

50 Battles

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1

Scorpion King Unites Egypt, 3050 B.C.E.

“The Scorpion King,” a Universal Pictures’ film starring The Rock (Dwayne Johnson) and directed by Chuck Russell was released in 2002. A fictional story with great action scenes, special effects and original music score, the film has reignited substantial interest in ancient Egypt. This viewer’s impression of the film, however, was that it was a great action film with little, if any, historical accuracy. Perhaps coincidentally, real documentation now exists that around the year 3050 B.C.E., there was a great battle just 300 miles south of Cairo that resulted in the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. The victor was the Scorpion king whose realm was the ancient city of Abydos.

Abydos was once the most important city in Egypt. It lies about six to eight miles west of the Upper Nile River and roughly 100 miles downstream from the ancient city of Thebes. Archeological evidence suggests Abydos was also the holiest site in Egypt and, in mythology, the rumored birthplace of the Egyptian god-king, Osiris. The basic story is that Osiris married his royal sister, Isis, and transferred most of his royal duties to her as his queen. He then ventured further out into the world to expand the wealth and power of his kingdom. He had great successes because he was favored by the gods, or perhaps was a god himself. His jealous brother, Set, tricked Osiris into being sealed in a coffin that was then floated down the Nile. Isis learned of the betrayal and recovered her husband’s body. The brother, Set, learned of the body’s recovery and he secretly had it dissected and again floated down the Nile. In her grief and rage Isis recovered her dismembered husband, and mated with the divine corpse. The result was the birth of Horace (part falcon, part human) and Egypt’s first mythological king. Every

pharaoh from that time forward had some association with the gods Osiris, Isis, and Horace. The spirit of Osiris eventually took on a mythological cult status as the god of transformation from life to death and as the overseer of eternal life in the world of the hereafter.

The non-mythological validity of a real Scorpion king appears to be beyond doubt. Hieroglyphic images in stone detail his existence and accomplishments as one of the earliest predynasty kings of Egypt. A burial place for the first kings of Egypt has been found near the ancient city of Abydos at a site called Umm el Ga’ab. There, a brick-lined tomb measuring 24’ x 27’ contained hundreds of ceramic storage vases from Palestine or Canaan, a crook-shaped scepter made of ivory, and 160 stamp-sized tags made of ivory or bone. Each tag was inscribed with basic hieroglyphs or picture symbols. The tags repeated reference to a scorpion definitely suggests the tomb was the burial site of the actual Scorpion king.

As indicated on the map, Abydos was situated from six to eight miles west of the Nile and north of the rival city-state of Naqada. The warriors of Naqada were depicted in rock etchings as longhaired primitive people with feathers worked into their matted hair. It can be inferred that hostilities resulted from competition for trade, for territory, for wealth, or any number of other factors as two rapidly evolving city-states competed for many of the same resources. The distinctions between the two groups of people were perhaps typical of classic power struggles between order and chaos, east and west, or good and bad where the strongest and most cunning generally prevails. The battle of Abydos against Naqada appeared to be one of heroic proportions and lasting outcome.

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The Peloponnesian War, 431-404 B.C.E.

Early Hellenistic states (Greece) included large numbers of islands as well as fiercely independent city-states. The most powerful of these cities possessed navies and, in varying degrees, had land-based armies. For reasons of security, power, wealth and prestige, the two most powerful cities—Athens and Sparta—formed either alliances or colonial control of other Greek-speaking (Ionic) cities and regions such as in the Table below.

Athens	Sparta
Hellespont, Samos	Corinth (chief ally)
Thessaly, Plataea	Delphi, Laconia
Halicarnassus, Euboea	Peloponnesus
Rhodes, Attica	Megalopolis
Delos, Amphipolia	Macedonia
Andros, Tenos	Thebes
Neutral States	
Crete	Melos
Argos	Achaea
(others)	

The Peloponnesian War spanned 27 years with distinct periods of peace in between. Mostly, it was a series of naval battles. Athens possessed the most powerful navy in the region by far, yet it was the Spartan navy that ultimately prevailed.

At the end of the protracted war Athens' resurrected navy was completely destroyed. It was also one of the first known wars in ancient history to be documented by a credible historian as it occurred—Thucydides. The war can be broken into five major periods:

Archidamian war Early (431-427)

Archidamian war Late (426-421)

Sicilian war (421-413)

Ionian war Early (412-404)

Ionian war Late (407-404)

The essential conflict related to Sparta's resentment of Athens' growing wealth and power in the diverse and very trade-sensitive region. To a major extent it was comparable to a trade war in which there were few rules. Athens, for example, once slaughtered the entire male population of the island of Melos and enslaved the women and children for refusing to abandon a neutrality agreement. The same Athens was also a model for early democracy, development of the arts, and ideals of freedom for the individual. It was Athens that had reached out to free Greek-speaking people of the region who were being oppressed by Persia (Battle of Marathon, 490 B.C.E. and Battle of Salamis, 480 B.C.E.). The Peloponnesian War, with many diverse battles, all but destroyed Athens as in some profound Greek tragedy.

Suspicious of Athens' aggressive motives, Sparta was almost the exact opposite in nearly every respect. The inland city-state was non-democratic, agrarian, conservative, militaristic, and a cultural backwater. With most of its power invested in the army, Sparta tried to maneuver Athens—the naval powerhouse—into a decisive land battle. Corinth, a major ally of Sparta, was also prepared to go to war against Athens because the same people who had built the Parthenon were trying to control the Corinthian Gulf. That seaway was a major trade route to Sicily, southern Italy, and other destinations within the Mediterranean. The very heavy-handed tactics that Athens applied to its non-allies had generated intense animosities in the region. Also, the previously battered Persian Empire was waiting for its opportunity to seek revenge upon Athens.

Pericles was the driving force behind much that is associated with the high points of ancient Athens. His efforts significantly contributed to



proud fleet was reduced to twelve ships. Her democratic government was replaced with an aristocratic Committee of Thirty that was so corrupt that public pressure helped to bring back some democratic reforms within the first year. Athens was reduced to little more than a vassal state to Sparta. Athens' colonial empire was taken away. The foreign policy and political influence of Athens was thereafter grossly diminished.

Sparta, lacking a vision for the future except to maintain military strength, imposed heavy-handed tactics on Athens but failed to ever achieve greatness or a large empire. The continued disunity of the Greek states opened the door for conquest by Alexander the Great's Macedonians and later control by the Roman Empire. The stubborn independence of the Greek culture, however, has been especially famous for its contributions to the concept of democracy for the individual that survives to this date.

Athens's growth as the most powerful, most beautiful, and wealthiest city-state in the Hellenistic world. It was Pericles who was able to arrange a peace agreement with Persia in 449 B.C.E. It was Pericles' war strategy to maintain protective city walls and a naval powerhouse that protected Athens from a blockade siege. Within the first year of the war Pericles died of a plague introduced by continuous imports of grain from Egypt and the Black Sea area. His overall strategy to win a war of attrition against Sparta was successful at first but not in the end. Near the end, Sparta was heavily funded by Persia (Athens' old nemesis) to build a navy that overpowered Athens' navy and blockaded the daily importation of food to her citizens. As a result, Athens found itself in the position of unconditional surrender in 404 B.C.E. Sparta demanded the destruction of the city wall, and the seven-mile "Long Walls" from Athens to the docks. Athens' once



Napoleon's Battle for Moscow, 1812

In the same year that the United States was entrenched in a war with the British, the Russian people used every means possible to extricate themselves from a very deadly land invasion by Napoleon's Grand Army. The combined death toll was in the millions.

Napoleon (1769-1821) invaded Russia with his Grand Army of 450,000 in 1812. It was the largest military force ever seen at the time



Napoleon Bonaparte

and size alone inspired great optimism of their invincibility. They were led by the most innovative and charismatic commander of the time. Morale was at a euphoric peak. The potential of grinding failure and defeat was unthinkable.

As Napoleon's disciplined and hardened army of infantry, cavalry, and artillery crossed the Niemen River in Western Russia, there was great optimism that the enemy would soon be engaged and that victory would be a certainty. The army carried enough food, water, and supplies for at least four weeks in advance

and fully expected to forage for any additional needs. Great personal honor and glory for France was all but certain. However, in the vastness of the Russian plains, the enemy faded further and further eastward without engaging the French any more than was necessary to slow their pace. Soon, weeks began to pass without any potential for a decisive battle. Food and supplies were consumed on a daily basis as the "journey into darkness" continued. In the heat of summer, food soon became scarce, disease rampant, and desertion became progressively more of a problem as winter approached.

By September, 1812, Napoleon's forces, which had declined from 450,000 to little more than 100,000, were able to reach Moscow. The residents put the city to the torch rather than willingly give aid to the invaders. Still, there was little confrontation that could destroy the Russian forces. Weather conditions were especially severe in that year. By October 19 Napoleon and the remnants of his once truly grand army started its westward return. The hostile distance was 500 miles from Moscow to the western frontier.

Napoleon's army was very much of an international force. Archeological recoveries of uniform buttons have established at least 54 different regiments. Often, these regiments contained large numbers of adolescents down to about age 15. Small numbers of women, some with infants or small children, also accompanied the now very beleaguered troops. In fact, the exposure to the elements and scarcity of food on the march to Moscow had been so severe it was decided to take an alternate route back to Western Europe.

South of Moscow there was a major confrontation in the area of Maloyavoslavets. Each side tended to bring several hundred cannon to the field. The degree and severity of inju-