The Battle of Qadesh: Historical Truth or Royal Propaganda?

Diana Liesegang investigates whether Rameses II's version of this famous battle may hold a grain of truth about the actual event.

In c. 1274 BC one of the most famous military events in the history of the Ancient Near East took place: the Battle of Qadesh. The Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II led his army to the fortress of Qadesh on the Orontes River (in what is now western Syria), with the intention of confronting the Hittite King Muwatallis II.

At this time, Egypt and Hatti were the leading major powers and were competing for control of the Syria-Palestine region. The Egyptian empire had for a long time been the dominant power in the Near East, following the successful imperial policies of warrior pharaohs such as Thutmose III and Sety I, but in the late Bronze Age, the kingdom of Hatti rose to become a mighty political rival and military power.

The centre of the Hittite empire lay in Anatolia and the Hittite kings ruled from the capitol of Hattusa, today known as Bogazkoy (in Turkey). They began expanding southwards into Syria-Palestine, and when the former Egyptian provinces of Qadesh and Amurru were conquered, Rameses II was forced to take military action. In the fifth year of his reign he led his army of about twenty thousand soldiers and two thousand chariots to Qadesh.

The Hittite king Muwatallis II was known to be a great soldier and statesman, with more military experience than the young Egyptian king. His army outnumbered the Egyptians, with about thirty-seven thousand soldiers and three thousand five hundred chariots. But tactical mistakes were made by both sides, and there was no clear winner at the end of the confrontation. Some sixteen years after the battle, a truce was called and a peace treaty agreed between Rameses and the new Hittite king Hattusilis.

Royal Propaganda
Back in Egypt, Rameses II began an extraordinary campaign of propaganda to present himself as the invincible warrior king. The royal iconographic programme in the
temples of Karnak, Luxor, Abydos, the Ramesseum and Abu Simbel shows the king enjoying a great victory at Qadesh, conquering the foreign foe and winning the war between Egypt and Hatti. These reliefs make the battle (at least the Egyptian version of it) one of the best documented events in the history of Ancient Egypt.

However, a closer look does reveal some of the realities of the battle. The iconic scenes show the impressive Rameses II as the brave and powerful king on the battlefield, surrounded by many foreign soldiers. Pharaoh dominates all scenes and is the most significant person in the story, as shown by his large size. Unusually, the Hittite king Muwatallis II is also presented in a larger size, although he never appears as a brave warrior; he is instead always shown observing the battlefield from his chariot, surrounded by his soldiers.

There is another important change to the usual royal Egyptian battle iconography. The Egyptian pharaoh is usually depicted smiting his enemies, who are shown in an attitude of fear and submission, pleading for grace, or lying dead on the battlefield. But in the Qadesh scenes, the representation of the Hittite army is absolutely extraordinary, depicted as a powerful army, with numerous soldiers, chariots, weapons and horses. They are shown standing nearby the fort of Qadesh in correct order, observing the fight and waiting for a sign to attack from Muwatallis II. The Hittites are therefore shown as equal adversaries to Rameses II, which gives us a hint of the real situation at Qadesh.

These images are accompanied by two different texts known as the ‘Poem’ and the ‘Bulletin’. The Poem contains a long version of the Egyptian-Hittite war and a prayer to Amun-Ra, spoken by Rameses II at the height of the battle. The Bulletin is a shorter text in the style.
of a war report, and describes the development of the day of battle itself. Within these texts and in the accompanying images are hints about the military mistakes made by the Egyptian army, including falling for a trap involving fake intelligence from two captured Bedouins, and marching on Qadesh without waiting for the arrival of all the divisions, only to face a surprise attack by the Hittites.

As well as the narrative pictures, the Poem and the Bulletin, there exists a third source of information, a number of hieroglyphic legends, the so called ‘Captions’, which according to Sir Alan Gardiner are essential for the analysis of the reliefs. They are small vignettes containing short inscriptions describing various elements of the battle. One of these mentions the “Naarin”, an elite Egyptian troop. The name “Naarin” is extraordinary in being very similar to the Hebrew word “naar”, the plural of a common word for “Youth” and as a military term, the expression also appears in the Bible to describe elite young warriors. During the battle, Rameses II’s life was saved by these Naarun, as recorded in the caption and in battle images, although this heroic deed is not mentioned in the Poem or the Bulletin.

Conclusion

Although the outcome of the Battle of Qadesh was not clear, Rameses II used royal iconographic propaganda to show an Egyptian victory to reflect Egypt’s position as the leading power in the Near East, but even in his depictions, he appears to have accepted the Hittite king as an rival equal to him and to recognise the strength of his military force. The reliefs show the traditional image of a victorious warrior pharaoh, but at the same time hint at the mistakes made by the Egyptians at the battle. It is also remarkable that the Egyptian pharaoh accepted a truce from his enemy; the fact that Qadesh remained under Hittite control suggests that the Hittites were the superior military force.

The treaty between Rameses II and Hattusili III opened a new door in inter-
national relations between Egypt and her neighbours, forming the basis of friendly and peaceful contact between the two empires. As to the question of who really won the Battle of Qadesh, we can only hope that further research will shed new light on the Hittite perspective of the battle. And although Rameses II's version of events may not give the whole picture, his reliefs do represent a masterpiece of art used as propaganda; as Sir Alan Gardiner commented, "The account of Rameses II of the Hittite War is a unique phenomenon in Egyptian literature, perhaps indeed in any literature."

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Photos: RBP.
