

# CONAN THE BARBARIAN

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1982 • US • UNIVERSAL PICTURES • 129M • COLOR • R

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**WRITERS:** John Milius And Oliver Stone

**BASED ON THE CHARACTER CREATED BY:** Robert E. Howard

**DIRECTOR:** John Milius

**PRODUCERS:** Dino De Laurentiis, Buzz Feitshans, and Raffaella De Laurentiis

**MUSIC:** Basil Poledouris

**DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:** Duke Callaghan

**SPECIAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR:** Nick Allder

**SPECIAL EFFECTS MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR:** Frank Van Der Veer

**SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS:** Frank Van Der Veer

**SPECIAL EFFECTS MAKE-UP:** Colin Arthur

**PRODUCTION DESIGNER:** Ron Cobb

**PRODUCTION ARTIST:** William Stout

**ART DIRECTORS:** Pierluigi Basile And Benjamin Fernandez

**COSTUME DESIGNER:** John Bloomfield

**TECHNICAL ADVISOR:** L. Sprague De Camp

**SPIRITUAL ADVISOR:** Doctor Fred L. Rexer

**ANIMAL HANDLER:** Franciso Ardura

**SNAKE TRAINER:** Dr. Yves De Vestel Tiva

**SERPENTS EXPERT:** I.T.I. Ophiology

**MASTER OF THE SWORD:** Kiyoshi Yamazaki

**SWORD MAKER:** Jody Samson

**STUNT COORDINATORS:** Terry J. Leonard and Juan Majan

**CAST:** Arnold Schwarzenegger (Conan), James Earl Jones (Thulsa Doom), Max Von Sydow (King Osric), Sandahl Bergman (Valeria), Ben Davidson (Rexor), Cassandra Gaviola (The Witch), Gerry Lopez (Subotai), Mako (The Wizard), Valerie Quennessen (The Princess), William Smith (Conan's Father), Luis Barboo (Red Hair), Franco Columbu (Pictish Scout), Leslie Folduary (Sacrificial Snake Girl), Gary Herman (Osric's Guard), Erick Holmey (Turanian War Officer), Akio Mitamura (Mongol General), Nadiuska (Conan's Mother), Jorge Sanz (Young Conan), Jack Taylor (Priest), Sven Ole Thorsen (Thorgrim), Kiyoshi Yamasaki (Sword Master), Pilar Alcón (Orgy Slave Girl, uncredited), Florencio Amarilla (Man, uncredited), John Milius (Lizard-on-a-Stick Vendor, uncredited), Ron Cobb (Black Lotus Street Peddler, uncredited), Dragon Dronet (Pit Fighter, uncredited), Donald Gibb (Osric's Guard, uncredited), Andrea Guzon (Breeding Woman, uncredited), and Corrie Jansen (Beautiful Woman Jumping to her Death, uncredited)

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## ON THE MAP

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The story takes place in Robert E. Howard's fictional Hyboria, in roughly 10,000 B.C. We begin in Conan's homeland, Cimmeria, as he sets out on a journey that ultimately takes him to Shadizar in Zamora and then Thulsa Doom's temple stronghold in his Mountain of Power. One day Conan will reign over Aquilonia . . . but we're not there yet.

## OUR STORY SO FAR

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With his village destroyed and his family slaughtered, a young barbarian goes through great hardship in slavery, becomes an accomplished pit fighter, meets friends and an equally capable female warrior and lover, and seeks revenge on the evil wizard who placed him on the path to becoming a man.

## ALTERNATE VERSIONS

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Some of the multiple cuts of the movie result from censorship in the UK that trimmed out scenes of animal-related violence and sexual content. The 1980s broadcast-network airing naturally trimmed the movie as well. On VHS videotape, Universal released two cuts of the movie running 115 and 123 minutes—neither as long as the theatrical version. An extended cut, available on DVD since 2000, includes additional character moments and an epilogue narration; this version also restores director John Milius's cameo appearance as a lizard-on-a-stick vendor and runs 131 minutes. Some dialogue and other variations pop up in European releases of the film. If you get the US Blu-ray, you're in for more surprises, because that cut differs yet again from the US DVD and the original theatrical version. It's confusing, all right. If you're a dedicated fan, you might just have to collect them all.

## IT'S MAGIC

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While much of this movie tends toward a more realistic depiction of an ancient time than many other films in this book, plenty of magic and supernatural influences point not only to the existence of sorcery but to the gods (like Crom) worshipped by the characters. In fact, one might wonder if Thulsa Doom is actually an incarnation of Set and not merely a warlock of some kind, because he can transform into a huge snake and is a thousand years old.

Other gods—which might or might not exist—range from the steel-obsessed Crom to Subotai's sky god and appear to derive from the elements and other parts of nature. Magic seems to hold sway over these beings, because you can fight back against the forces of Death itself, as Conan's companions do when he dies (for all intents and purposes) and specters set upon him, determined to drag him to an afterlife (presumably). The process of resurrecting him, which includes writing incantations all over his body and leaving him to bake for a night (kidding), is complex and difficult . . . but it works.

The witch who beds Conan seems to derive at least some of her magical energy from sex, which is nice work if you can get it. As with so many of our movies, blue appears to be the default color for this energy, although she also becomes a fireball that flies away into the distance.

## THE QUEST FOR MEANING

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As with many of this genre's movies, we witness the crumbling of old ways, the prospect of restoring them, or perhaps the dawn of an era with the glories of the past receding into the distance, marked by monuments and entombed artifacts like the ages of Middle-earth in a certain other fantasy saga. The film hangs its shingle early with the quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, "That

THIEF  
WARRIOR  
GLADIATOR  
KING

which does not kill us makes us stronger.” As we watch the forging of the sword—and as Milius and Schwarzenegger confirm on the DVD audio commentary—the entire film becomes a metaphor for crafting a perfect weapon, whether in a sword or of a man. Conan’s experience tempers him like steel, but only because of Doom’s actions, so the villain creates the hero and his own eventual demise, as in many other fantasy and superhero stories. Thulsa even refers to their relationship as one of a son and a surrogate father. In fact, this culture seems determined to create someone who will take it all down: training him in combat, building a perfect fighter, and instilling all the seething resentment in him that will one day turn against the establishment. Its members even teach him writing and make him smarter! The wheel serves as a form of natural selection, leaving only the strongest warrior alive, but even for those destined for greatness like the Cimmerian, his fall into the Atlantean tomb where sits another ancient king (which mirrors the shot at the end of the film) foreshadows his fate: Conan will one day be another discarded weapon of a bygone age.

Scourging, crucifixion, and resurrection create obvious parallels with Christ. Sadly, though, despite this film’s revered status, it has disturbing thematic currents—not just in subtext but in text. In the aforementioned audio commentary, director and star hold court throughout, making misogynistic and homophobic jokes that lend further distaste to Milius’s oft-stated main message of the film: that might makes right, especially when you’re holding cold blue steel. Indeed, this movie and its “Riddle of Steel” are nothing more than a fantasy epic wrapped around an NRA pro-gun commercial . . . and guess which director is a board member of that organization? Perhaps not surprisingly, the runes on the sword declare that its wielder suffers no guilt when using it in the service of Crom, so the implication is that killing in the service of one’s deity is A-OK. Symbols of civilization and social structure are condemned as corrupt or wicked in comparison to the anarchy of a barbarian’s existence. Time to load up on canned goods and ammo? It’s also no surprise, then, that the movie attacks anyone devoted to the cause of peace. Milius calls out the worshippers of Doom in the mock Woodstock sequence as “hippies,” as though the word is poison. Doom, the only black character in the film, is a cult leader and monster. Is there a racial angle here, too?

As for women, we make plenty of jokes in this book about the often sexist nature of some of these films, but rarely does it seem quite as intentional and mean-spirited as it does here. Valeria might be a strong and independent warrior . . . but only until she falls in love with the hero, gives up that independence, and then dies. Although Conan’s “lamentation of the women” quote remains one of the genre’s most memorable, it seems to sum up what both he and Milius thought truly *was* best in life. In the commentary, Milius goes so far as to say that when male viewers hear Conan wax eloquent about women mourning, they’re thinking, “I want to be like him.” Count these two authors out, thanks.

### WHO GOES THERE?

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Arnold Schwarzenegger is a living legend whose iconic stature as one of the greatest film action-heroes of all time makes it difficult to summarize his career in a few lines. With a dubious beginning in acting after making the transition from bodybuilding—including multiple reigns

as Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia—he made the infamous *Hercules in New York*, an “official” debut in *Stay Hungry*, and an appearance as Mickey Hargitay in the TV-movie *The Jayne Mansfield Story*. *Conan the Barbarian* set him on the path to true and lasting Hollywood heroics, which continued with roles in *Conan the Destroyer*, *The Terminator*, *Red Sonja*, *Commando*, *Raw Deal*, *Predator*, *The Running Man*, *Red Heat*, *Twins*, *Total Recall*, *Kindergarten Cop*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Last Action Hero*, *True Lies*, *Eraser*, *Batman & Robin*, *The 6th Day*, and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*.

Following his third *Terminator* film and after years of diminishing returns on many projects, Schwarzenegger reinvented himself once again as “the Governator,” serving as the governor of California from 2003–2011. Now that he’s “bahk” . . . to acting (like we weren’t going to make that joke?), Schwarzenegger is picking up where he left off, with roles in *The Expendables* and its sequels, the zombie film *Maggie*, *Terminator Genisys*, and a planned sequel to *Twins* called *Trip-lets* (introducing Eddie Murphy as another sibling for Schwarzenegger’s and Danny DeVito’s characters), not to mention taking up the steel once more . . . but we’ll talk more about that in **The Saga Continues**.

Max Von Sydow is a film institution, known to generations of cinema fans for a variety of projects that include everything from esteemed productions by Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*) to gleefully camp comic-strip adaptations (*Flash Gordon*). Other film credits include *Wild Strawberries*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (in which he played Jesus), *The Exorcist*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *Voyage of the Damned*, *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, *The Adventures of Bob & Doug McKenzie: Strange Brew*, *Never Say Never Again* (as James Bond’s nemesis Blofeld), *The Ice Pirates*, *Dreamscape*, *Dune*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Ghostbusters II* (as the uncredited voice of Vigo), *Needful Things*, *Citizen X*, *Judge Dredd*, *What Dreams May Come*, *Minority Report*, *Rush Hour 3*, *Solomon Kane*, *Shutter Island*, *Robin Hood*, and *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens*. He’s also appeared on television in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Samson and Delilah*, *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, and *The Tudors*, and was the voice of Esbern in the videogame *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

Sandahl Bergman is the first in our cast who would return in a different role in the not-quite-*Conan* follow-up, *Red Sonja*. She also appeared in *Xanadu*, *She*, *Airplane II: The Sequel*, *Hell Comes to Frogtown*, and *Sorceress II: The Temptress*, and turned up on television in *Moonlighting*, *Cheers*, *Hard Time on Planet Earth*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Sliders*, and as the same character in two creepy episodes of the horror anthology TV series, *Freddy’s Nightmares*.

Ben Davidson was a football player for three teams during his career and moved into acting with appearances in TV shows like *Banacek*, *CHIPs*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Fantasy Island*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *B.J. and the Bear*, and *Simon & Simon*, as well as the film *Necessary Roughness*. He died in 2012 at age 72.

Cassandra Gaviola was a regular on the TV series spinoff of *M\*A\*S\*H*, was in *Trapper John, M.D.*, and also appeared on *Fantasy Island*, *Taxi*, and *General Hospital*, as well as in the movies *Night Shift* and *Dead by Dawn*.

Gerry Lopez is revered in the surfing world for his accomplishments and contemplative approach to the lifestyle. He made only a few other film appearances, including *Storm Riders* and *Farewell to the King*.

Mako was a ubiquitous presence on film and in television, appearing in movies like *Under the Rainbow*, *Conan the Destroyer*, *RoboCop 3*, *Highlander: The Final Dimension*, and *Pearl Harbor*, and TV series such as *I Dream of Jeannie*, *I Spy*, *The Time Tunnel*, *Kung Fu*, *Ironside*, *Mannix*, *Columbo*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Fantasy Island*, *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, *Voyagers!*, *Quincy M.E.*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*, and *Charmed*. He was also the narrator of the animated series *Dexter's Laboratory* and lent his voice to the cartoon shows *Samurai Jack*, *Duck Dodgers*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. He died in 2006 at age 72.

Valerie Quenessen was an acrobat as a child and started acting as a therapeutic attempt to overcome shyness. Her brief career included appearances in *Bolero* and *Summer Lovers*. She died in 1989 at age 31, due to a car accident.

William Smith has had a prolific career as one of those instantly identifiable faces on television and in film, often as a menacing figure. He started as a child actor, making an appearance in Universal's *The Ghost of Frankenstein*, but throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, he turned up in western, action, and science-fiction series, also playing Falconetti in the *Rich Man, Poor Man* miniseries (both of them) and appearing in films like *Piranha*, *The Thing with Two Heads*, *Invasion of the Bee Girls*, *The Frisco Kid*, *Any Which Way You Can*, *Red Dawn*, *Hell Comes to Frogtown*, *Maniac Cop*, *Manosaurus*, and *Warriors of the Apocalypse*.

Luis Barboo began his career in westerns like *A Fistful of Dollars* and also appeared in *Where Time Began*, *Mystery on Monster Island*, and *Night of the Werewolf*. He died in 2001 at age 74.

Franco Columbu has shared a long friendship with Arnold Schwarzenegger, training alongside him as a bodybuilder and even standing as best man at the big man's wedding. He also appeared in *The Terminator*, *The Running Man*, and *Big Top Pee-wee*.

Erick Holmey returned (uncredited) in *Conan the Destroyer* and *Red Sonja*.

Akio Mitamura's few other film credits include *1941*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and *Flight of the Intruder*.

Nadiuska spent most of her career prior to this movie in softcore fare.

Jack Taylor started his career on the classic television series *The Jack Benny Program* and later segued into Mexican horror films, the Jess Franco-directed *Count Dracula* starring Christopher Lee, *Female Vampire*, *The Ghost Galleon* (one of the *Blind Dead* movies), *Exorcismo*, *Where Time Began*, *Pieces*, and *The Ninth Gate*.

Sven Ole Thorsen spent years in the bodybuilding world and holds the record as Schwarzenegger's most frequent costar. After this movie and roles in *Conan the Destroyer* and *Red Sonja*, he continued to appear in action epics and cult hits, such as *Raw Deal*; *Lethal Weapon* and its second sequel; *Predator*; *The Running Man*; *Overboard*; *Red Heat*; *Twins*; *The Hunt for Red October*; *Last Action Hero*; *The Quick and the Dead*; *Mallrats*; *Eraser*; *Kull the Conqueror*; *The 13th Warrior*; and *Gladiator*. He also had a regular part on the TV series *Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future* and lent his voice to the Danish animated parody *Ronal the Barbarian*.

Kiyoshi Yamasaki's only other acting credit came in *Red Sonja*, although he also served as sword master again for *Conan the Destroyer* as well as fight coordinator for *Dune*.

*Revenge of the Nerds* fans might best know Donald Gibb for yelling "Nerds!" at the top of his lungs, as the jock Ogre in the '80s cult classic and two of its sequels, but he also played in films like *Any Which Way You Can*, *Stripes*, *Meatballs Part II*, *Lost in America*, *Transylvania 6-5000*,

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*Amazon Women on the Moon*, *Bloodsport*, *Bloodsport 2*, and *Hancock*, TV shows such as *The A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, *Otherworld*, *Night Court*, *MacGyver*, *Quantum Leap*, *The X-Files*, and *Seinfeld*, and the *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*

videogame. Now lots of television viewers know him as one of the gray-bearded “pillagers” from the Capital One credit-card commercial series.

## 6 DEGREES OF SORCERY

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The Nietzsche quote comes from *Twilight of the Idols*. The forging-of-the-rings sequence at the start of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* echoes the title sequence of this movie. The tale of Conan’s father about Crom has some passing similarity to the tale of Prometheus. Conan’s gladiatorial days mirror those of other heroes created by their enemies in games of violence, such as in the science-fiction film *Rollerball*.

Conan’s legendary line about “the lamentations of the women” is a paraphrase from Genghis Khan. Several other elements of Conan’s character and story also parallel aspects of that historic figure’s life. Subotai was even the name of his general.

The Atlantean tomb resembles the later Egyptian crypt seen in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Another witch’s cottage appears in *Brave . . .* but it sure does have a different occupant. Her diabolical laughter is a bit like that of the Deadites of the *Evil Dead* series.

Quite a few visual sequences honor the work of fantasy artist Frank Frazetta. Look for notable similarities in the orgy chamber, for example.

The Eye of the Serpent is one of many familiar “MacGuffins” in fantasy films, like the All-Seeing Eye in *The Thief of Bagdad* (which, as we note in that chapter, owes much to *Conan* and Robert E. Howard) and the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. The big snake might remind *Doctor Who* fans of the Mara, while a similar scene to the close-up shot of its eye opening turns up in the final moments of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Its keeper is also sad about its demise, as is the rancor-keeper in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*.

King Osric’s difficulty with his daughter mirrors that of another Von Sydow monarch and his female offspring: Ming and Aura in *Flash Gordon . . .* prints of which carried trailers for this movie! Conan tries to spare Valeria from danger at one point, as Perseus does with Andromeda in *Clash of the Titans*.

We’ve seen plenty of heroes trudge through the snow, including *Superman*. The Tree of Woe is a none-too-subtle crucifixion followed by a magical resurrection. The spirits that try to collect Conan’s soul resemble spirits in *Fantasia* and *Ghost*. Schwarzenegger dons similar war paint in his action romp *Commando*.

Maax’s ziggurat in *The Beastmaster* echoes Thulsa’s high-staired headquarters. Milius has said that the set, with its speech-ready parapet, puts Thulsa in the position of Hitler *a la* the work of Leni Reifenstahl.

Thulsa himself shares a name with Robert E. Howard’s nemesis for Kull, but he’s a very different character, more reminiscent of *Conan* antagonist Thoth-Amon. He has a cult status

similar to that of the infamous Jim Jones. His following was partially based on the same Thuggee cult that inspired the villains in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. (That word seems so familiar. . . .)

The imprisoned princess sits at Thulsa's feet like Princess Leia in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* and is later chained as bait like Andromeda in *Clash of the Titans*. Columns fall like they do in the tale of Samson and in the Well of Souls in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Thulsa fires snake-arrows made rigid, like Moses transforming a snake into a staff in *The Ten Commandments*. How many times have we seen the funeral pyre scene in these films and others? The sword of Conan's father shatters like Narsil in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Our hero holds up the villain's severed head like Perseus with the Medusa in *Clash of the Titans*. If you want to see Conan's Atlantean sword again, check out Schwarzenegger's recent comeback film *The Last Stand*, where it is briefly wielded not by him but by actor Luiz Guzman!

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### SHATTERING THE ILLUSION

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Author Robert E. Howard followed the creation of his character Kull with the debut of this heroic Cimmerian in 1932 via short stories published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. Partially inspired by Thomas Bulfinch's *The Outline of Mythology*, as well as the Cthulhu stories of H. P. Lovecraft, Howard crafted a fictional ancient world in which his barbarian could have adventures and introduced a character who would become a multimedia hero for decades. Other authors, like L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter, carried on with new *Conan* stories, but it took some time for the warrior to fight his way into film—and not before a defeat or two along the way.

Edward Summer was the first to try to bring Conan to the big screen, in the 1970s, hoping to spark a James Bond-style series, with at least six adventures planned in advance. Roy Thomas (Marvel Comics writer, responsible for that publisher's *Conan* comic-book adaptation) co-scripted a very faithful version of the Howard mythos, but it was shelved.

Then Oliver Stone drafted a screenplay, and Dino De Laurentiis entered the picture as primary financier. Early on in development, they hoped that legendary illustrator Frank Frazetta would serve as a designer or consultant, but when they could not make a deal with him, Rob Cobb became production designer, with the intention of avoiding the style of many previous movies of the genre by creating more of a Dark Age look than Greco-Roman. He also employed a number of Frazetta-style tableaux.

When John Milius came in as director (over other possible helmers who included Ridley Scott), he extensively reworked Stone's script, which would have set the movie in a post-apocalyptic timeframe instead of the Howard-faithful ancient one. From Stone's version of the tale, he also dropped a variety of creatures more akin to those in Ray Harryhausen's *Sinbad* adventures. Milius's vision combined elements of adventures written by past *Conan* authors and borrowed from previous films, such as *Seven Samurai*.

Sterling Hayden of *Dr. Strangelove* and *The Godfather* fame was cast as King Osric but had to drop out due to medical reasons, leaving the role open for Max Von Sydow. Such talented thespians among the cast, including James Earl Jones, were to provide support for less-experi-

enced lead actors, such as dancer Sandahl Bergman and professional surfer Gerry Lopez (whose dialogue Sab Shimono ultimately re-dubbed).

And who else could be Conan? Although it's hard to imagine now, other choices included future Arnold Schwarzenegger action-hero rival Sylvester Stallone, Charles Bronson, and even Conan's dad, William Smith, whom Schwarzenegger knew as a child following Smith's body-building career. But Schwarzenegger, as he appeared in *Pumping Iron*, attracted the production's attention and made the choice obvious.

Schwarzenegger signed for four films with a salary that would rise with every subsequent sequel and a percentage of profits. Schwarzenegger's relationship with De Laurentiis might not have gotten off on the right foot, though, due to a comment Schwarzenegger made about the producer's height, but the actor did bond with costar Jones as hoped, with Schwarzenegger helping Jones to stay fit during the production while Jones provided coaching on Schwarzenegger's performance.

The first filming took place in the UK at Shepperton Studios with the shot of an older Conan on his throne. It appears only briefly at the end of the film, but the scene originally ran longer and included Conan reading to the audience. Schwarzenegger was supposed to narrate the film beginning with this scene, but the powers that be had concerns about his accent. Even speech training with voice coach Robert Easton and Milius himself couldn't eliminate it. Schwarzenegger did, however, train to slim down and become a bit more athletic (beyond simple weightlifting), learned a variety of fighting styles, did his own stunts, and wielded multiple copies of two specially forged (unsharpened) swords that cost \$10,000 each to fabricate. In fighting scenes, he used lighter-weight versions, saving the expensive, detailed ones for use as "hero" props in close-ups.

As with many of these movies, actors didn't escape unscathed. In addition to Schwarzenegger, Bergman also performed her own stunts, with both actors often in danger. Schwarzenegger hurt his back falling ten feet during the dog-chase scene, and a sword chopped off a piece of Bergman's finger!

Injuries among actors might be one thing, but the film also attracted the attention of the American Humane Association, which labeled the movie "unacceptable" when news of cruelty to animals such as horses, camels, and dogs filtered out during production. Environmentalists also took exception to the crew's alterations to the local landscape and required the production to pledge that it would return everything to its original state.

Most of the principal photography took place in Almeria, Spain, after production canceled initial plans to shoot in Yugoslavia due to concerns about the local political climate. Ironically, an attempted coup in Spain still plagued the filming, but cameras rolled on. A Madrid warehouse served as the local headquarters for the filmmakers and also as a soundstage for interiors, along with one other warehouse and an airplane hangar.

While the locale worked out well, the stunt performers tended to pad their parts by dying in overly dramatic ways. Milius eventually offered bonus pay if they would keep it simple and die quickly.

The movie made use of sets from other productions as well as historic locations, with marble shavings standing in for snow and eight large miniatures taking the place of buildings, with



clever camera angles creating the illusion of scale. Not everything was small: builders constructed forty feet of the tower scaled by Conan's party in full size, as well as a \$350,000 temple structure with 120 steps. When shooting wrapped, the production team burned the temple to the ground. Conan would have been proud.

Special-effects supervisor Nick Allder, a crane operator from *Dragonslayer*, utilized a motorized mounted camera system he had created on that film to shoot some of this movie's action sequences. Practical effects included body parts and beheadings partly overseen by make-up man Colin Arthur, who had previously worked at Madame Tussauds.

Only the front of the thirty-six-foot-long mechanical snake appeared in the film, because the rest of the construct didn't fit on the set. Schwarzenegger had to hit the right spot on the snake to explode it and release the blood for the beheading scene.

Doom's transformation employed a number of effects to create the illusion of his human form shifting into—eventually—that of a real live snake shot on a miniature set.

Milius kept a tight reign on optical effects, believing that they would add more of a note of fantasy to the film than he intended. For Conan's near-death experience with ghostly beings from beyond, however, a company called VCE—which had previously provided similar apparitions for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and had also worked on *Dragonslayer*—and ILM teamed up to create the otherworldly struggle to save the barbarian's soul.

The studio delayed the film's release, originally planned for Christmas 1981, when censors balked at an edited version that they felt needed further trimming: more than ten minutes' worth. Audiences therefore missed seeing Conan's decapitated mother in close-up, for example, and the cuts required adjustments to the musical score. When previews began, though, audiences responded effusively. The studio even moved up the US opening to take advantage of the positive buzz.

The film made over \$100 million and cemented Schwarzenegger as a rising action star, leading him one day to credit the role as "God's gift" to his Hollywood career. Conan conquered cinema, by Crom!

## MUSIC OF THE MINSTRELS

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Few other scores in this genre can compete with Basil Poledouris's bombastic, foreboding, propulsive, operatic, and ultimately triumphant soundtrack for *Conan the Barbarian*. So confident was Milius in Poledouris—they had worked together before—that he brought the composer in to develop the score purely from pre-production storyboards. Poledouris would continue refining it during shooting, visiting the set and finalizing his work based on a temp-tracked, edited version of the movie that Milius prepared by inserting a variety of classical pieces to provide Poledouris with the appropriate mood for each sequence. *Excalibur* nixed Milius's plans to base some choral elements on Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* by beating him to the punch, so Poledouris employed a twenty-four-member chorus to create an original piece loosely translated into partially nonsensical Latin and based on *Dies Irae*, a Gregorian hymn from the 1200s. He completed the soundtrack in mono rather than stereo, the last such score to accompany a studio release of that caliber. The score had so powerful an impact that the music often appeared

in other movies' trailers and temp tracks. Even negative critics of the film praised Poledouris's work, which stands the test of time. Varese Sarabande expanded upon the original soundtrack release, adding four tracks and nearly twenty minutes of music to the preceding twelve-track version.

## THE SAGA CONTINUES

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Although Schwarzenegger had signed for four movies, some discussion ensued of making a trilogy of films that would follow Conan's heroic journey: the first to illustrate his strength, the second to focus on the use of his sword, and the third to dwell on the consequences of his actions and life. A sequel did come out; you can read about it in the index. It didn't do well enough to allow for the third chapter . . . yet. (More on this later.)

Bantam published a novelization of the film in May 1982, co-authored by Lin Carter, L. Sprague, and Catherine de Camp. As for comics, Conan had beaten his film incarnation to that medium when Marvel brought the barbarian to its pages in 1970; its success certainly didn't hurt the eventual development of the film and Conan's more prominent place in pop culture. Initially written by Roy Thomas, with art by Barry Windsor-Smith, a color comic-book series titled *Conan the Barbarian* later gained the supplement of a more mature black-and-white magazine called *Savage Sword of Conan*, also written by Thomas, with art by John Buscema, among others. The comic books also spawned a newspaper strip that ran until about a year before the release of this film. When the time came, Marvel released an adaptation of this movie and later its sequel in two issues of its *Marvel Comics Super Special* series. (Two earlier issues had featured unrelated *Savage Sword of Conan* stories.) The same adaptation—scripted by Michael Fleisher and illustrated by John Buscema—also appeared as one of the publisher's Marvel Illustrated Books paperback volumes and is now one of the rarest releases in that line.

A \$5 million, twenty-minute live stage attraction at Universal Studios Hollywood, *The Adventures of Conan: A Sword and Sorcery Spectacular*, ran for ten years, starting in 1983. It made use of Poledouris's music and treated audiences to an animatronic dragon that actually spewed flames and towered eighteen feet high!

Merchandise includes decades' worth of Conan-related memorabilia, but if we look specifically at tie-ins to this film (and its sequel) and not just material featuring the Conan character in general, we can narrow the range a bit and save our sanity at the same time. While there have been a number of Conan-themed videogames, the 1984 Datasoft release, *Conan: Hall of Volta*, most closely associated with this film (actually, its sequel). The box art showcased Schwarzenegger as seen in *Conan the Destroyer*, but it wasn't the most faithful tie-in, seeing as it featured a character who threw a "boomerang sword." Designers had first planned it as an unrelated game called *Visigoth*. The game, such as it was, was available for the Apple II and Commodore 64 as well as the Atari 400/800.

When one of Howard's characters finally made his way to tabletop gaming in 1984, it was Conan, thanks to a licensing deal made by TSR to release movie tie-in modules for their *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* line. David Cook's *Conan Unchained* and Ken Rolston's *Conan Against Darkness!* featured Schwarzenegger photo covers and gained enough popularity to

inspire an entire game built around the character. TSR followed up its 1985 release of the *Conan Role-Playing Game* with three more modules: Kim Eastland's *Conan the Buccaneer* and *Conan the Mercenary*, and William Carlson's *Conan Triumphant*. In addition, TSR published James M. Ward's *Conan the Undaunted* and Roger E. Moore's *Conan and the Prophecy* and *Conan the Outlaw*, which were *Endless Quest* books similar to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. Steve Jackson Games brought Conan over to the GURPs system in 1986 with an initial release, followed by four supplements.

Many later *Conan*-related games have returned to the original source material and might not have a direct connection to this movie, but the legacy of the film looms large in almost every adaptation of the character, if only in the minds of fans and gamers. Recent examples of games include 2004's d20-based *Conan: The Roleplaying Game* from Mongoose Publishing, a 2006 collectible card game designed by Jason Robinette and released by Comic Images, a 2008 MMORPG from Funcom and Eidos Interactive called *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*, and a 2009 *Age of Conan* boardgame from Fantasy Flight Games.

In one of the murkier stories related to the film, the Mattel toy company supposedly entered into a licensing agreement to produce a *Conan*-themed toy line in conjunction with the movie's release. Mattel then requested the agreement's termination in early 1982 after seeing the movie and realizing its violent tone did not suit their usual market. Immediately after that, however, Mattel debuted its *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* action figures and playsets, sparking a lawsuit that Mattel won. *He-Man* lead designer Roger Sweet has gone on record as saying he devised the character and his cohorts in 1980 with partial inspiration from the work of Frank Frazetta (then again, Conan as a character certainly predates this), and some sources say that the *He-Man* line clearly moved into production parallel with the film and that there never was any such licensing agreement. This story seems to have evolved from fans speculating on the origins of a mysterious Wonder Bread promotion that offered a brown-haired prototype He-Man, later resurrected in the line under the name Wun-Dar. Meanwhile, who produced the *Masters of the Universe* feature film adaptation five years later? *Conan* executive producer Edward R. Pressman, the man who, as rumors claim, negotiated the toy deal in the first place: hmm. A short-lived *Conan* action-figure line did briefly turn up in 1984 from Remco. It was "compatible" with the *Masters of the Universe* toys and borrowed designs from some of Remco's other products.

So . . . about that third *Conan* movie . . .

A long-awaited *King Conan* project reared its weary, crowned head from time to time, involving filmmakers like Milius, the Wachowski brothers, and Robert Rodriguez, but all seemed completely sunk to the depths of Atlantis by Schwarzenegger's transition to political life as governor of California in 2003. Through a convoluted series of rights and financial deals, a *Conan* project finally started up at Nu Image / Millennium Films, with Marcus Nispel directing and Jason Momoa (*Game of Thrones*) in the title role. The results of this "reboot" were less than spectacular. The film suffered post-release controversy when script doctor Sean Hood took to the web and candidly discussed the plighted production and its box-office failure.

HE CONQUERED AN EMPIRE  
WITH HIS SWORD.  
SHE CONQUERED HIM WITH  
HER BARE HANDS.

Meanwhile, fans watched as Schwarzenegger left office and began plans to segue back into the world of movie making. . . .

Writer-director Frank Darabont commented on his own proposal for a *Conan* film, which would return to the Howard material and feature his former *Walking Dead* star, Jon Bernthal, as a wittier, smarter barbarian, but let's face it: for fans there's only one Conan, and there can be no greater quest than the journey to a third and final *Conan* film, at long last fulfilling the promise of the older warrior sitting heavily on his throne, as teased at the ends of both films. One can complete even the most miraculous quests if one is courageous—and patient—enough.

Soon enough, everyone learned that Schwarzenegger's Hollywood comeback included revisiting the Cimmerian who helped make him an action star. Unlike the "reboot," the new project, titled *The Legend of Conan*, is a full-fledged studio production backed by Universal that will ignore both that 2011 movie and the 1984 sequel that so irked Schwarzenegger. Currently Chris Morgan is co-producing and co-writing the film, which one interview characterizes as "Conan's *Unforgiven*." Morgan drew the actor back to the fold by promising that this project would be like catching up with an old friend. Further news revealed that at least three other original *Conan the Barbarian* actors will return alongside Schwarzenegger and that production will start in the fall of 2015. Co-producer Frederik Malmberg also expressed interest in involving the WETA team from the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* films. We'd recommend a thematic connection to Osric's speech about jewels ceasing to sparkle, gold losing its luster, the throne room becoming a prison, and the only thing left being a father's love for his child. Pair Conan with a son or daughter, and roll camera!

And so the one, the only, the original cinematic Conan will take up the sword again. (We do know that Schwarzenegger still has the Fangs of the Serpent dagger.) Speaking of which . . .

### TAKE UP THY SWORD!

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#### THE SERPENT'S FANGS (WEAPON)

The dual, kris-like blades of this nasty-looking dagger contain vials of heart-seeking snake venom. A successful strike yields better-than-average damage (per a standard dagger), but a critical strike shatters the vials, envenoming the victim with a deadly toxin. In a very short time, the venom reaches the heart, causing death unless the victim successfully saves versus poison. Even with a save, the venom still inflicts devastating damage. While fanatical members of a well-known snake cult typically wield these daggers, assassins also highly prize them.

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#### THE FILM'S DESTINY

This is the one, a film so revered, so cherished by the sword-and-sorcery and gaming fan communities that it is almost review-proof. Sure, we could talk about how some of the acting isn't exactly perfect (not including Schwarzenegger, who was, after all, born to play this part and acquits himself very well so early in his film career) or about how some of the effects haven't aged so well, but there's really no point in doing that. Although this book illustrates that the genre has a history stretching back much earlier than 1982, with several crucial films arriving in theaters in just the two years prior to *Conan the Barbarian*, this is the moment that sets in stone

nearly everything about the modern conception of a sword-and-sorcery film. All the tropes of the hero journey, though in existence throughout the history of storytelling, take shape cinematically here, forged and tempered into the forms they bring to the present day.

This isn't to ignore the troubling thematic elements (for which we took the movie to task in the "Quest for Meaning" section), but if we review the film purely as an entertainment experience, and within the context of the genre we're celebrating, there really are few finer examples than this one. The creation of a hero has rarely been as directly drawn, exhilarating, and memorable, and few human beings on Earth could have embodied the essence of adventure and sheer strength in the face of unspeakable evil as Schwarzenegger. It's now hard, looking back at what we can see in the movie, to be as forgiving as perhaps we want to be, but we'll try: *Conan the Barbarian* is, flaws and all, a classic with truly artful imagery and is the benchmark for every pretender (and a few worthy successors) that followed.

## THIS YEAR IN GAMING

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*The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, by authors Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, began development as *The Magic Quest*. Puffin Books—the children's division of Penguin—published it in 1982, with an impressive cover by illustrator Peter Andrew Jones, poster artist for *The Sword and the Sorcerer* and cover artist for the *Kult* RPG (Metropolis Ltd.), *Stormbringer* RPG (Chaosium), and the *Dungeonquest* boardgame (Games Workshop). This was the first of more than sixty solitaire roleplaying-game books in the *Fighting Fantasy* series. The plot had the player-reader take on the role of an adventurer on a quest to find the treasure of the warlock buried deep within Firetop Mountain. The initial volume spawned two book sequels, videogames, and a boardgame from Games Workshop. In late 2012, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the series, Australian videogame studio Tin Man Games produced iPhone and Android versions of the *Fighting Fantasy* series, with Livingstone's blessing.