

Ramses II



If, today, at the end of the twentieth century, one were to ask the average person to name an Egyptian pharaoh, the reply would probably be, "Tutankhamen." This, of course, is due to the highly unusual discovery by Howard Carter in 1922 of the child-king's small but almost intact tomb. Tutankhamen died at age 17. Outside of the contents of his tomb, little is known of his reign, and he is not considered to be a pharaoh of major importance. Returning to our "name that pharaoh" question, if the average person were to be able to name a second pharaoh, it would almost surely be Ramses II. Even if little importance is currently placed on knowledge of ancient history, legends of this great ruler still live on. Many may remember him from Shelly's famous, if historically inaccurate, poem, "Ozymandias." Some associate him with "Pharaoh" from the Biblical story of the Exodus. A series of best selling novels has recently been written based on the life of Ramses II. Finally, the astute history student will know that Ramses II, popularly known as "Ramses the Great," built more temples, statues and obelisks than any other pharaoh of Ancient Egypt.

Ramses' place in Ancient Egyptian History

In an effort to handle the 3,000 years of Egyptian history which includes 170 or so pharaohs, Egyptologists have divided Ancient Egypt into Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom, with intermediate periods in between. The system of dynasties dates back to the third century BC, when the High Priest of Heliopolis, Manetho, defined the basic Egyptian chronology still in use today. Ramses II ruled for 67 years during the 13th Century BC. He was a pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty, during the New Kingdom. When the young Ramses came to power, 1300 years had already passed since the time of the Fourth Dynasty, the dynasty that is traditionally associated with the famous pyramids and Sphinx of the Giza plateau (although much evidence suggests that they were constructed many years before even the first historical dynasty).

The pharaohs of the New Kingdom were kings of a massive nation, and many of their tremendous works, temples and fortresses are still extant today as testament. Ramses came to power approximately 46 years after the death of Tutankhamen. Tutankhamen's reign marked the end of what is known as the Amarna Interlude, a sixteen-year period of revolution in Ancient Egypt when the religious fanatic Akhenaton mandated that his "personal god," Aton, be the only one worshipped. Akhenaton moved the capital out into a new desert city that was abandoned after the traditional religion and government were restored. After Tutankhamen, a series of three military leaders and government officials in turn assumed the throne. Their primary role was to reestablish the ancient ways and to assure that no foreign countries took advantage of the temporary disorganization. The last of these, Ramses I, was the first of the Nineteenth Dynasty, and the first of the so-called Ramesside Period. He was the grandfather of Ramses II.

Family and childhood

Seti I was the son of Ramses I, and was the pharaoh who truly restored Egypt to the greatness and harmony it had enjoyed before the Amarna period. He instituted a major building program and a clearly defined foreign policy abroad. He assumed the title "repeater of births," which indicated the beginning of a new and legitimate era. Seti secured the eastern borders with Syria and the western borders with Libya. Later, foreshadowing the famous battle of Kadesh led by his son Ramses II, Seti attempted for once and all to restore Egyptian dominance in Syria and Lebanon (Clayton 141).

Most importantly, Seti's 13-year reign represents one of the most important periods in the history of Ancient Egypt for art, architecture and culture. The quality of the relieves, the temples and his tomb are unique in all of Egyptian art. Seti worked on the great building project his father began in Karnak that his son Ramses would later complete: the Hypostyle Hall in the Temple of Amon. He built the magnificent temple at Abydos, the city sacred to Osiris. It is in this temple that the "Royal List of Abydos" is found. This is one of the important sources of Egyptian history and chronology. Behind this temple is the massive and mysterious "Osirion" or "Tomb of Osiris." Scholars also attribute this to Seti, although there is evidence that it is much older.

Seti's finest work was his tomb in the Valley of the Kings (KV17), which was discovered by Belzoni in 1817. It is the longest, deepest and most beautiful of all of the tombs in the Valley. Seti married within his own military "caste." Ramses' mother was named Tuya. She outlived her husband by many years. She was queen-mother in until her death in Year 22 or 23 of the reign of Ramses II, and statues of her appear frequently in Ramses' temples and constructions. She appears on the facade at Abu Simbel, and in statue at the Ramesseum and at Ramses' Delta capital, Piramesse. A beautiful portrait of Tuya was discovered in 1972 during a reclearance of her large tomb in the Valley of the Queens.

At ten years of age, Seti recognized Ramses as "Eldest King's Son," even though there were no other sons, for Ramses older brother died young. He was carefully trained as future pharaoh. He was named after his grandfather, a military man, the vizier and friend of Pharaoh Horemheb. Ramses, too, was trained in the martial arts, and by his mid-teens he is seen as a participant of Seti's Libyan campaign in the inscribed portrayals at Karnak. He rode alongside his father, learning directly from the pharaoh, but also learned from the masters of the various arts and

sciences: the inscriptions refer to the youth as overseer in the cutting of obelisks in the granite quarries of Aswan and working on his father's many building projects. Again and again, inscriptions from the epoch around the empire refer to Ramses as an astute young leader (Clayton 147).

One of the primary sources of Ramses early years is found at Abydos: the dedication stele he set up in his father Seti's temple. After his father's death, Ramses had sailed to Abydos, the sacred shrine and ancient burial site of Osiris, and found that his father's massive temple project was left unfinished and the burial sites of the earlier kings lay in ruins. Ramses immediately summoned the Court and reinitiated the project, making it clear that he would fulfill Seti's wishes. On the stele he describes his youth: The All-Lord [Seti] himself made me great, while I was a child, until I reigned I was installed as eldest son, as hereditary prince upon the throne of Geb [the earth god][He, Seti, said] "Crown him as king, that I may see his beauty while I live with him" He equipped me with women, a royal harem, as beautiful as those of the palace, those of the South and North were under my feet (Clayton 147).

By the age of fifteen, Ramses had already married his two principal wives, Nefertari and Istnofret. Nefertari was always the Chief Queen, until her death in Year 24 of Ramses reign. Her famous tomb in the Valley of the Queens is the most beautiful of all. The paintings inside her tomb are extraordinary, and have recently been completely restored. At Nefertari's death, Istnofret took her place. Apparently, she lived until Year 34. These two queens bore Ramses most important children. Ramses first son, Crown Prince Amenirkhopshef, as well as at least three other sons and two daughters, were born unto Nefertari. Istnofret bore Merneptah, who would eventually succeed his father. She also bore a son named for his father, and Khaemwaset, who is often referred to today as the first archeologist. In his lifetime, as High Priest of Memphis, he was venerated as a great magician and restorer of ancient monuments. One notable example of his restoration projects is King Unas' pyramid at Saqqara, which contains the famous "Pyramid Texts."

Over the course of his life, Ramses had eight principal wives. Following pharaonic custom, Ramses included several family members in his harem. One of his sisters and three of his daughters eventually became royal wives. The king of the Hittites sent his daughter to be wed to Ramses at the conclusion of the Hittite wars, and another one of his daughters came to join her seven years later. There were also a number of Syrian and Babylonian royal ladies in Ramses' harem. Ramses fathered over 100 children. He outlived twelve of his heirs. Merneptah, Ramses thirteenth son, became pharaoh when he was in his sixties.

Egypt under Ramses II

From the papyruses and legal documents that have come down to us from the time of Ramses, it is clear that his reign was one of peace and prosperity. Women participated in government, and several became pharaoh at different times during the New Kingdom. Even the humblest workers could seek redress at the highest court if they felt they were being treated unjustly. There were, however, exceptions to the rule in this land of Maat, the Goddess of Justice. Evidently certain priests began to abuse their power. In Pharaonic Egypt, religion was all-important. As Egypt became larger and larger, some of the priests began to take advantage of

their growing power. The profession of scribe, a sort of combination lawyer, civil servant, academician and tax collector, was highly respected, but there were also those within the profession that used their position unethically (West 20).

The most notable contributions to posterity of Ramessian Egypt are cultural in nature. All along the River Nile can still be found temples and monuments that, no matter how grand they seem today, are only the bare remains of the massive projects that were commissioned by Ramses and constructed by equally grand teams of architects, builders, stone workers, artists and craftsmen of all sorts.

For the Egyptians, perpetuation of the empire depended not only on repelling invaders (as Ramses too spent his fair share of time doing), but also on maintaining the magical link with the celestial world. The themes that can be found in the temples of Ramses' day can be found throughout Egyptian history: "Ramses is received by Amon and presented with the Key of Life," "Ramses presents a statuette of Maat to Horus, demonstrating that justice rules in his kingdom," "Ramses is protected by Hathor, Amon, etc." A tremendous empire needs tremendous temples to sustain this magical consciousness.

One of the greatest wonders of Ancient Egypt under Ramses II, and in general, is not made of stone. It is the simple fact that this great civilization existed in harmony, with very little internal strife, in a structure that is analogous to a giant extended family, the king and queen representing the parents in this analogy, the nobles the older brothers and sisters, and the citizens the happy children. The analogy could be taken further to show the wise initiates as grandparents, etc. This fact about Ancient Egypt, which in some ways reaches a peak under Ramses II, is rarely presented in today's versions of history. Because we are accustomed to different ways of life and different forms of government, we cannot conceive of happiness under an absolute monarch. This bias is compounded by the biblical account in Exodus.

John Anthony West draws other analogies to explain the relationship between the Egyptian Pharaoh and citizens: the coach and the chef. Who runs the team, the coach or the water boys? Likewise, the chef runs the restaurant, not the dishwashers. But both the chef and the coach lead with the consent (and in a successful restaurant or team, the love and admiration) of the dishwashers and other members of the team (357). This is another reason, in addition to the magical ones alluded to above, that the temples and monuments contain phrases and statements that to us, may seem like bragging or boasting. As West says, when Ramses II claims he has built a monument to his father, Amon, and states that there has been no other like it before, "The king was no more boasting than was Christ in the Gospels when he declared, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (358).

The topic of Egyptian Religion is complex and requires serious study to understand, but it doesn't require much effort to see that modern perspectives of the ancient ways are unfortunately colored, if not completely opaque, by prejudice against conceptions of universe and deity that do not agree with those which are currently accepted.

Monuments, Temples and Statues

To take in the constructions of Ramses II is to tour the Nile. From the remote reaches of Nubia, to the Delta far north, Ramses the Great raised obelisks, statues and temples to honor the Neters or Gods, and to fortify the magical link between the Heavenly Nile and the Terrestrial Nile. The great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak is considered to be one of the world's great masterpieces of architecture. For Ramses II, the Hypostyle Hall was a family matter: it was planned and begun by his grandfather Ramses I, continued under his dad, Seti I, then completed by Ramses himself. The walls are covered with immense battle scenes. Battles and hunts are common themes on the outer parts of the temples. These are historical in nature, but also symbolic, representing the battle between light and darkness, or good and evil, not unlike the Bhagavad Gita of Ancient India.

Ramses also built the so-called second pylon at Karnak. Leave Karnak and walk southwest along the Nile and you will shortly find yourself at the temple of Luxor, a sumptuous temple which is unique in many ways. It has not only one axis, as do most religious structures, but a complex system of axes. All of the additions to Luxor respect the system, which includes construction based on the golden section.

Ramses added the Great Court and the tremendous outer pylon. On the front side of the pylon can be seen and read the famous story of the Battle of Kadesh, where Ramses, although outnumbered and cut off from the rest of his forces, conquered the Hittites. The Great Court is famous for its beautiful colossi.

The Nile is only a few yards from the Temple of Luxor. Cross it, and travel west-northwest, passing the Colossi of Memnon and you will soon arrive at Ramses' mortuary temple: the Ramesseum. This giant temple structure contains a wealth of beauty and information, but is most well known for the giant colossus that was the object of Shelly's poem, "Ozymandias."

There is an astronomical/astrological scene on the ceiling of the Hypostyle Hall, which has provided much information for archeoastronomers, but there are also mysterious celestial elements that still intrigue the scholars. Ramses built many temples in the far reaches of Nubia. He even built his most heroic feat there, the Cliffside temples of Abu Simbel. This is the massive facade carved out of a mountain of rock that provides an entrance to an inner Hypostyle Hall, chambers and sanctuary. The temple was oriented in such a way so that twice a year a shaft of sunlight penetrated the temple traveled through the Hypostyle Hall between the colossus pillars and illuminated statues of three of the four-seated gods. Ptah is not illuminated because he is associated with the underworld (Clayton 154).

Ramses building feats are many. He completed Seti's mortuary temple at Gurna in Thebes, as well as Seti's temple at Abydos. He added his own temple at Abydos. And he built the city of Pi-Ramesse in the Delta, a fabulous city adorned with many obelisks which is almost completely gone today.

Foreign affairs

Historically, the New Kingdom pharaohs seem to have experienced more attacks by foreign invaders than their predecessors. The Libyans, the Syrians, the Nubians and the Hittites alternately invaded the borders of Egypt. The most famous war that Ramses undertook, and

indeed one of the most famous in ancient times was the Battle of Kadesh.

In Year 4 of Ramses' reign the Pharaoh was forewarned of an enormous coalition of forces being headed by the Hittites. In the spring of Year 5 Ramses gathered an army of 20,000 men and headed north to contend with the force. The Egyptian forces were divided into four divisions: Amon, Re, Ptah and Seth. The Hittite army was much larger, 37,000 men, plus 2500 chariots, and due to faulty intelligence that Ramses received, had the element of surprise. The Hittites attacked, their chariots cut off Ramses from his men, and confusion reigned among the Egyptians. The young Ramses beseeched Amon for help. According to the inscriptions, Amon himself incarnated in Ramses and the Pharaoh began to rally his troops, single-handedly slaying many Hittites himself. Peace was eventually offered by the Hittite king. Today, we know from a variety of sources that the Battle of Kadesh was a historical event. However, it is also clear that the event was considered to be symbolic and didactic, and was included at many temples. It was even used in the education of the youth.

For years scholars have supposed that Merneptah, Ramses' son and successor, was the "Pharaoh" referred to in the Bible. This was due to the fact that one of the only known related references to the issue was found on his "Victory" stele: Israel is listed as one of the conquered lands. Currently, however, scholars favor Ramses II as the Biblical "Pharaoh" due to chronological considerations. It is hoped that evidence will be discovered in KV5 that will shed additional light on the matter.

Death and Burial

When Ramses II was 92 years old, in Year 67 of his reign, he was finally united with his beloved Amon. His tomb in the Valley of the Kings (KV7) was completed long before his death. Unfortunately for us, very little was left that the plundering tomb robbers hadn't stolen. Using the magnificent tomb of the relatively minor Tutankhamen as a point of comparison, we can imagine that it must have been absolutely splendid. Ramses' mummy was removed and hidden by the Valley priests at the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, and was discovered in a cache at Deir el-Bahari in 1881 (<http://www.kv5.com/>).

In 1989, an old tomb that had been deemed unimportant by Howard Carter in 1902 was rediscovered. It was KV5, now known to be the tomb of many of the sons of Ramses II. It contains over 110 corridors and chambers dug hundreds of feet into the hillside. It is one of the largest tombs in all of Egypt, and is currently under excavation (Preston 46).

Everyday thousands of tourists stream past the monuments and temples that once were either surrounded by the hustle and bustle of daily Ancient Egyptian activity, or echoed the silent communication between the Gods and humankind. Three thousand years have slipped over the desert sands. The massive stone monuments, vibrating sympathetically with their celestial counterparts, have been covered and uncovered by those sands over the years. But late at night, when the humans sleep, and the nocturnal animals roam, Sirius rises in the east. And the wind whispers the name of Ramses II.