the entrance of



ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared a “caliphate” on June 29, 2014, hoping to establish a new Islamic empire.



Clad in black, ISIS followers have earned the reputation for merciless brutality... not unlike a marauding horde of black army ants...



In the insect world, epic battles take place every day, leading to the rise and fall of empires so vast it defies description. Here: army ants returning with the spoils of war...

its colony sees the scout’s shadow. It knows what that means. They have been discovered. War is coming—soon.

The guard sends a subterranean alarm that ripples through the termite colony. They

can do nothing, though, as the *Matabele* scout deploys pheromones—a special ant chemical—to mark the target and to highlight the path there. The scout returns to the main ant fort to recruit a raiding party. With a jolt of pheromones, a chemical message travels among the warriors. It’s a perfect time to attack, early in the day before the heat rises.

The *Matabele* raiding force consists of some 600 ants. They move out with the ominous, deliberate pace of a Roman legion. Like legionnaires, these ants wear armor. Their exoskeletons can withstand all but the harshest blows. They sting with highly toxic venom. But their heaviest weapon is their jaws that are able to rip opponents to shreds.

As they approach, a termite sentry is on patrol. A raider attacks. The battle begins.

The first wave of ants breaks the termite battlements. Then the smallest *Matabele* enter the cracks of the rotted branch and attack. They make relentless forays into the termites’ inner sanctuary. Heavier ant troops, some more than 2.5 centimeters long, line up waiting to finish off the victims and complete the grisly harvest.

Nevertheless, the termite warriors manning the colony perimeter are stout and smart. They employ a classic defense tactic: Against superior forces, seize and hold the narrow passage. Stand your ground. Come home with your shield... or on it.

The termite defenders never relent, despite the impossibility of their situation, sacrificing themselves to seal off the embattled bunker. Slowing the *Matabele* tide, they have allowed their comrades deep inside hidden chambers to organize a last-ditch defense.

However, the outcome is inevitable. Despite gallant efforts and strategic defenses, the termites are doomed. Even the formidable termite guards are no match for the raiders’ venomous stings.

The enemy finally breaks through. The ants stream forward, attacking with no mercy. In full retreat, some termites seek shelter—but there’s nowhere to hide.

For the ants, it’s a devils’ buffet: all you can kill, all you can carry. One raid can claim

some 4,000 victims. In a single day, a *Matabele* colony might send out three or four such raiding forces.

When the *Matabele* have all the dead termites they can manage, they head home. Soon the big ants will move their base to richer hunting grounds. But today, their young will feast like kings, fattened on the spoils of war.

Army Ants

1,000,000,000,000,000 (that’s one quadrillion) ants live on Earth! There are an estimated 14,000 species of ant. Perhaps none are more notorious than the some 200 species—inhabiting all parts of the globe—called “army ants.”

Army ants are aptly named. Living a nomadic existence, they are a 100% mobile battalion ruling their turf with massive



An artist’s rendition of fierce Zulu warriors. The *Matabele* ant was named after a particularly fierce tribe of Zulu warriors.



Artist’s impression of Julius Caesar with columns of Roman soldiers on the march.