

# Thebes at War

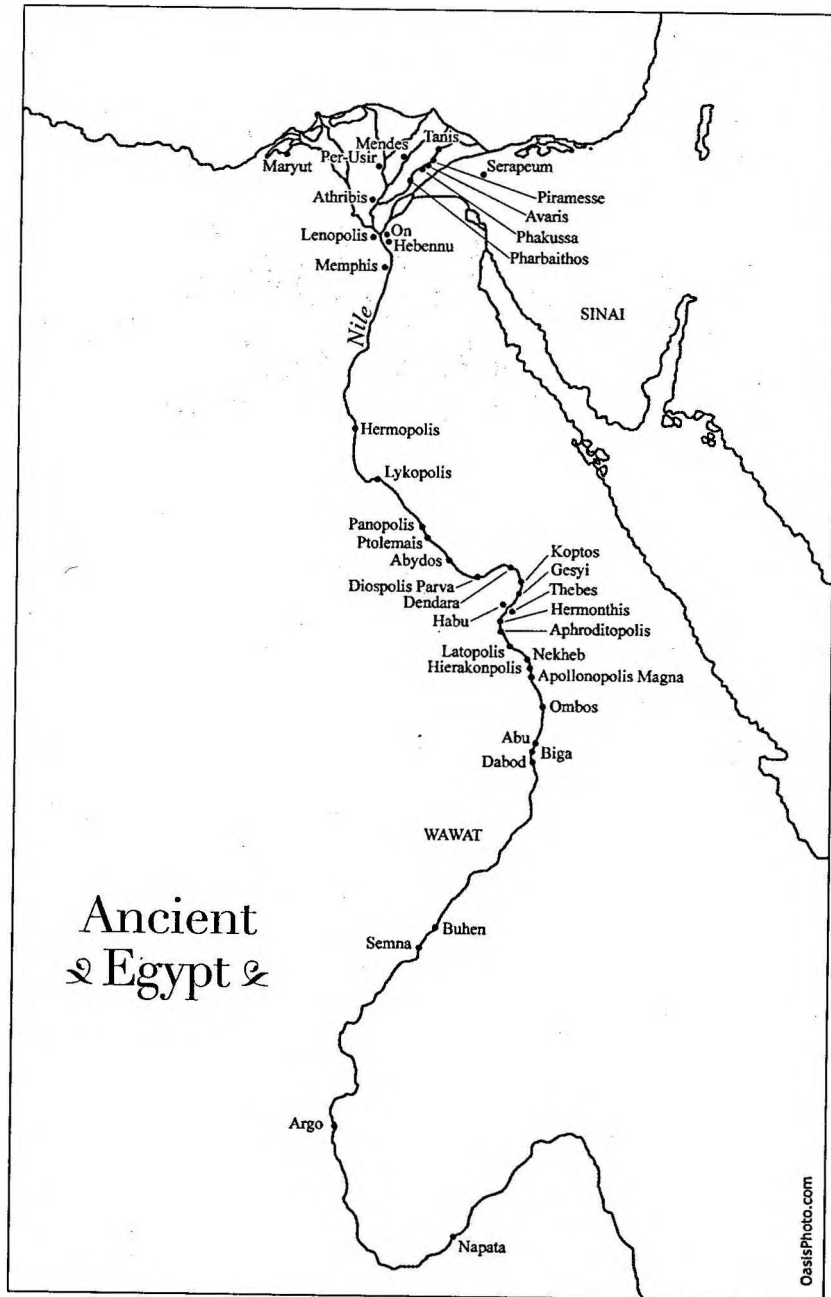
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## Seqenenra

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The ship made its way up the sacred river, its lotus-crowned prow cleaving the quiet, stately waves that since ancient days had pressed upon each other's heels like episodes in the endless stream of Time. On either side, villages dotted the landscape, palms sprouted singly and in clusters, and greenery extended to the east and the west. The sun, high in the sky, sent out beams of light that quivered where they drenched the vegetation and sparkled where they touched the water, whose surface was empty but for a few fishing boats that made way for the big ship, their owners staring questioningly and mistrustfully at the image of the lotus, symbol of the North.

To the front of the cabin on the deck, sat a short, stout man with round face, long beard, and white skin, dressed in a flowing robe, a thick stick with a gold handle grasped in his right hand. Before him sat two others as stout as he and dressed in the same fashion—three men united by a single outlook. The master gazed fixedly to the south, his dark eyes consumed with boredom and fatigue, and he glared balefully at the fishermen. As though oppressed by the silence, he turned to his men and asked, "I wonder, tomorrow will the trumpet sound and will the heavy silence that now reigns over the southern regions be broken? Will the peace of these tranquil houses be shattered and will the vulture of war hover in these secure skies? Ah, how I wish these people knew what a warning this ship brings them and their master!"

The two men nodded in agreement with their leader's words. "Let it be war, Lord Chamberlain," said one of them, "so long as this man whom

our lord has permitted to govern the South insists on placing a king's crown on his head, builds palaces like the pharaohs, and walks cheerfully about Thebes without a care in the world!"

The chamberlain ground his teeth and jabbed with his stick at the deck before him with a movement that betrayed anger and exasperation. "There is no Egyptian governor except for this, of the region of Thebes," he said. "Once rid of him, Egypt will be ours forever and the mind of our lord the king will be set at rest, having no man's rebelliousness left to fear."

The second man, who lived in the hope of one day becoming governor of a great city, fervently replied, "These Egyptians hate us."

The chamberlain uttered an amen to that and said in violent tones, "So they do, so they do. Even the people of Memphis, capital of our lord's kingdom, make a show of obedience while concealing hatred in their hearts. Every stratagem has been tried and nothing now is left but the whip and the sword."

For the first time, the two men smiled and the second said, "May your counsel be blessed, wise chamberlain! The whip is the only thing these Egyptians understand."

The three men relapsed for a while into silence and nothing was to be heard but the slap of the oars on the surface of the water. Then one of them happened to notice a fishing boat in whose waist stood a young man with sinewy forearms, wearing nothing but a kilt at his waist, his skin burned by the sun. In amazement he said, "These southerners look as though they had sprung from their own soil!"

"Wonder not!" the chamberlain responded sarcastically, "Some of their poets even sing the beauties of a dark complexion!"

"Indeed! Next to ours, their coloring is like mud next to the glorious rays of the sun."

The chamberlain replied, "One of our men was telling me about these southerners and he said, 'Despite their color and their nakedness, they are full of conceit and pride. They claim they are descended from the loins of the gods and that their country is the wellspring of

the true pharaohs.' Dear God! I know the cure for all that. All it will take is for us to reach out our arm to the borders of their country."

No sooner had the chamberlain ceased speaking than he heard one of his men saying, pointing to the east, "Look! Can that be Thebes? It is Thebes!"

They all looked where the man was pointing and beheld a large city surrounded by a great wall, behind which the heads of the obelisks soared like pillars supporting the celestial vault. On its northern side, the towering walls of the temple of Amun, Divine Lord of the South, could be seen, appearing to the eye like a mighty giant climbing toward the sky. The men were shaken and the high chamberlain knitted his brows and muttered, "Yes. That is Thebes. I have been granted a sight of it before and time has only increased my desire that it submit to our lord the king and that I see his victory procession making its way through its streets."

One of the men added, "And that our god Seth be worshipped there."

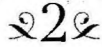
The ship slowed and proceeded little by little to draw in to the shore, passing luxuriant gardens whose lush terraces descended to drink from the sacred river. Behind them, proud palaces could be seen, while to the west of the farther shore crouched the City of Eternity, where the immortals slept in pyramids, mastabas, and graves, all enveloped in the forlornness of death.

The ship turned toward the port of Thebes, making its way among the fishing smacks and traders' ships, its size and beauty, and the image of the lotus that embellished its prow, attracting all eyes. Finally, it drew up alongside the quay and threw down its huge anchor. Guards approached and an officer, wearing a jacket of white linen above his kilt, was brought out to it and asked one of the crew, "Where is this ship coming from? And is it carrying goods for trade?"

The man greeted him, said, "Follow me!" and accompanied him to the cabin, where the officer found himself standing before a high chamberlain of the Northern Palace—the palace of the king of the Herdsmen, as they called him in the South. He bowed respectfully and presented a military salute. With patent arrogance, the chamberlain raised his hand to return the salute and said, in condescending tones, "I am the envoy of Our Master

Apophis, Pharaoh, King of the North and the South, Son of Lord Seth, and I am sent to the governor of Thebes, Prince Seqenenra, to convey to him the proclamation that I bear."

The officer listened to the envoy attentively, saluted once more, and left.



An hour passed. Then a man of great dignity, somewhat short and lean, with a prominent brow, arrived at the ship. Bowing with dignity to the envoy, he said in a quiet voice, "He who has the honor of receiving you is Hur, chamberlain of the Southern Palace."

The other inclined his stately head and said in his rough voice, "And I am Khayan, high chamberlain of the Palace of the Pharaoh."

Hur said, "Our master will be happy to receive you immediately."

The envoy made a move to rise and said, "Let us go." Chamberlain Hur led the way, the man following him with unhurried steps, supporting his obese body on his stick, while the other two bowed to him reverently. Khayan had taken offense and was asking himself, "Should not Seqenenra have come himself to receive the envoy of Apophis?" It annoyed him excessively that the former should receive him as though he were a king. Khayan left the ship between two rows of soldiers and officers, and saw a royal cavalcade awaiting him on the shore headed by a war chariot and with more chariots behind. The soldiers saluted him and he returned their salute haughtily and got into his chariot, Hur at his side. Then the small procession moved off toward the palace of the governor of the South. Khayan's eyes swiveled right and left, observing the temples and obelisks, statues and palaces, the markets and the unending streams of people of all classes: the common people with their almost naked bodies, the officers with their elegant cloaks, the priests with their long robes, the nobles with their flowing mantles, and the beautifully dressed women. Everything seemed to bear witness to the mightiness of the city and to its rivalry of Memphis, the capital of Apophis. From the first instant, Khayan was aware that his procession was attracting looks everywhere, and that the people were gathering

along the way to watch, though coldly and stolidly, their black eyes examining his white face and long beard with surprise, distaste, and resentment. He boiled with anger that the mighty Apophis should be subjected to such a cold welcome in the person of his envoy and it vexed him that he should appear as a stranger in Thebes two hundred years after his people had descended on the land of Egypt and seated themselves on its throne. It angered and exasperated him that his people should have ruled for two hundred years, during which the south of Egypt had preserved its identity, character, and independence—for not a single man of the Hyksos resided there.

The procession reached the square in front of the palace. It was broad, with far-flung corners, government buildings, ministries, and the army headquarters lining its sides. In its center stood the venerable palace, its imposing sight dazzling the eyes—a mighty palace, like that of Memphis itself, with guardsmen topping its walls and lined up in two rows at the main gate. The band struck up a salutatory anthem as the envoy's procession passed, and as the procession crossed the courtyard Khayan wondered to himself, "Will Seqenenra meet me with the White Crown on his head? He lives as a king and observes their etiquette and he governs as kings govern. Will he then wear the crown of the South in front of me? Will he do what his forebears and his own father, Seneqnenra, refrained from doing?" He dismounted at the entrance to the long colonnade and found the palace chamberlain, the head of the royal guard, and the higher officers waiting to receive him. All saluted and they proceeded before him to the royal reception hall. The antechamber leading to the doorway of the hall was decorated on both sides with sphinxes, and in its corners stood giant officers chosen from among the mighty men of Habu. The men bowed to the envoy, making way for him, and Chamberlain Hur walked ahead of him into the interior of the hall. Following, Khayan beheld, at some distance from the entrance and dominating the space, a royal throne on which sat a man crowned with the crown of the South, the scepter and the crook in his hand, while two men sat to the right of his throne and two to the left. Hur, followed by the envoy, reached the throne and bowed to his lord in veneration, saying in his gentle voice, "My lord, I present to



Your Highness, High Chamberlain Khayan, envoy of King Apophis."

At this the envoy bowed in greeting and the king returned his greeting and gestured to him to sit on a chair in front of the throne, while Hur stood to the right of the throne. The king wished to present his courtiers to the envoy, so he pointed with his scepter to the man closest to him on his right and said, "This is User-Amun, chief minister." Then he pointed to the man next to him and said, "Nofer-Amun, high priest of Amun." Next he turned to his left and indicated the man next to him. "Kaf, commander of the fleet." He pointed to the man next to him and said, "Pepi, commander of the army." With the introductions completed, the king turned his gaze on the envoy and said in a voice whose tones indicated natural nobility and rank, "You have come to a place that welcomes both you and him who has entrusted you with his confidence."

The envoy replied, "May the Lord preserve you, respected governor. I am indeed happy to have been chosen for this embassy to your beautiful country, of historic repute."

The king's ears did not fail to note the words 'respected governor' or their significance, but no sign of his inner perturbation showed on his face. At the same moment, Khayan shot a quick scrutinizing glance from his bulging eyes and found the Egyptian governor to be a truly impressive man, tall of stature, with an oval, beautiful face, extremely dark, his features distinguished by the protrusion of his upper teeth. He judged him to be in his fourth decade. The king imagined that the envoy of Apophis had come for the same reason that had brought earlier missions from the North, namely, to ask for stone and grain, which the kings of the Herdsmen considered tribute, while the kings of Thebes saw them as a bribe with which they protected themselves against the evil of the invaders.

The king said quietly and with dignity, "It is my pleasure to listen to you, envoy of mighty Apophis."

The envoy moved in his seat as though about to jump up and fight. In his rough voice he said, "For two hundred years, the envoys of the North have never ceased to visit the South, each time returning satisfied."

The king said, "I hope that this beautiful custom may continue."

Khayan said, "Governor, I bring you three requests from Pharaoh. The first concerns the person of my lord Pharaoh; the second, his god, Seth; and the third, the ties of affection between North and South."

The king now gave him his full attention and concern showed on his face. The man went on to say, "In recent days, my lord the king has complained of terrible pains that have wracked his nerves by night and of abominable noises that have assaulted his noble ears, rendering him prey to sleeplessness and ill health. He summoned his physicians and described to them his nocturnal sufferings and they examined him with care, but all went away again puzzled and none the wiser. In the opinion of them all, the king was in good health and well. When my lord despaired, he finally consulted the prophet of the temple of Seth and this wise man grasped the nature of his sickness and said, 'The source of all his pains is the roaring of the hippopotami penned up in the South, which has infiltrated his heart.' And he assured him that there could be no cure for him unless they were killed."

The envoy knew that the hippopotami kept in the lake of Thebes were sacred, so he stole a glance at the governor's face to gauge the effect of his words, but found it stony and hard, though it had reddened. He waited for him to make some comment but the man uttered not a word and appeared to be listening and waiting. So, the envoy said, "While my lord was sick, he dreamed he saw our god Seth in all his dazzling majesty visit him and rebuke him, saying, 'Is it right that there should not be a single temple in the whole of the South in which my name is mentioned?' So my lord swore that he would ask of his friend, the governor of the South, that he build a temple to Seth in Thebes, next to the temple of Amun."

The envoy fell silent, but Seqenenra continued to say nothing, though he now appeared as one taken aback and surprised by something that had never before occurred to him. Khayan, however, was unconcerned by the king's darkening mood and may even have been driven by a desire to provoke him. Chamberlain Hur, grasping the danger of the demands, bent over his lord's ear, whispering, "It would be better if my lord did not engage the envoy in discussion now."

The king nodded in agreement, well aware what the chamberlain was driving at. Khayan imagined that the chamberlain was notifying his lord of what he had said, so he waited a little. However, the king merely said, "Have you any other message to convey?"

Khayan replied, "Respected governor, it has reached my lord's notice that you crown yourself with the White Crown of Egypt. This surprises him and he finds it out of keeping with the ties of affection and traditional friendship that bind the family of Pharaoh to your own time-honored family."

Seqenenra exclaimed in astonishment, "But the White Crown is the headdress of the governors of the South!"

The envoy replied with assurance and insistence, "On the contrary, it was the crown of those of them who were kings, and for that reason, your glorious father never thought of wearing it, for he knew that there is only one king in this valley who has the right to wear a crown. I hope, respected governor, that my lord's reference to his sincere desire to strengthen the good relations between the dynasties of Thebes and Memphis will not be lost on you."

Khayan ceased speaking and silence fell once more. Seqenenra was plunged in melancholy reflection, his heart weighed down by the king of the Herdsmen's harsh demands, which attacked the very wellsprings of faith in his heart and of pride in his soul. The impact of these things reflected itself in his pallor and in the stony faces of the courtiers around him. Appreciative of Hur's advice, he volunteered no reply but said in a voice that retained, despite everything, its calm, "Your message, Envoy, involves a delicate matter that touches on our beliefs and traditions. This being so, it seems to me best that I inform you of my opinion on it tomorrow."

Khayan responded, "The best opinion is that on which counsel is taken first."

Seqenenra turned then to Chamberlain Hur and said, "Conduct the envoy to the wing that has been made ready for him."

The envoy raised his huge, short body, bowed, then departed, with a conceited and haughty gait.