

WHEN EMPIRES CLASH

TWELVE GREAT BATTLES IN ANTIQUITY



PATRICK HUNT



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When Empires Clash
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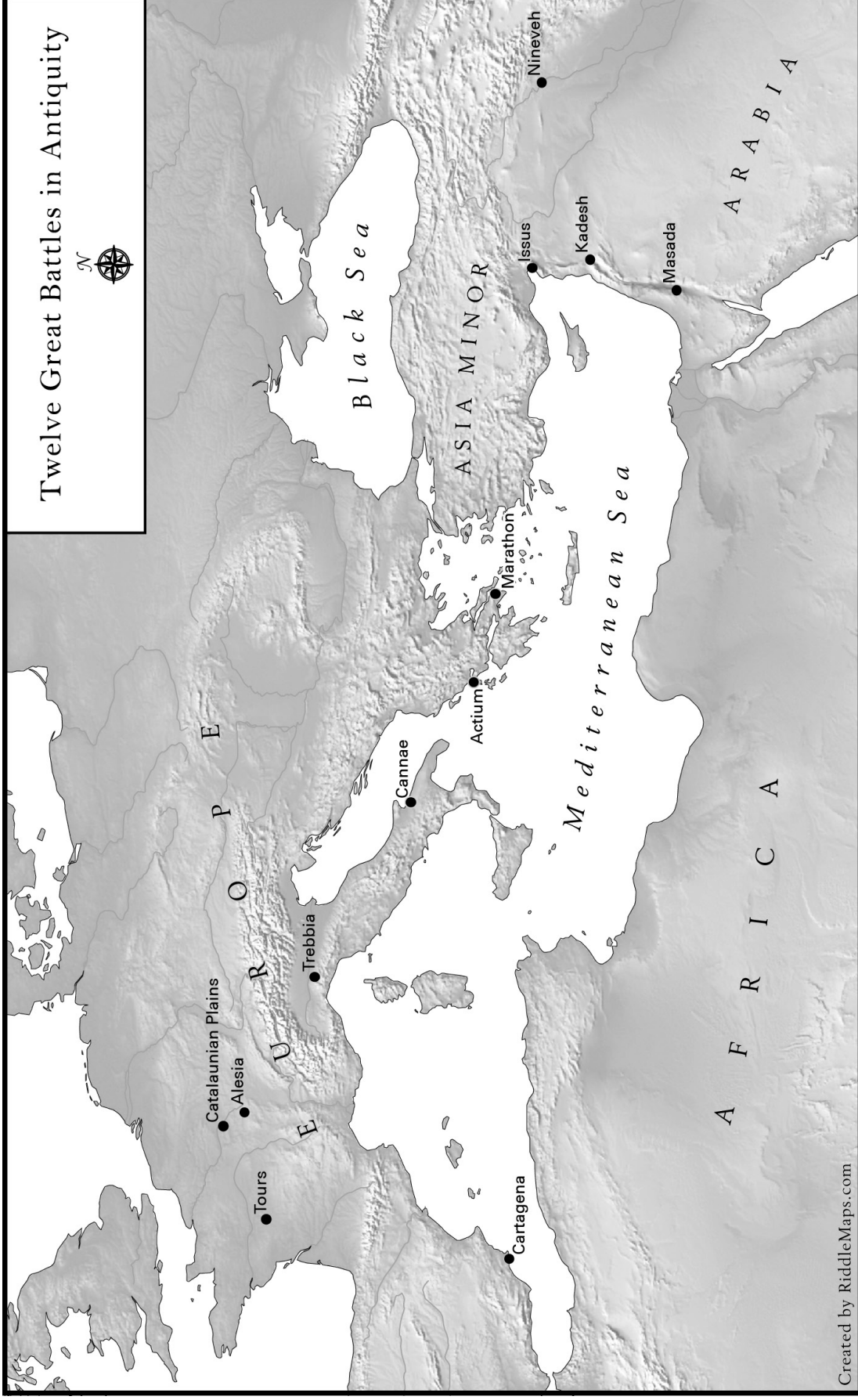
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Twelve Great Battles in Antiquity



PREFACE

“The predominance of the psychological over the physical, and its greater constancy, point to the conclusion that any theory of war should be as broad as possible. An intensive study of one campaign unless based on an extensive knowledge of the whole history of war is likely to lead us into pitfalls...Effective results in war have rarely been attained unless the approach has had such indirectness as to ensure the opponent’s unreadiness to meet it.” Sir B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*¹

HOW OFTEN HAS HISTORY pivoted around one great battle? When empires have clashed, how often have outcomes been surprises—a lack of readiness as Liddell Hart mentions above—or contrary to the expectations of a military opponent? Not all ancient battles changed history forever, but some stand out dramatically for multiple reasons. Whether for unusual tactics, unexpected outcomes, bold and brilliant command, quick adaptation to the changing field circumstances, prescient awareness of the “fog of war” or some other factor, some great battles changed the playing field forever, either bending the destiny of perceived military juggernauts and shocking the world in which they happened or forcing cultures to redraw the rules of engagement.

While there may not be any agreed on fixed list of ancient great battles among historians, the following selected dozen—although several are more properly sieges than battles—fit the criteria for bringing about substantial change in large scale contests between empires or great powers of their eras. From the Late Bronze Age to the Late Roman Empire and Early Medieval Era, this book examines in chronological order the Battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE), the Battle of Nineveh (612 BCE), the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE), the Battle of Issus (333

BCE), the Battle of Trebbia (218 BCE), the Battle of Cannae (216 BCE), the Battle of Cartagena (209 BCE), the Battle of Alesia (52 BCE), the Battle of Actium (31 BCE), the Battle of Masada (73 CE), the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains (451 CE), and the Battle of Tours (732 CE). One of the reasons I have selected these particular battles is that I have either been to these battle sites (9 of 12) or have studied archaeological material therefrom (not limited to but including the other 3 of 12). In a way, this is emulation of the ancient historian Polybius who cautioned against writing about places he had not been. That there is a Western bias and frame of reference is fully acknowledged.

Whether land engagements of infantry, cavalry, chariots, or of mixed elements or a naval battle, each of these great battles has been documented in antiquity by reliable sources and analyzed amply since. Not every battle summarized here is technically a clash of empire—especially since the Battle of Actium culminated a civil war in Rome unless the fragments of Ptolemaic Egypt might be considered as an empire—but the impact of each has been seen as important for varying reasons. Some of the ancient sources include the Greek historians Herodotus, Polybius, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus and Roman historians like Quintus Curtius Rufus, Julius Caesar, Livy, Cassius Dio and Josephus and contemporary Frankish chronicles like Gregory of Tours. While not formulaic but rather using a workable template, the chapter formats for each battle will include background, discussion of topography, major commanders, order of battle for both sides, battle chronology, unusual decisions, tactics, outcomes, and conclusions why each changed history. While each chapter on a specific battle may vary somewhat in length and focus given the different circumstances, there will also be both regional and specific local maps provided. Sources and outlooks from other commentary will be provided as endnotes; a selected bibliography is also provided in the end matter.

I humbly acknowledge individuals and organizations or academic institutions for support and encouragement. First, for wonderful mentoring, I am grateful to Professor David Stronach, then Chair of Near Eastern Studies at University of California, Berkeley, under whom I studied as Post-Doctoral Research Fellow 1992-94; additional thanks to Professor Susan Treggiari, then Chair of Classics at Stanford

University, who brought me to Stanford as a Visiting Scholar, continuing there with lectureships under a subsequent Chair, Professor Richard Martin, and related teaching through Professor Marsh McCall and Provost and Dean Dr. Charles Junkerman and Associate Dean Dr. Dan Colman. The National Geographic Society's Expedition Council is thanked for sponsoring fieldwork research with grants in 2007-2008 and subsequent assistance for visits to ancient battle sites in Europe, specifically France and Italy as well as speaking opportunities nationally on Hannibal and related research through National Geographic Learning. I also acknowledge many invited opportunities to speak recently on these or related battles, for example, at the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Museum "Great Battles" Lecture Series in 2013, the University of British Columbia's Parlitalia Hannibal event in 2014, and at the U.S. Naval War College in mid-June 2015 as well as during consecutive annual stints as a National Lecturer for the Archaeological Institute of America since 2009. I am grateful for graduate study at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Greece, where I visited all of the above battle sites in Greece. I know how fortunate I have been to study archaeology and conduct global fieldwork while a doctoral student at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London at the University of London. I express gratitude for the honor and opportunity as a National Lecturer for the Archaeological Institute of America (2009-2015) to speak on my Hannibal fieldwork conducted since 1994 in Europe. Also acknowledged is the Turkish Ministry of Culture for an invited lectureship in 2012 in Istanbul and to study some of the related Anatolian battle sites. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has also been instrumental in publishing some of my synopses of battle details via twelve entries in 2014 on the Second Punic War battles in the "Hannibalic War"; and thus I thank the encyclopedia's Executive Editor Theodore Pappas. The author also thanks Stanford University's deans for allowing him to regularly teach on these global events and military multiple times since 1992 when I first came to Stanford on post-doctoral appointments, also as a Visiting Fellow 2009-10 on Hannibal Studies and Cultural Diplomacy at Stanford's Hoover Institution for War and Peace. My conversations there with Victor Davis Hanson have been brief but

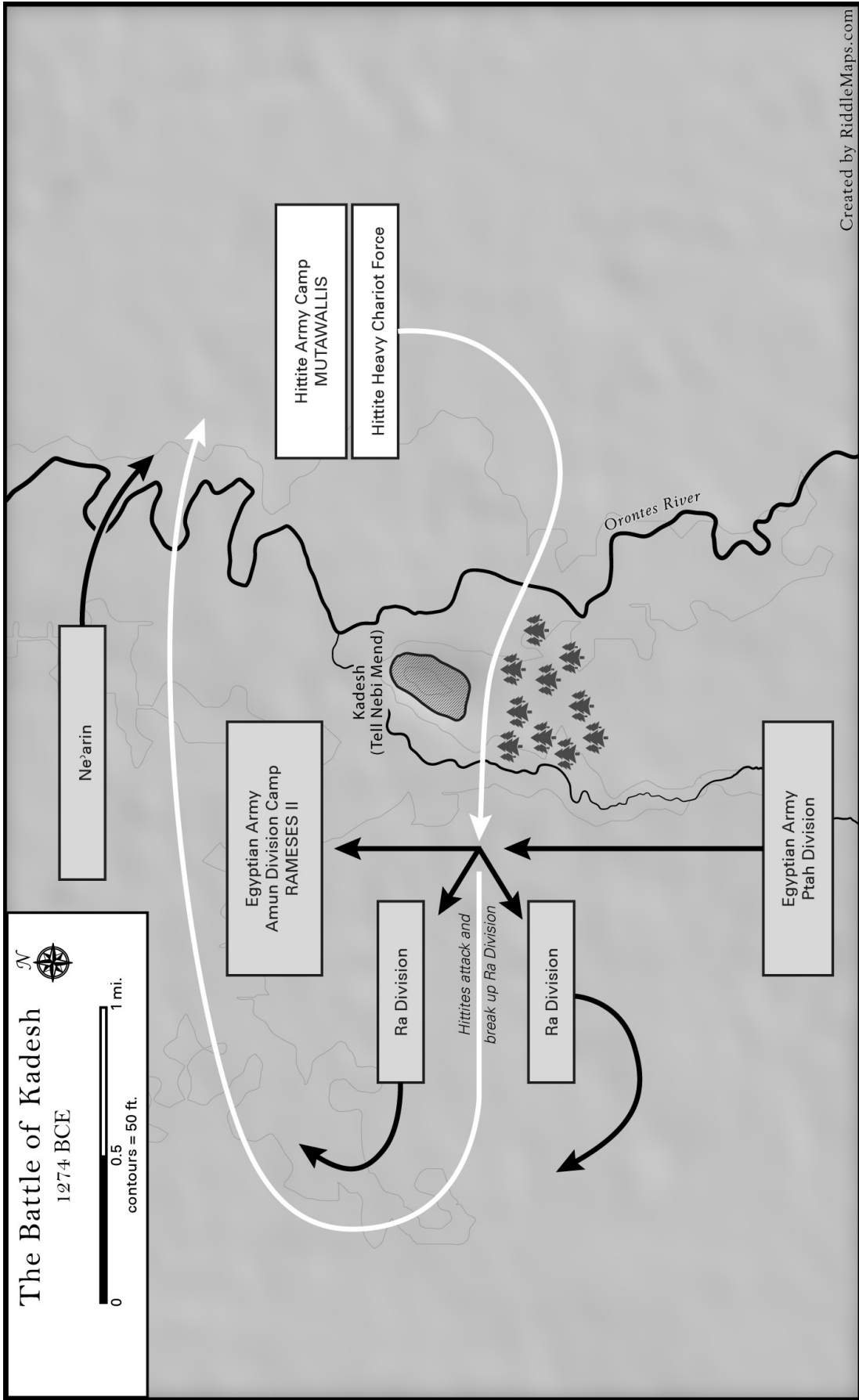
instructive as have been my discussions with Major General Robert Ostenberg, U.S. Army (ret.). I have somehow remained teaching at Stanford for the bulk of my academic career to the present (1993 through 2015). Thanks to A.D. Riddle for exceptional maps and to Jeffrey Shaw for editing. Last but not least, I thank my friend and the editor of this volume, Timothy Demy, Ph.D., at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, who has been a great encouragement and resource since our graduate days together.

Stanford, 2015

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CHAPTER

1

THE BATTLE OF KADESH



"It is a measure of the fascination exerted by the battle of Qadesh that nearly three and a quarter millennia after the event it still excites the interest of scholar and layman alike."²

BACKGROUND

STANDING ON THE BANK of the Orontes River on the modern Syro-Lebanese border one doesn't need to strain very hard in this flat landscape with the archaeological site's tell looming close by to imagine the sounds of the greatest battle ever fought up to that time more than three thousand years ago. Perhaps it is a little easier considering it is nearly as strategic a place today where modern Middle Eastern regimes and resistance forces still fight viciously over some of the same routes and territory. Like Megiddo far to the south in Israel where Rameses II must have passed en route to Kadesh this place seems to embody a global specter.

While the actual date may be arguable along with details, the ancient Battle of Kadesh is important for at least three reasons. It is the first ancient battle recorded in the Late Bronze Age for which we

have considerable documentation and may also be the largest battle ever staged between chariot forces in history. Furthermore, it also highlights the difficulty of accepting only ancient texts for historic events, illustrating the enigmatic differences between documents of two opposing empires and the material record because the outcome of this battle contrasts the “victory” of Egypt who claimed to win against the perceived continued occupation of the Hittites who apparently did not lose, as the battle was essentially a stalemate.

When ancient empires clashed over territory on their margins, claimed by both or with alliances shifting from one to the other, it may mark a time when one wanes and the other waxes or it may be just a temporary redrawing of borders and buffer zones. The Levant (in terms of modern geography around the region of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, northwestern Syria and southern Turkey) was often in that ambiguous sphere of influence of Egypt reaching north or of Mesopotamia reaching west. As such, regardless of current national identity, this region has often been termed “the Land Between”³ where each empire exercised hegemony back and forth along the Mediterranean Coast and the Euphrates watershed. Demonstrating whichever empire is dominant, such cultural influences show in the archaeological finds of ceramics, weapons, inscriptions, architecture, jewelry and even religion, among other imagery and material remains. This is certainly true for the Battle of Kadesh even when literary texts and archaeological finds tell somewhat different messages, in this case between Egypt and now the Hittites in Anatolia.

For background, some of the Amurru (or Amorite) people of Northwest Syria along the Orontes River had recently changed their vassalage from Egypt to the Hittites around 1300 BCE.⁴ The Orontes River was often a general boundary between competing empires and Kadesh here played the role of a buffer principality claimed by both the Hittites and Egypt. The Prince of Kadesh was one of these lords who possibly saw in his greater proximity to Anatolia than to Egypt that Egypt’s power over the Levant had waned considerably in the chaotic time between the Amenhoteps’ 18th Dynasty and the Ramessides’ 19th Dynasty—note that the tomb of Tutankhamen was forgotten in the interregnum upheavals.⁵ The long shadows of Thutmose I

(1493-82 BCE) and Thutmose III (1479-25 BCE) and their vigorous campaigns in this region were long gone. The Amarna Letters—naming Kadesh as *Qidshu* in its Semitic language—also tell of this decline of Egyptian sway in the region, as people like the Mitanni expanded in land Egypt had claimed for centuries and began to control the flow of trade. Prior correspondence from the fourteenth century BCE shows how Babylonians attempted to gain advantage over eroding Egyptian power in the area under the guise of pretended sycophancy.⁶ Pharaoh Seti I had tried to restore Egyptian sovereignty over Canaan and Syria and was temporarily successful.

The Prince of Kadesh had at first bowed to Seti—“opening the door for Pharaonic dominion to expand into Northern Syria”—and the militarily efficient Seti had subjugated Kadesh in a military campaign out of Egypt and Canaan to the Amurru between 1306 and 1289 BCE.⁷ Given the distance of Kadesh from Egypt and proximity to Hittite Anatolia, Seti may have made some form of treaty with the Hittites allowing Kadesh to be administered by them, although this would have likely given them greater financial gain from its important trade. Subsequently the Prince of Kadesh may not have renewed his allegiance to Seti’s successor Rameses II, possibly also being promised something by the Hittites for vassalage.⁸ In contested interpretation of the prior causes of war, whether or not the Prince of Kadesh precipitated the perceptions of a shift of allegiance and the battle that followed is not as important as the fact that Egypt and particularly its new dynamic pharaoh saw the immediate need to return this contested territory to the fold. Thus Rameses II marched four divisions north from the Delta of Egypt along the Levant coast in spring of 1274 BCE to the Orontes River, a distance of around 1000 miles.

DISCUSSION OF TOPOGRAPHY

Kadesh is a major tell or ancient occupation mound adjacent to the Orontes River on the Homs Plain, mostly agreed on as the archaeological site of Tell Nebi Mend in Syria near the modern border of Lebanon. Kadesh was important not only because it was adjacent to the Orontes River, itself a boundary between contested territories,

but also because it was a major hub of both east-west and north-south routes, north-south between Canaan and Anatolia as well as east-west Orontes-Euphrates trade routes between the Levant and Mesopotamia.⁹ Both Egyptian and Hittite powers must have perceived this vital location as a trade nexus.

The rich archaeological site of Kadesh spans many millennia from the Chalcolithic Period onward through the Bronze Age until the “Sea Peoples” destroyed the city around 1178 BCE. Peter Parr of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, University of London excavated Tell Nebi Mend.¹⁰ This author has also handled Bronze Age potsherds from Tell Nebi Mend and conversed with its excavator Peter Parr as a doctoral student at the Institute of Archaeology. The Bronze Age occupation site is mostly on the higher northern end of the tell; the Hellenistic and Roman occupation on the southern end. The ancient battle site itself was on the Homs Plain along the Orontes River but, according to most military historians, mostly just west of the river and the tell ¹¹ and south of the mostly modern artificial Lake Homs, therefore between the current lake and the high ancient tell with its buried city. The flat terrain on all sides of the ancient city was extremely important for the maneuvering of opposing forces of thousands of chariots.

MAJOR COMMANDERS

Pharaoh Rameses II (1303-1213 BCE) commanded the Egyptian forces, although the four divisions each had commanders, some named but not all. Several Egyptian princes were also present as was the grand vizier Paser. How many of the day-to-day battle decisions were made by Rameses remains unknown although his records at Karnak suggest his autonomy with the most important role of decision-making.

King Muwatallis II (circa 1295 to at least around 1272 BCE) commanded the Hittites, although again we cannot determine the hierarchical decision making process for engagements. Two of the princely brothers of King Muwatallis, including his successor Hattusili and possibly another brother Sapatur, the latter who seems to have died in battle, also held some form of command along with allied lords.

ORDER OF BATTLE

Although numbers and formations are debated, the main Egyptian army comprised around 20,000 soldiers and was divided into four main divisions, the Amun (Amen), the Re (Pireh), the Seth (Suteh) and the new Ptah.¹² The Egyptian infantry was divided into 20 companies called *sa* of between 200 to 250 men each, and these companies were further divided into units of 50; in order of battle the experienced soldiers (*menfyt*) were placed in front with recruits (*nefrut*) and reserves in the rear.¹³ Some Egyptian depictions on Theban tomb wall reliefs shows tightly packed infantry formations, well organized and in ranks of 8 by 11 men with shields and spears. The Egyptians had around 2,000 chariots in this total army, possibly divided into four groups of 500 light chariots, each manned by 2 including driver and archer. The rest of the Egyptian forces of around 18,000 men were mostly infantry and support or supply forces. Considering the great distance traveled, Rameses also must have employed ox-drawn carts in a revolutionary logistical supporting role,¹⁴ likely for supplies. While slow, the oxcart made such long-distance supply much more feasible for a large marching army. The Egyptian chariots were apparently also owned or operated by fighting nobles—partly because war-horses were very expensive—and many came from the royal stables. The Egyptians also had Sherden mercenaries, possibly some Nubians and an ambiguous local force of Amurru called Ne'arin (or Nahrin). Egyptian infantry had long shields with curved tops, short stabbing dagger-swords as well as curved sickle swords called *khopesh* and their archers used composite bows.¹⁵

The Hittites fielded around 35,000 soldiers including allies and had at least 2,000-2,500 heavy assault chariots usually manned by 3 most likely including driver and 2 archers (or two spearmen or one of each), although many details including number of chariots are debated.¹⁶ Bryce maintains the principal weapon of Hittite chariots was bow and arrow.¹⁷ Hittite infantry was equipped with arms including bows, quivers of 20-30 arrows and also spears—some up to 7 feet long—and the primary offensive equipment was a short stabbing sword for close quarters—although they also had long swords—while the primary defensive equipment was the large rectangular

shield covering from neck to thigh, possibly also with curved tops. Hittite *'thr'* warriors at Kadesh are shown in Egyptian reliefs with long thrusting spears and short stabbing daggers.¹⁸ The Hittites would possibly also have had short, curved sickle swords. While their shields were heavily laminated wood and leather like the Egyptian shields, all the weapons in the field of battle would have been bronze,¹⁹ since only incremental weapon iron would have been available at this time even though the Hittites were pioneers in ironworking.²⁰ The Hittites also had up to nineteen allies included in their forces, among them the kings of Aleppo, Carchemish, Ugarit and Wilusa (Troy) and their armed supporters along with some mercenaries. Since the horse originally came into the Ancient Near East from Central Asia, Anatolian horses bred from Wilusa were later even acknowledged in Homeric literature in the Iliad with Hector's epithet as tamer of horses and the symbol of the Trojan Horse.²¹

BATTLE CHRONOLOGY

There were several phases to the battle itself. Many details are debated since the principal account is the propagandized Egyptian one, but the main sequence of events is accepted. Muwatallis and the Hittite army had arrived earlier at Kadesh and had hidden behind the city, hoping to ambush the Egyptians. It partly worked because the Egyptians "captured" two Hittite spies who pretended to be Shasu nomads (or maybe were Shasu but were still spying for the Hittites). The spies dissembled to the Egyptians saying the Hittite army was far away in Aleppo about 120 miles distant and the army and king kept their distance out of fear of Rameses.

Out of overconfidence or pride, Rameses fell for the ruse and, hoping to capture Kadesh without a fight, quickly led his Amun contingent of chariots and recklessly spread out his forces over a long line, splitting them up where they were too far apart to be effective if attacked by a larger force. The capture and torture of two more Hittite spies revealed the enemy's deception and proximity but it was too late except to send messengers to the dispersed divisions to quickly assemble. The Hittites—whose assault strength lay in just

such strategies of ambush and surprise sorties, “masters of strategies and tactics”²²—had hoped something like this would develop to fracture the unity of Egyptian forces. They let the first division of Amun pass by and then swept out of hiding behind the eastern side of the Qadesh tell.²³

Rameses had discovered his mistake after the second Hittite captives had been tortured to reveal real Hittite positions, but before the Egyptians could gather, a large body of Hittite chariots swept into the completely surprised and exposed Re division of Egypt, wreaking havoc and destruction as well as dispersing them. To a certain degree the Hittite surprise was effected not only by the cover of the tell but also a vegetation cover of sufficient trees along the Orontes.²⁴ Survivors from the Re fled to the Amun camp where the pursuing Hittite chariots also panicked the Amun division and began sacking the Amun camp, although the beleaguered Amun infantry quickly formed a shield wall and while facing heavy losses, managed to hold. With the Amun fighting Rameses himself was apparently isolated in his chariot with his noble bodyguard of chariots and Sherden bodyguard, surrounded and nearly captured. Having realized the weakness of his hastiness, Rameses fought until he could rejoin his main Amun force. Rameses’ primary advantage was the mobility of his chariots. In the main, this would have been a humiliating defeat for Egypt but the Egyptian Ne’arin local reinforcements suddenly arrived on the rear of the plundering Hittites and scattered them.

There is considerable debate about exactly when in this first phase the Ne’arin came to the rescue and the tide turned as well as how many Egyptians were slaughtered but all agree the arrival of these Egyptian reinforcements saved Rameses. The timing of the multiple Hittite surges in several thousands of chariots is also ambiguous but it is also accepted that at least main surges of Hittite chariots attacked the Egyptians, with the first being more successful. Luckily, Rameses managed to avoid capture and rallied his assembling Egyptian light chariots and drove off the heavier Hittite chariots, many of which crashed and their forces perished. The last phase of this battle turned into an Egyptian rout of the Hittites. The surviving Hittites who had attacked retreated to the Orontes River where the bulk of the Hittite forces

and reserve chariots had waited with King Muwatallis. No doubt some unhorsed Hittite charioteers drowned recrossing the river, although the Egyptian account highly glorifies Rameses with the first day of battle being a rout of the entire Hittite army after the surrounded Rameses almost singlehandedly repulsed his enemy with the divine aid of the god Amun, which full victory cannot be a reliable source.

Again inconclusive in number of forces, a second day of battle—if it took place—may have been more of skirmishing forces but it is possible the main infantry masses of both armies, up to 35,000 soldiers, may have never actually met, although it seems fairly certain the full Amun division of both chariots and infantry was engaged and held off multiple Hittite chariot charges; the surprised Re division took the brunt of the Hittite attack and may have been partly destroyed. Both sides suffered fairly significant losses although a head count is almost impossible to make. It appears Egyptian infantry of the Re division may have been the heaviest casualty on that side and Hittite heavy chariots seem to have been the main loss of that side. Whatever the case regarding the full armies engaging or not, Rameses was unable to lay siege to the city of Kadesh and take it because of the bulk of the nearby Hittite army. The main objective of his campaign frustrated, Rameses himself retreated with his army southward toward Damascus, then returning eventually back to Egypt.

UNUSUAL DECISIONS AND TACTICS

Marching a thousand miles north was an ambitious undertaking and ultimately futile for the Egyptians in the long term as they never regained a permanent foothold in Amurru. Hittite espionage worked with the Shasu ruse making Rameses think the Hittite army was far away. Lacking good tactical information and failing to send out scouts, the impetuosity of Rameses in not having confirmation of where the Hittites were located led to his hasty advance, his dispersion of his divisions and the almost rout of half his army in the Re and Amun divisions. Conversely, the over commitment of the Hittites to pillaging the Amun and Re camps weakened the extent of damage once the Egyptian reinforcements of Ne'arin arrived. In fact, had it not been

for a lack of discipline especially on the part of the mercenary Hittites greedy for loot and their Ne'arin allies, the Egyptians would have likely entirely lost the battle.²⁵ Reversing the tide, Rameses regrouped the Amun division and his lighter, more mobile chariots—with the added Re division chariots who had fled—pursued the heavier Hittite chariot force into the Orontes. Here the initial advantage the Hittites had achieved was lost. Whether or not the total Hittite army outnumbered the Egyptian army, chariot mobility appears to be one of the most important Egyptian assets.

OUTCOMES

Despite Egyptian claims that the Hittites asked for a truce to end the Battle of Kadesh, the truth is that the Egyptian attempt to regain hegemony in Syria failed and Kadesh remained a Hittite outpost. Within a decade or so the Egyptian presence in Amurru was gone forever, maintaining only their Levant presence in Canaan. This fact of Egyptian absence after Kadesh is one of the strongest evidences that Rameses and the Egyptians propagandized their “victory” beyond credibility.

The “myth-riddled”²⁶ Egyptian documents for the Battle of Kadesh exist in the bombastic *Pentaur Poem* (Papyrus Sallier III) praising Rameses and the so-called “Bulletin” inscriptions illustrated by wall reliefs in Karnak (Luxor) and repeated with variations at other Egyptian loci like Abu Simbel and the Ramesseum.²⁷ The Hittite battle version existed at the capital Hattusas (Bogazkale) but records no such Egyptian victory, only that the Egyptians retreated. Versions that Rameses had recorded at home are telling, “Amun...caused every distant land to see my victory through my strong arm,” hyperbolically claiming 100,000 Hittite deaths and that the Hittites pleaded for peace:

“Then my majesty relented in life and dominion being like Mont at his moment when his attack his done...My majesty let them (Egyptians) hear these words which the vile chief of Khatti (Hittites) had written to me. Then they said with one voice, ‘Very excellent is peace, O Sovereign

our Lord! There is no blame in peace when you make it. Who could resist you on the day of your wrath? My majesty commanded to hearken to his words and I moved in peace southwards.”²⁸

But the number of deaths reported by Rameses is certainly an error of propagandizing. Nevertheless we do not know how many casualties in total or for each side of the battle.

Without full contradiction, the above Egyptian text does add this curious phrase: “There is no blame in peace when you make it”—why should there be any blame at all?—and that Rameses had made peace, not the Hittites who only requested it. Apparently the perceived sovereignty of Rameses had to take full credit for any “response” even in peace.

Another of the most important outcomes took place at least 15 years later around 1259 BCE, documenting the oldest known treaty in history between Pharaoh Rameses II and Muwatallis’ successor brother King Hattusili II. A clay tablet at the Istanbul Museum of Archaeology is the extant evidence for this earliest treaty. While small, the extant clay tablet seen by the author on several occasions and always surrounded by a crowd in Istanbul is also testimony to the importance of Kadesh.

CONCLUSIONS

The Battle of Kadesh around 1274 BCE²⁹ was ultimately a stalemate. Only able to claim a moral victory in his own personal prowess and avoidance of capture, Rameses II derived personal satisfaction rather than true military success and extension of Egyptian territory into Syria. The Hittites did not lose any territory but neither did they defeat Rameses. Neither side demonstrated full military superiority, but the Battle of Kadesh remains important for several reasons. It highlights the difference between propaganda and unbiased reporting in ancient history, making a vital exercise in historiography. It appears to be the first great clash of two far-flung empires where armies met from homelands over a thousand miles distant; even greater if we

measure the distance between the origins of much of the armies' leadership in the Nile Delta and Hattusas (Bogazkale) at a distance of around 2,000 miles. It was probably the first and largest chariot battle in history and is the first great ancient battle to be documented with any derivable certainty.

