

## A Hittite and a Shaman: At Queen Nefertari's Secret Service

**Naveen Sridhar**

Amazon KDP

(267pp)

979-844230832-7

*A Hittite and a Shaman is a riveting tale of political intrigue and backroom maneuvering.*

In Naveen Sridhar's historical novel *A Hittite and a Shaman*, an ancient Egyptian queen seeks peace in a period of saber-rattling and rising tensions.

Nefertari, "an unhappy woman" and the wife of Ramses II, seeks to avert war between her country and the Hittite kingdom. She's practical and wise; she desires peace and dislikes jingoism. After receiving an indecipherable letter of mysterious provenance, she joins forces with a Hittite and a shaman, involving herself in palace intrigue as she works to find a diplomatic resolution for both nations following a Hittite infiltration. The opposing forces are in pursuit of the exiled King Mursili III and Crown Prince Hartapu, the latter of whom seeks to evade being captured or killed.

Set after the battle of Qadesh in 1264 BCE, the book vivifies ancient Egypt, as well as a prolonged conflict that led to a groundbreaking peace accord. It is epic in scope, infusing historical happenings with a great sense of portent. But while the prose is cerebral and alliterative, the dialogue is often stilted: characters make grand, unnatural philosophical pronouncements about war and peace, or engage in delivering lengthy expository speeches to advance the narration. Still, the story is neatly chronological as it alternates between Nefertari's strategics and Hartapu's race for survival. Its brisk pace is engaging, too, and its interludes establish a clear sense of place, as when Nefertari goes on strolls to reflect on her next gambit.

Eight of the book's major characters are historical figures, and their development is well grounded in scholars' accounts. Interior monologues flesh out their particulars: Nefertari exhibits a keen intellect, reading people, analyzing situations, and plotting her next moves with skill. Secondary characters are also explored in terms of their histories and beliefs—in this cast, everyone has substance. The same level of attention is applied to period details, working to capture the pinnacle features of ancient Egyptian civilization.

Following all of Nefertari's calculated maneuvers, the two sides end up pursuing a treaty near the book's end. It's a satisfying resolution to a gripping tale, and one that honors the place of the treaty in history, going beyond the pomp and circumstance of the moment to illustrate the patience and perseverance needed to reach it.

A riveting tale of political intrigue and backroom maneuvering, *A Hittite and a Shaman* breathes life into a fascinating chapter of Egyptian history.

JOSEPH S. PETE (May 16, 2022)

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