

LEADERSHIP

Lessons from the Ancient World

*How Learning from the Past
Can Win You the Future*

Arthur Cotterell
Roger Lowe
Ian Shaw



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

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Preface

This book is different. Instead of approaching the question of leadership through analogies drawn from literature, sport or exploration, it offers an entirely new perspective by looking at the actions of ancient leaders; and, in making a selection of leaders right across the Old World, from Rome to China, the book is able to provide trainers and trainees, and managers in general, with leadership examples about which they are unlikely to have preconceived ideas.

The study of ancient events from a management point of view is a unique way of observing how leadership actually works in practice. While it can be argued that in the historical record we are often uncertain that we possess an all-round picture, the unusual perspective gained by looking at remote times more than makes up for any possible shortcomings. For the leaders presented, and discussed here, are significant figures in their own right. Although many of the gambles they took were brilliantly successful, the consequences of their failures were just as spectacular. But all of these leaders decided on a course of action within the context of their own times, being aware of the range of possibilities then open to them. Again, this historical background allows us to note how they responded to very different situations, and how tem-

perament, intelligence, experience, daring and advice came into play as they dealt with really pressing problems. The methods they used to implement their ancient decisions are equally instructive, since they illustrate the advantages and disadvantages that inevitably confront managers as leaders.

The book has 19 chapters, the last of which aims to draw conclusions from the individual accounts and reflect on the direction that leadership development ought to take over the next decade in order to cope with the challenges of globalization, innovation and technological advance. This is why its title is 'Winning as a leader'. Each of the first eighteen chapters addresses a key leadership theme in a structured way. Every chapter introduces a leader from the ancient world in terms of historical setting, personal behaviour and relationships. Then the outcomes of whatever action was taken are outlined. Afterwards there is an examination of recent thinking on the leadership topic under review, with reference to the decisions taken by the ancient leader. Within this section, attention is drawn to possible further sources of study and signposts to key thinkers and writers are also provided. Finally, every chapter presents a 'contemporary leadership challenge' through one or more case studies or development activities based on the authors' own personal experience. They are drawn from a range of organisational settings in both the public and the private sectors. Each chapter is complemented by an illustration, based on contemporary sources, by Dr Ray Dunning.

The authors, an ancient historian, a chartered manager and a trainer in a multinational company, hope that the scope of their interests will be such that they can bring leadership into sharper focus. That there is a crying need for a more accessible approach to the subject they are in no doubt at all. For in this book they have endeavoured to show how ancient leaders can illuminate the complex problems facing those who run, or aspire to run, present-day organisations.

Introduction

Leadership has been a pivotal issue for mankind since the beginning of organised society. In the ancient world, no less than today, the qualities to be found in the good leader as well as the bad leader have caused intense debate. Even more, the effectiveness of leaders always remains a matter of acute interest, and especially during times of crisis, when risks are taken and gambles are bound to occur. Contemporary concern about change, as well as its increasing pace, only serves to focus the spotlight once again on the nature of effective leadership, as organisations both in the private and public sectors try to deal with the challenge of new circumstances. In this book parallels, and indeed stark contrasts, between the situations of leaders, ancient and modern, are used to throw new light on the perennial problems involved. That leadership is now the subject of an immense body of theory, a seemingly endless literature, has persuaded the authors of the value of a fresh look, a new perspective, on leadership which combines, for the benefit of the busy reader, ancient dilemmas along with accessible theory and present-day problems. Each chapter, except for the final one, tackles separately a key leadership concept.

One thing the reader will notice in the selection of ancient leaders is an absence of women. This is not a

result of any lack of interest on the part of the authors in female achievement. Rather it is a function of the fact that, with very few exceptions, women did not become significant leaders in the ancient world. Except for Boudicca and Cleopatra in Roman times, there were virtually no women who made strategic decisions at the highest level in the West. Only Hatshepsut, the stepmother of Thutmose III, succeeded in occupying centre stage in Egypt during his minority. As she then seized power for a number of years, it inevitably meant that Thutmose, on becoming pharaoh at long last, in 1428 BC, demolished her monuments and in the process obliterated the record of her reign. A similar situation occurred in China, where from AD 690 till 705 Empress Wu became the only woman to sit upon the dragon throne. She pushed aside two of her sons in order to achieve supremacy. Gifted though she undoubtedly was, this determined woman had a streak of cruelty in her character which created a reign of terror, although she was careful not to alienate her senior officials. Again it ensured that we lack any sympathetic record of her brief period of rule.

Courage is the aspect of leadership investigated in Chapter 1, which begins with the tremendous crisis faced by Ramesses II at Kadesh in 1274 BC. Then the young pharaoh was surprised by 3500 chariots in a trap carefully laid by the Hittite king Muwatalli II. Only a series of desperate counter-attacks, led by Ramesses in his own golden chariot, prevented an utter rout. The supreme courage that Ramesses demonstrated in the battle saved his army from destruction. Although all military leaders make mistakes, only successful ones like Ramesses are capable of recovering from potential calamity. The relevance of courage to leadership, therefore, is explored with particular reference to the idea that only a talented individual can rise to the challenge of the unexpected. It suggests that bravery remains a key element in the make-up of an effective leader, and not just in adverse circum-

stances. The practical problem accompanying this chapter focuses particularly on the changing attitude to leadership, the dramatic shift from command and control to cooperation and joint effort. So the case study considers the need for courage when there is a need to regenerate a business hopelessly stuck in a non-competitive mode.

Chapter 2 looks at risk taking. Starting with Pharaoh Thutmose III's astute handling of his forces at Megiddo in 1460 BC, it shows how risk taking powerfully points up the difference between management and leadership. At the battle of Megiddo, Thutmose risked a very dangerous advance: his army's subsequent attack from an entirely unexpected direction ended in a total victory over his Canaanite opponents. This overwhelming success reveals how leaders can effectively act on the basis of their own intuition rather than relying on detailed research, often ignoring in their actions the considered advice of colleagues when taking calculated risks. Modern managers may seek to control risk, but it is the leaders who have to risk a gamble, because there is no such thing as guaranteed profit. Also discussed is the nature of the self-confidence required in the successful risk taker. In the case of Thutmose, this comprised being certain that he could anticipate the disposition of the Canaanite army. This intuitive sensitivity to other people's thinking remains an important feature of an effective leader, particularly when it is combined with a systematic approach to decision analysis, as is featured in a case study addressing the challenges that face a young manager coping with cultural change in a business.

In Chapter 3 the role of motivation in leadership is considered. The remarkable military revolution inaugurated by the Chinese ruler Wuling is the ancient example of the ability to motivate others. He overcame stubborn opposition, and took no notice of the derision of fellow princes, when in 307 BC he adopted nomad cavalry

tactics. Strengthened by this reform and the conquest of new territory, Wuling's small state enjoyed a century of peace and prosperity. Because there are obviously huge advantages for a leader like Wuling, who can identify and act on what motivates people in his or her team or organisation to deliver a high-quality performance, the search for the secrets of motivation has become a preoccupation for management thinkers. Admitted now is the importance of the organisational context in creating a motivational climate, something Wuling recognised as he carefully explained his purpose to key people, his ministers, in order to get them on side and ensure that they then spread the message more widely. As Professor Fred Herzburg succinctly put it: only when an individual no longer runs on a recharged battery but possesses 'his own generator . . . can we talk about motivation. He wants to do it'. Getting people to this stage is far from easy, as the case study illustrates. This analyses the actions of three young managers brought into a failing business. They quickly identify that a lack of motivation is a key factor in its underperformance and then turn the organisation around.

Vision is today very much part of a leader's profile. Often an expression of personality, the organisational vision may be compulsive, passionate and intuitive. Yet there can be no doubt over its growing importance as businesses move from the traditional management model of central control and planning towards 'vision thinking', a beacon which indicates the direction that an organisation should take and illuminates the goals it should be aiming to achieve. Chapter 4 argues that a compelling vision like that of Liu Bang, the peasant who founded the Han dynasty in 202 BC, is a necessary prerequisite for present-day organisational success. Liu Bang's desire for a civil service dedicated to the welfare of his people was the enduring foundation of the Chinese empire, which lasted until the early twentieth century. His vision was so compelling that China could not, until modern times, con-

ceive of any other way to exist. The case study reflects on the value of a CEO having such an outlook, when endeavouring to convince the workforce of a factory that a secure future really is worth fighting for.

Chapter 5 examines how people can be developed to their potential and begins with the approach adopted by the fifth emperor of the Han dynasty, Wu Di. Such were the external and internal problems then threatening China that Wu Di had to introduce major organisational changes and, at the same time, recruit reliable and imaginative administrators to oversee their effective implementation. In the process he pioneered the system of public examinations, still a fundamental part of systematic career development today. What Wu Di struggled to do in the first century BC is no more than CEOs have to tackle now: seeking reliable means of guaranteeing that an initiative or development is actually delivered in the way imagined, given that a leader can only work through his or her own people. As he could not afford to micromanage all his officials, Wu Di had to trust their 'deep learning'. A way in which any perceived shortcomings would be handled now is through coaching, a critical leadership skill. Yet the interest Wu Di took in his top officials' actions could be seen as something akin to coaching, because his serious interventions were restricted to consistent failure. Two individuals in need of coaching are represented in the case study, which draws a telling distinction between 'what' and 'how' in setting developmental objectives. It notes, too, the need for managers to know their employees on a deeper personal level, so as to align their employees' goals and ambitions with those of the organisation.

The Athenian statesman Themistocles provides the starting point for a discussion about focusing on results in Chapter 6. It was his foresight, skill and ingenuity which led directly to the defeat of the Persian navy at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC. His strategic method of saving

Greece from Persian domination is at one with the way in which management thinking is now actually evolving. Not for Themistocles, a target-driven approach to what appeared an impossible problem, the repulse of the overwhelming might of Persia, but rather preparing Greece's defence step by step according to the changing situation. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, could be describing Themistocles' leadership style when he wrote: 'You pick a general direction and implement like hell'. Just how critical such flexibility can be is obvious in the case study. This focuses on an organisation's use of visual and graphic facilitation techniques, used in an intensive review and development planning session within an advertising agency. Through this exercise, the creative and imaginative use of resources emerges as a critical success factor.

Chapter 7 poses the question of integrity in leadership through an analysis of the reasons for Pericles' long period of political ascendancy in Athens. Pericles alone was elected to an almost continuous period of office from 455 BC onwards. After his death no political leader or party was able to control Athens, as different groups held sway on different occasions. The result was serious inconsistency in the conduct of the war with Sparta which culminated in Athens' surrender in 404 BC. The close scrutiny of leaders in democratic Athens meant that every word and action of Pericles was judged on its merits: no spokesperson could be used to explain away shortcomings. Political, like executive, integrity is indivisible as Pericles well knew and so concerned was he to preserve his reputation that in 431 BC, at the start of the war, he turned over his private property to the state, asking that no suspicion of seeking personal gain should be attached to him. It was an action that would have delighted Norman Schwarzkopf, the US commander in the first Gulf War. He held the view that a leader, in particular during a major conflict, should be absolutely above suspicion. 'Never lie', he said. 'Ever'. Where there

is a lapse in ethical leadership, as the case study shows, the results can be catastrophic. The defence of Bernard Ebbers, the boss of WorldCom, at his trial in 2005, was pathetic in that he claimed to be quite unaware of fraud being carried out in his company. Over the next quarter of a century in prison he has the opportunity to reflect on the jury's rejection of this claim. If one assumes responsibility as a leader, then with it comes the duty to see that it is properly carried out. Ethics are not something a CEO can put into the drawer of a desk, and then conveniently forget.

In the same manner a leader has to know when to take decisive action, although it might land him or her in trouble, as happened to the Theban general Epaminondas in 369 BC. Then he was put on trial for extending his generalship beyond its allotted time, although his invasion of the Peloponnese permanently broke Spartan military power. Chapter 8 discusses the skills involved in such decision making. At the most senior level, decisions that are likely to affect the entire future of an organisation can be a daunting task. For, as David Taylor notes in *The Naked Leader*, 'a true decision means quite simply to close off all other options. And it is not an easy thing to do, because to move away from where you are at the moment . . . may mean leaving something behind you'. It is a dilemma faced by any CEO who subscribes to the hard-ball approach to management, as the case study makes abundantly clear. The exploitation of opportunity is the key to commercial success, according to George Stalk and Rob Lacenauer, the advocates of its go-getting manifesto.

A leader's ability to influence people is the subject of Chapter 9. That Alexander the Great, prior to his death in 323 BC, was so influential in establishing a multi-ethnic kingdom provides a fascinating example of the art of persuasion. As the historian Plutarch commented, 'Alexander considered that he had come from the gods to

be a governor and reconciler of the world. Using force of arms when he could not bring the men together by reason, he employed everything to the same end, mixing lives, manners, marriages and customs as it were in a loving-cup'. Even though Alexander's kingdom broke up after his death, as his senior commanders fought each other for a share of the vast territory he had conquered, his ideas were not entirely forgotten or abandoned. Where perhaps Alexander scored his greatest success was in making clear for all time how a persuasive leader must have whole-hearted belief in his own ideas, if he or she is to have any chance of influencing people. Cultural sensitivity was absolutely critical to his success in dealing with such a range of different peoples. Experienced leaders today are able to adopt different styles to suit a variety of audiences so that, if not handled with great tact, this can lead to the dangerous perception that they are either inconsistent or cynical, resulting in their employees feeling confused as well as distrustful. Handling teams, an instrument now widely used in large organisations for sharing ideas, overseeing developments and problem solving, demands persuasive powers of the highest order on the part of senior managers. Not even Alexander's god-given authority was adequate in every situation, as the mutiny of his Macedonian troops revealed in India. Yet influencing is now a much sought-after skill in matrixed organisations, a need which is explored in depth by the case study: it details the stages an effective manager has to go through in order to bring about change in the pattern of behaviour at work.

No less challenging for a leader is the timing of stepping down. In Chapter 10 Candragupta's abdication provides the focus for a discussion of this vexed question. The first Indian ruler to found an empire, Candragupta came to the conclusion that he ought to relinquish power and devote himself to a religious life in 297 BC. That he could abdicate in favour of his elder son and leave his imperial legacy intact says a great deal about his competence as a

ruler and also something about the quality of the officials who served him as an emperor. To his chief minister he owed much, but there is little doubt that it was the loyalty he inspired in all his subjects, which really permitted Candragupta's successful abdication. Given that for an individual a lifetime career in a single business is no longer the dominant model, moving on has become a much more frequent event. This is why succession planning for change at the top is now such a difficult and time-consuming business. Untypical in this regard is Toyota, the Japanese car manufacturer, which remains wedded to a policy of 'growing your own', for the reason that in this company great emphasis is placed on the maintenance of its own distinct culture. Other large organisations tend to buy in leaders, although increasingly pressurised working environments have made senior executives conscious of the need for a work-life balance. In the case study there is an example of how legacy planning can revitalise a business's performance. A sales force is renewed, in every sense, by a radical career development scheme.

Chapter 11 examines how a business can best be represented in the wider commercial, political and social environment, after looking at both the successes and reverses experienced by Hannibal during his invasion of Italy. From 218 to 202 BC this Carthaginian general managed to harass Rome, literally in its own backyard. Historians, ancient and modern, are amazed at the leadership skills Hannibal demonstrated during this gruelling campaign. Possibly his powerful public persona helped to sustain him for so long in hostile territory: he was completely identified with his own city-state of Carthage in the same way that Bill Gates always now is with Microsoft. As these two leaders have more than a little of the showman about them, they could cope easily with an ambassadorial role on the grand scale. Creating a public image can thus be seen as not just a modern phenomenon. Hannibal's image continued to exert a powerful influence over

the Romans long after the Italian invasion ended. Yet this high-profile style of leadership was not enough to secure a Carthaginian victory: supplies and reinforcements were always in short supply, while Rome had the capacity to raise new armies and keep them in the field. Securing adequate resources is, therefore, a key function of a leader and failure to maintain an adequate level of investment means a business, or an invasion, will always fail. The case study develops this idea by looking at the government's leadership programme for failing secondary schools, with its 'superheads' and 'hyperheads'. The pressures on these individuals to succeed are reminiscent of those Hannibal suffered during his Italian campaign.

With the resourcefulness of Zhu Geliang, a famous minister in third-century AD China, the whole issue of managerial creativity is considered in Chapter 12. During the crisis which briefly split the Chinese empire into three warring states, Zhu Geliang's ingenuity alone was enough to ensure the survival of Shu, the weakest of these bitter rivals. Time and again he pitted his wits against Shu's enemies, using psychology to stop apparently irresistible invaders. A modern leadership challenge is discovering similar bright ideas in order to enhance management performance and devise solutions to supposedly intractable problems. Corporate creativity is in fact now an urgent concern for large organisations that have lost the ability of 'thinking outside the box'. That is why so much attention is being given to fostering a creative working environment. If innovation and creativity are so important for organisational renewal, then a situation has to be engineered within an organisation that supports those employees who are capable of imitating Zhu Geliang. How this can be done is indeed the point of the case study. It outlines the innovation process and suggests a way in which teams can advance new ideas through brainstorming and review. Also recommended is the need for senior managers to give timely recognition of creativity.

In Chapter 13 self-managed development receives attention. Leaders often have to learn how to lead, a circumstance clearly highlighted in the advice that Li Shimin, the second Tang emperor of China, required from his minister Wei Zheng. Wei Zheng was keenly aware that during Li Shimin's reign precedents and patterns were being set which would affect the conduct of government for generations to come: hence his willingness to stand up to Li Shimin when he felt a wrong decision was about to be taken. Although the emperor always listened to his chief minister and seriously thought about his comments, no matter how inconvenient they sometimes were, Li Shimin could not but become annoyed on occasions when Wei Zheng seemed to pointlessly resist what he wanted to do. Only after Wei Zheng's death in AD 643 did the emperor really appreciate the full value of the advice he had been given. Emotionally intelligent leaders of course are never unwilling to learn. Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management would be impossible for them otherwise. Yet there is still a tendency, which Wei Zheng discovered in Li Shimin, for leaders to become less attuned as they grow in experience and authority. Keeping one's feet on the ground is not so easy as many people think. As the case study indicates in its discussion of the Chartered Manager scheme, there are always good reasons for comparing one's own performance with that of other managers. Benchmarking makes sense only when it is realistic and relevant to what happens in the workplace.

Chapter 14 considers Sulla's constitutional reforms. His attempt at radical change in the late 80s BC failed for a number of reasons, the chief one of which was an inability to gain enough support to take his initiatives permanently forward. He challenged too many deeply rooted traditions, and as a result many people saw his determination as serving his own political ambitions, rather than bringing any significant benefits to the struggling Roman republic. It is easy from our perspective to recognise that

Sulla sought a transformation, not just change. Although today such a fundamental alteration is often seen as imperative in an organisation facing totally new circumstances, it needs to be understood how time consuming this kind of process inevitably is, and how leadership skills of a very high order indeed are required to see it effectively through. Sulla's reliance on force never stood a chance of success. In one sense this Roman dictator was correct, for he grasped that only a supreme leader could ever hope to deal with the immense crisis then undermining the republic. Where he got it wrong was in tackling reform with headlong haste. The case study, however, offers a better way of managing the profound impact of change on people.

Networking is the subject of Chapter 15, which follows the efforts that Cicero made to find political allies 20 years or so after Sulla. In an attempt to control the growing instability caused by army-commanders and their political agents in Rome, he tried to put together an alliance of interest and sentiment which embraced the upper classes and the well-to-do. But excessive self-belief simply let Cicero down, because oratory and intrigue meant nothing against naked swords. He also failed to identify in any detail the common ground that he and his political partners might have or the detailed aim around which they might rally. Cicero obviously missed the first rule of networking, the maintenance of social relationships which include a distinct agenda. For good networking helps leaders to promote their values and interests, and then translate their purposes in action. So vital is networking in the modern business world that companies actively promote its use as a means of harnessing and directing the experience, information and wisdom locked away inside them. Effective networking can be said to reduce the likelihood of inflexible or categorical judgements being taken, while at the same time helping to ensure an organisation develops visions which are both linked and compatible. For this reason the case study focuses on the experience of

a senior executive in a multinational pharmaceutical company. She discovers for herself, and for her human resources colleagues worldwide, the real value of regular networking via new technology.

In Chapter 16 the role of a leader in dealing with conflict is examined. Few leaders were ever faced with the legacy of conflict which greeted Vespasian in the year AD 69. He was in fact the fourth Roman emperor that year. On his arrival in Rome he discovered both large-scale burnt out areas as well as the architectural excess of Nero's last years. It was the extravagance of the emperor Nero that had led to the year of civil war which Vespasian's succession ended. A 100-metre-high gilded bronze statue with the face of Nero still overlooked the devastated and bankrupt city. In a quiet and business-like manner, Vespasian reorganised taxation, restored discipline to the army, strengthened frontiers, put down rebellions and began a programme of renewal in Rome itself. One of his projects, completed by his son Titus, was the Colosseum, a truly gigantic amphitheatre designed to seat 50,000 spectators. To return an organisation to a healthy, harmonious and productive condition when it has been torn apart by internal conflict requires a particular set of leadership skills, totally distinct from those needed to keep an already successful business on track, or initiate new projects or products into established routines. Vespasian possessed these skills in abundance, and they are discussed in the context of outsiders being brought in today in order to turn around failing companies, hospitals and schools. Pointed out, too, is the danger involved in seeking consensus at all costs. Since this can lead to mediocre decision making and even stagnation. It is something taken up in the case study, where a manager has the task of reallocating space in a business head office during a system's software upgrade. The purchasing department has to go for six months into temporary accommodation in the car park. All the problems this difficult move entails are discussed and analysed.

The difficulties involved in delegation and empowerment are the subject of Chapter 17, which looks at the Roman emperor Diocletian's radical scheme for imperial administration in the late third century. What he was most anxious to avoid was a repetition of the conflicts that had surrounded the accession of emperors over the previous 50 years. So Diocletian established a collegiate system of government, with two senior rulers and two juniors. It was understood that the juniors would automatically move up to the top positions on the death or abdication of their seniors. This arrangement is now echoed within Philips NV in Holland, for its organisational structure is built on joint responsibility being shared by two top managers, one representing the 'commercial' end of the business and the other the 'technical'. Also discussed in this chapter is the radical empowerment approach used at SEMCO, the Brazilian conglomerate. Over-empowerment is touched upon in the notorious case of Barings, the merchant bank brought down by Nick Leeson's uncontrolled gambling on the Tokyo futures market. Two case studies explore further the problems inherent in delegation and empowerment. In one, a newly appointed deputy head teacher struggles to introduce a managerial attitude at the level of subject heads in a secondary school, while in the second a new CEO tries to introduce a more empowering culture into a food factory.

Chapter 18 ponders the need for senior managers to recognise achievement and celebrate success. It starts with an account of the late Roman general Belisarius' career in the sixth century. From Emperor Justinian's point of view, the services this commander famously rendered the throne were a mixed blessing. His resolute action during the dreadful riot in Constantinople, his remarkable victories over the Vandals in northern Africa and the Ostrogoths in Italy, were of course achievements for which Justinian could only be thankful. Yet the possibility that Belisarius harboured imperial ambitions of his own always worried the emperor, despite the fact that the

general had publicly turned down the offer of a Gothic throne. For the recognition of achievement always has a political context, a circumstance which Belisarius' enemies were ready to exploit by spreading rumours about his desire for even greater honours. Just as today, a rising star in any organisation can often be seen as a threat by senior management. The converse, as Jack Welch once again points out, is the danger of egotism. 'I've seen talented young people promoted too quickly', he says, 'and their ambitions spin out of control'. Keeping the balance right is thus the secret of successful leadership when it comes to celebrating achievement. The case study explores this idea through an account of a newly introduced recognition scheme at a run-down NHS hospital. That the first winners declared at the annual Quality Improvement Awards ceremony was a team of porters says it all: the scheme had successfully improved everyone at the hospital.

This book ends with an attempt to identify some significant issues in the actions of the 18 ancient leaders. It also considers the future of leadership development. Given globalisation and technological change, Chapter 19 asks where training in leadership should now go. The chapter endeavours to sum up those aspects of leadership that are critical today, and point out ways in which they can be better understood, and applied to a particular set of circumstances so as to increase the chance of developing a winning individual style.

Suggestions for further reading are provided so that readers who wish to do so can pursue matters of special interest. A personal selection of books and articles covers all the leadership topics addressed in this book. Hopefully it will assist those wanting to explore them in greater depth.

1

Courage: The Daring of Ramesses II at Kadesh

What happened?

The leader

In Egyptian tradition Ramesses II (pronounced 'Ram-eeses') was remembered as a colossus as large as his own monumental statues, the ideal warrior-king whose 67-year reign secured the country's survival as a great power during a period of intense international rivalry. But at the battle of Kadesh in 1274 BC, in the fifth year of his reign, the 29-year-old pharaoh was lucky not to have suffered a disastrous defeat.

The historical setting

Rivalry between the great powers of the ancient eastern Mediterranean was at its greatest in Syria. There, Egypt's sphere of influence stopped at Kadesh, a city built on the banks of the Orontes river. However, there was one great power that always found this frontier difficult to accept. It was Hatti, whose inhabitants are now known as the Hittites, a name derived from the Bible authorised by King James I. The Hittites had expanded their territories

beyond Asia Minor to exercise control over what is today eastern Turkey, Armenia and northern Syria. When King Suttarna sent the forces of Kadesh against Hittite troops operating close by, he was soon defeated and led off into captivity, along with his son Aitakkama. Although this put a strain on Hittite–Egyptian relations, there was no immediate reaction from Egypt. However, Aitakkama’s return to Kadesh as a Hittite ally was less well received, and so the pharaoh Sety I recaptured this Syrian city. An inscription relates how he ‘smote the land of Hatti, causing the cowardly rebels to submit’. The accession of Sety I’s son, the young Ramesses II, seems to have been regarded by the Hittite king, Muwatalli II, as a good opportunity for intervention. So it happened that Ramesses found himself suddenly confronted by the Hittite army at Kadesh.

Ramesses’ behaviour

News of Kadesh switching its allegiance to Hatti had brought a determined response from Egypt. Riding in his golden chariot at the head of an army of four divisions, named after the gods Amun, Re, Ptah and Seth, Ramesses sped past Gaza along the road next to ‘the shore of Amor’, as the Egyptians called the Mediterranean. This impetuous advance was very much part of the young pharaoh’s character, and it set the scene for the near disaster at Kadesh.

For Ramesses was unaware that the Hittite king had set a trap for his forces there. With an army of 47,000 men, including a complement of 3500 chariots, Muwatalli waited in a concealed position. Against this host Ramesses could not deploy so many soldiers, nor were they all available at the start of the battle: the Amun division was just behind him, the Re division was crossing the ford near Kadesh, while the Ptah and Seth divisions still remained south of the River Orontes. The Hittite



Ramesses II, the victor at Kadesh. The war god Montu, with whom the young pharaoh was identified, was a falcon-headed deity worshipped at Thebes. The personal identification became so strong that a cult statue was venerated in Ramesses' honour during his lifetime.

attack came when the Amun division was establishing a camp chosen by Ramesses near the city itself. 'There His Majesty', we are told, 'sat on a golden throne', presumably to receive ambassadors from an overawed Kadesh. Ramesses received instead a rude shock. Two Hittite scouts sent by Muwatalli to ascertain the exact position of the Egyptian army were captured and, after a beating, revealed the location of the Hittite army. 'The King of Hatti', they admitted, 'together with soldiers from many lands, is armed and ready to fight behind Kadesh'.

Ramesses' senior officers were stunned by the news and abashed at the anger of the pharaoh over their carelessness. After a hasty conference, messengers were dispatched to hurry on the divisions still on the march. By then the Hittite chariotry had 'charged the Re division, and cut through the middle, as it was not drawn up for battle'. This collapse almost engulfed the Egyptian camp when in panic troops from the broken division rushed there in order to escape pursuing Hittite chariots. A total rout seemed inevitable, until Ramesses asserted his leadership. 'Then His Majesty rose like the war god Montu and seized his weapons, putting on his coat of mail'.

As the Hittite chariotry surrounded his camp in an ever-tightening circle, Ramesses launched a desperate counter-attack. First, infantrymen were sent to tackle enemy chariots that came too close to the camp, pulling down charioteers and killing them with short swords and spears. Then, taking advantage of this confusion, Ramesses mounted his own chariot and drove into the Hittites with tremendous force. Even though we know how Menna, his charioteer, 'saw the vast number of hostile chariots hemming the pharaoh in, and went deadly white with terror', the counter-attack gave the surrounded Egyptians a respite, which Ramesses used to rally his troops. He also noticed that the eastern wing of the Hittite chariotry was the weakest part, and next he
