

# Pharaoh Ramesses II and His Times

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RAMESSES (RAMSES) II inherited a challenge and a vision when he came to power around 1279 BCE. Two hundred years before, the Eighteenth Dynasty kings Thutmose (Tuthmosis) I and III had carried Egypt to the dizzy heights of her political power. They had "extended the boundaries of Egypt" as far as the great western bend of the Euphrates River. Even under pressure from rival powers like Mitanni, Egypt had still ruled up the coast to Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), and to Qadesh (Tell Nebi Mend) in inland Syria. Far south, up the Nile River, Egypt's boundary had been set beyond the Fourth Cataract, extending the rule of the pharaohs for some two thousand miles (3,200 kilometers) from the Mediterranean coasts to the northern Sudan. Just a century before Ramesses's time, Eighteenth Dynasty magnificence reached its peak under Amenhotep (Amenophis) III, expressed most tangibly in the construction of temples of previously unequalled size and splendor. The duty of any pharaoh was to equal, if not surpass, the achievements of his "royal ancestors" in the service of the gods and so to the benefit of Egypt. So the Eighteenth Dynasty set a high standard to emulate.

But that same dynasty had bequeathed a negative challenge also. Amenhotep III's son—as Akhenaten—had plunged Egypt into turmoil. During his absorption in the attempt to substitute exclusive worship of the sun disk Aten

(Aton) for that of Egypt's large family of gods, foreign affairs had taken a back seat. Conflict between the Hittites and Mitanni spilled over into Egypt's sphere in Syria, losing her the control of Ugarit, Qadesh, and much else. The losses were not recovered by Akhenaten's successors, leaving the military faction in Egypt as dissatisfied as the dispossessed priests had been under Akhenaten (see the preceding article in this section).

## *The New Men*

Last ruler of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Horemheb had brought back internal order and prosperity to Egypt. But, for the third time, in succession, Egypt had a pharaoh with no son to assure the succession. To solve that problem, Horemheb turned to a long-standing military colleague of his, one Pramesse, appointing him first as senior vizier, then as official heir to the kingdom. Pramesse hailed from the east Delta and came of a traditionally military family. He had a son, Sety (Seti, Sethos), who (even before Horemheb's death) had children of his own, including a baby boy who was destined to become the Ramesses II of history. So, when Pramesse did succeed Horemheb (as Ramesses I), the new dynasty—the Nineteenth—had a ready-made succession of its own, to assure the future of Egypt's kingship.

The new king himself died in his second

year, giving way to his son Sety I. The policies that the father had no opportunity to enact were vigorously executed by the son. In three or four campaigns, Sety I crushed all opposition in Egyptian-held Canaan, reaffirmed his rule over the Phoenician ports, and briefly wrested south-Syrian Qadesh from the Hittites, leaving there a victory stela as his "visiting card." But this triumph was transient, and Qadesh soon returned to Hittite rule, probably by a treaty that recognized Egypt's dominance in Phoenicia. Neither side saw advantage in prolonging conflict.

More permanent were Sety's works of peace. Here, he planned to honor the greatest gods of Egypt on a scale even surpassing the Eighteenth Dynasty. King of the gods, patron of empire, was Amun of Thebes—it was the overweening theological claims of this deity that had led Akhenaten to banish him in favor of Aten. But Sety I followed the subtler policy of giving Amun the greatest buildings, but honoring him as merely the first of three chief gods. The other two were Re, traditional sun-god at Heliopolis (biblical On), and Ptah, the venerable creator-god at Memphis (modern Mit Rahina). Alongside these three, Osiris at Abydos (modern Araba al-Madfuna) embodied the Egyptians' hopes for life after death. So Sety built magnificently for all four deities. For Amun in Thebes, he turned the new front court at Karnak's temple into the greatest columned hall ever seen then or since—the "Great Hypostyle Hall" of modern guidebooks. Directly opposite, on the desert's edge west of the Nile, he built his own large memorial temple for himself and his father, as local forms of Amun, for their afterlife. In the desert Valley of the Kings, Sety ordered to be dug the vastest underground tomb that had existed up to that time. In the north at the traditional capital, Memphis, Sety planned another great hall for the temple of Ptah. Across the Nile at Heliopolis, he undertook a great pylon gateway, fronted by obelisks (one of which is now in Rome), statues, and an avenue of sphinxes. At Abydos he erected his noblest temple, in honor of Osiris, Aman-Re, Ptah, and himself, in creamy limestone, exquisitely carved and painted, plus a "tomb" of Osiris.

In all of these activities, the young prince

Ramesses was involved with his father, as a royal apprenticeship—taken on campaigns, sent out with quarrying expeditions, and so on. Eventually, Sety declared Ramesses prince regent, giving him almost all of the trappings of kingship. He went on his own first little "war" in Nubia, ordered the building of his first temple, also in Nubia at Bayt al-Wali, became titular army chief, and so on. Then, at the height of his powers, Sety I died in the twelfth or fourteenth year of his reign (opinions are divided on which year). Thus, in his twenties, young Ramesses II inherited a vast empire and all his father's unfinished projects as legacy.

## FROM CONFLICT TO CONCORD

### *A Model Pharaoh (Years 1–4)*

The new king had chosen his traditional five-fold titles to express his ideals and ambitions with unusual clarity. As a goddess, Ma'at personified truth, justice, right order in life. So, as Falcon King (Horus) and Strong Bull, Ramesses took the epithet "Beloved of Maat," patron of Egypt's highest values. As protégé of the ancient goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt (*nebtj*), he declared himself "Protector of Egypt, Vanquisher of Foreign Lands." As Golden Falcon, his hope was to be "Rich in Years, Great in Victories." His twin cartouches (royal rings) enclosed the throne name Usermare Setepenre, "Sun [Re] Strong in Ma'at, Chosen of the Sun-god," and his personal name Ramesses, "Beloved of Amun."

The young king's first duty was to bury his father, Sety I, in the latter's sumptuous tunnel-tomb, hidden away deep in the Valley of the Kings in the desert hills on the west bank at Thebes. "Who buries inherits" was the Egyptian rule, on the mythological model of Horus burying his father, Osiris. Ramesses stayed on to celebrate Amun's great feast of Opet and (as was customary then) to make new administrative appointments and promotions. Thus, by Amun's oracle, a new high priest of Amun was appointed. Ramesses would also have chosen (in committee) the site for his own tomb in the royal valley; certainly, his own vast memorial temple (the Ramesseum) was already begun in

western Thebes. Sailing back north, Ramesses called in at Abydos and found it necessary to give fresh impetus to the work of completing his father's magnificent temple, no doubt alongside work on his own nearby. Then, it was back to Memphis and to his project for a new east-Delta capital at his hometown, now to be called Pi-Ramsese, "Domain of Ramesses" (near the modern site of Tell al-Dab'a at Qantir).

Such projects needed wealth. So in year 3, the young king sought eagerly to increase exploitation of the gold mines in Nubia. In Akuyati (Wadi al-Allaqi area) were rich deposits, but acute water-supply problems hindered work there. His plans bore fruit; water was found, and so the gold could be mined. Equal success attended his first campaign in Syria. Signaling his passage by a stela near the Dog River (Nahr al-Kalb) in the Lebanon in year 4, Ramesses overwhelmed the kingdom of Amurru, compelling it to forsake Hittite allegiance and return to Egyptian rule.

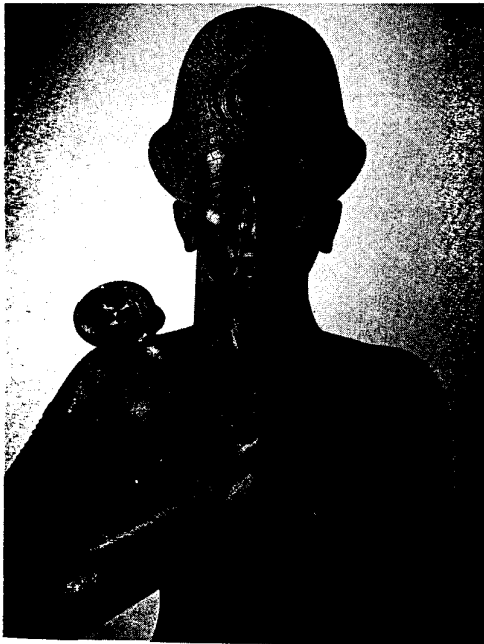


Fig. 1. Statue of a youthful Ramesses II. EGYPTIAN MUSEUM OF TURIN (1990)

### *Battles Royal (Years 5–18)*

Encouraged by his initial success, Ramesses aimed at the recapture of Qadesh, which would open the way to northern Syria as in the great days of Thutmose III. But the aggrieved Hittite ruler Muwattalli (Muwatallis) II planned otherwise. He mustered the biggest army he could, lay in wait just east of Qadesh, and sent out two spies who were to allow themselves to be captured and misinform Ramesses that Muwattalli was far distant. (See "Military Organization in Egypt" in Part 4, this volume.)

Ramesses swallowed their tale and pushed on recklessly to encamp west of Qadesh. The trap was sprung, as the Hittite chariotry then swung across the Orontes River fords to cut through one Egyptian division and swoop upon Ramesses's camp and first division to finish off the job. But three factors ruined the Hittite master plan. First, another two Hittite spies were apprehended at the last moment, and the true situation was wrung from their lips. Second, thus warned, the young pharaoh displayed great aplomb and fierce bravery in scraping together a group of warriors and ferociously charging back at the Hittite attackers, catching them off guard. Third, at this vital moment, an Egyptian auxiliary force arrived to rendezvous with the pharaoh, enabling him to push the Hittites decisively back into the river in confusion. So the day was saved. The next day Ramesses counterattacked but could not rout the stolid Hittite troops. Stalemate resulted; action ceased. Such was the famous battle of Qadesh. (See the box on the battle of Qadesh in "Hittite Military Organization" in Part 4.)

The political results were less clear-cut. Ramesses's personal bravery saved him and his forces from total annihilation but led only to stalemate, and he never took Qadesh. Once he returned to Egypt, the Hittites even took over the Egyptian province of Upi temporarily. But neither did the Hittites win outright; they lost the flower of their chariotry with several top leaders. And meanwhile, Assyria marched into the Hittite protectorate of Khanigalbat (the one-time Mitanni).

For a year or so, Ramesses avoided great adventures, refurbishing his forces and perhaps then subduing emergent Moab and Edom

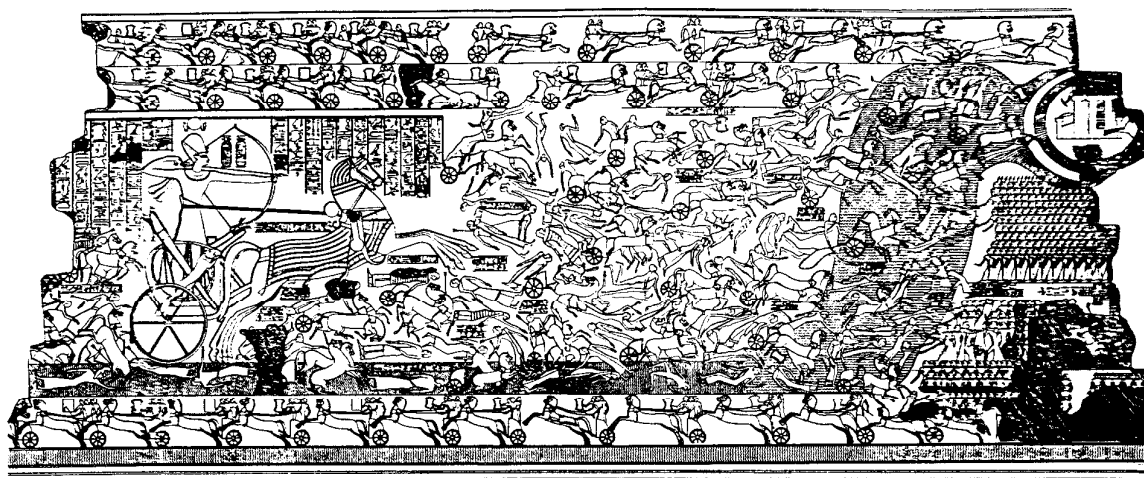


Fig. 2. Scene from a relief excavated at Luxor of the Battle of Qadesh, 1275 BCE. CHARLES KUENTZ, *LA BATAILLE DE QADESH* (1928–1934)

across the Jordan. In year 8 he subjugated Galilee and probably regained Upi and Damascus. Year 10 found him passing Dog River and Beirut. At that time and later, he tried a new tactic. Instead of attacking Qadesh directly, he outflanked it on the north, entering central Syria from the coast to strike at Tunip and Dapur. But these cities simply returned to the Hittite fold once he went home. So, tiring of indecisive results, Ramesses ceased his campaigns.

High-level politics took over. The new young Hittite king Urkhi-Teshub (also called Mursili/Mursilis III) was ousted by his ambitious uncle Khattushili (Hattusili) III and exiled to north Syria. The young man fled to Egypt. Fearing that Ramesses might back Urkhi-Teshub's claims, Khattushili demanded his extradition, which the pharaoh refused. War loomed. A stela of year 18 at Beth-She'an in northern Canaan may reflect Ramesses II's assuming a defensive position there at that time. Suddenly, however, the crisis went flat. Khanigalbat had eventually returned to Hittite rule after Qadesh, but now the new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser I, reoccupied Khanigalbat and organized it as totally Assyrian territory, not simply as a vassal. Khattushili III found himself in danger of war on two fronts, so he ceased to worry about Egypt and Urkhi-Teshub.

### *The Road to Peace (Years 18–21)*

After a decent pause, therefore, Khattushili III found it prudent to come to terms with Egypt. Negotiations finally led to a full treaty of peace and alliance in year 21 of Ramesses II, ending all hostilities. Ramesses recognized Khattushili as legitimate ruler and gave up all claim to Qadesh; Egyptian interests in Phoenicia were safeguarded. Amid celebrations, messages of congratulation were exchanged by the respective queens and others, accompanied by lavish presents. The splendid silver treaty-tablet given to Ramesses by Khattushili is long since gone, but cuneiform copies on clay tablets from the Hittite archives and an Egyptian translation on two hieroglyphic stelae in Thebes preserve its contents for us.

## THE SUN KING

### *A Land of Temples*

Wars abroad occupied only a few months in the year. Meanwhile, Ramesses II's first twenty years saw his building program go steadily forward. Pi-Ramsese in the east Delta took clear shape: a great palace, glittering with multicolored faience tilework; fine temples of Amun, Re, and Ptah, plus the local god Seth; army bar-

## At War: Ramesses II in the Thick of the Battle of Qadesh ("Poem," Excerpts)

Then his majesty set off at a gallop;  
he plunged amid the forces of the Hittite foe,  
being entirely on his own, no other with  
him.

So his majesty went on to look around him;  
he found twenty-five hundred chariots  
hemming him in, all around,  
—all the Hittite foe's swiftest force, . . .  
—three men to a chariot, acting as one unit.

[The king speaks:] "But there was no high  
officer with me,

no charioteer,  
no army soldier,  
no shield bearer.

But my army and my chariotry melted away  
before them;

none could stand up to them, to fight with  
them."

Then said his majesty:

"What's up with you, now, my father Amun?  
Has it been a father's part ever to ignore his  
son?  
And have I done anything without you?  
Do I not go and stop at your word?  
—I have disobeyed no plan that you  
commanded!

How much greater is he, mighty Lord of Egypt,  
than to allow mere foreigners to approach  
his path.

What are these Asiatics to you, O Amun?  
—despicable creatures, ignorant of God!

Have I not made for you a crowd of monuments?  
I filled your temples with my captures.

"I built great pylons for you,  
myself setting up their great  
flagstaffs.

I brought you obelisks from Elephantine,  
myself acting as stone carrier.

I directed for you ships at sea,

ferrying for you the tribute of  
foreign lands.

What will people say, if even the least evil  
befalls him,

who depended on your counsel?

—Do good to him who counts on you,

—then people will serve you willingly  
indeed.

I have called on you, O Amun,

while I am among multitudes whom I  
know not.

All the foreign lands have united against me,  
I being left utterly alone, none  
others with me.

"See, even though I made petition from the back  
of beyond,

my voice echoed in distant Thebes.

I found that Amun came, just as I called him;

he gave me his hand, so I rejoiced.

He spoke out from behind me, as close as face to  
face:

'Forward! I am with you, I am your Father,  
my hand is on you!'

"So I shot on my right and captured on my  
left, . . .

I found that the twenty-five hundred chariots, in  
whose midst I was,

fell prostrate before my horses; none could  
fight."

[The Hittites shout]: "He's no mere man, who's  
among us!

—It's Seth great-in-power, Baal in  
person!

Not the acts of a mere man, the things he does;  
they belong to one who is utterly  
unique!"

racks, stores, and workshops; homes and offices  
of princes and high officials; and the town  
proper. A basin and link with the eastern  
branch of the Nile made it a port for Mediterra-  
nean traffic into Egypt. Far to the south the

great temples of Abydos and at Thebes came  
near completion. In the Ramesseum stood a  
thousand-ton colossus that inspired Percy  
Bysshe Shelley's poem on Ozymandias more  
than three thousand years later. In several tem-

## At Peace: Ramesses II Marries a Hittite Princess (Lesser and Great Stelae of First Hittite Marriage)

Now, his majesty was ruler of nations, great lord  
of all lands;  
heaven shook, earth trembled, when he  
took up Re's kingship.

Re has said to him, every time he rises,  
—"What's on your mind?—I'll do it for  
you!"

So the king's words on earth, they were heard in  
heaven.

Rebellious foreigners come in peace,  
their chiefs under his sandals,  
such that even the Hittites, opponents of Egypt,  
have come under his control, . . . just  
like Egypt.

The great Hittite ruler sent to pacify his majesty,  
year after year,—but he paid no heed.

Then he brought out his eldest daughter, with  
rich gifts,  
—gold, silver, copper in abundance,  
—slaves, spans of horses, limitless, . . .  
for Ramesses II.

His majesty was informed, thus:

"See, the great Hittite ruler has sent his eldest  
daughter, . . .  
they smother the roads, . . . all the Hittite  
grandees.

They have crossed remote mountains, difficult  
passes,  
they have reached your majesty's frontier.  
Let the army and officials go welcome them, O  
King!"

Then his majesty pondered in his mind, saying,  
"How will they manage, . . . in Syria,  
in these days of rain and snow, happening in  
winter?"

So he offered richly to his father Seth,  
petitioning him:

"The sky is in your care, and the earth under  
your feet  
—what happens is what you command.

So may you not send rain, icy blast, or snow,  
until the marvel you have commanded  
reaches me."

His father Seth heeded all that he had said.  
And so, the sky was calm, summer days in

winter, so that his army and officials could  
set out.

They formed an escort, mingling with the Hittite  
troops,  
. . . they ate and drank together as one, like  
brothers.

None spurned his fellow, having peace and  
friendship.

Then the rulers of the lands the cavalcade  
passed by,  
—they cringed, turning away, fainting,  
when they saw Hittites joining with the army of  
the king:

[They exclaim]: . . .

"As for the Hittite land, it's with Ramesses just  
like Egypt,  
such that even the sky is under his thumb,  
and whatever he wishes, it  
does!"

As the cavalcade arrived in Pi-Ramsese,  
the king made great celebration, in year  
34 . . .

Having arrived, from traveling to Egypt,  
the daughter of the great Hittite ruler was  
presented to his majesty,  
with great and rich tribute, limitless in all  
respects.

Then his majesty beheld her, fair of features, first  
of women,  
—and the grandees honored her as a very  
goddess!

Indeed, it was a great and mysterious event, a  
precious wonder,  
—unknown and unheard of in popular  
tradition,  
—unparalleled in the writings of the  
ancestors. . . .

She was beautiful in the opinion of his majesty,  
he loved her to distraction, as a momentous  
occasion for him,  
a triumph that his father Ptah-Tatonen had  
decreed for him.

Her Egyptian name was proclaimed as  
"The royal wife, Maat-Hor-Neferu-Re, may she  
live!

Daughter of the great Hittite ruler,  
Daughter of the great Hittite queen."

She was installed in the palace, in the king's domain,  
accompanying the sovereign daily,  
her name being proclaimed in  
the entire land.

The troops, . . . court officials, . . . and  
citizens, they drank together, in joy, for King  
Ramesses II.

Then the Hittite land was single-mindedly under  
his majesty,  
even King Usermare Setepenre, Son of Re,  
Ramesses II.  
Afterward, if man or woman went on business to  
Syria,  
they could even reach the Hittite land without  
fear of evil,  
because of the magnitude of his majesty's  
victories!

ples, brilliantly carved and colored reliefs blazoned forth Ramesses's heroism at Qadesh and in later wars. Far upriver, in Nubia, the twin temples at Abu Simbel for Ramesses II and his beautiful chief queen, Nefertari, were hewn from the living rock and dedicated by about year 23. Building work of all kinds proceeded throughout Egypt and Nubia during most of the reign. Outside of the capital cities, the repair of older temples and construction of new ones extended, for example, to Hermopolis (modern al-Ashmunein), Araba al-Madfuna (Abydos), Armant, and Edfu. There were also royal cult centers in Nubia at Serf Hussein's Wadi al-Sebu'a, al-Derr, Aksha (Serra West), Amara West, and distant Napata.

#### *The Royal Family, Near and Far*

Ramesses was no solitary. Initially he had two chief queens, Nefertari and Istnofret (or Isinofre) who—along with the women of the harem—presented him with a long series of sons and daughters. Diplomatic marriages brought Babylonian and other princesses to that harem (often not to be seen again, diplomatic gossip used to say), culminating in Ramesses's marriage to Khattushili III's eldest daughter in year 34 and to a second daughter perhaps a decade later, amid great festivities each time. But various hitches had delayed the first such marriage, such that at one point Ramesses II had scandalized the Hittite queen by suggesting that the Hittites should at any rate send the dowry even if they couldn't manage a princess. Of the pharaoh's offspring, most famous (right down to Roman times) was his

fourth son, Prince Khaemwaset, who became a learned scholar, even (like Egyptologists) investigating the ancient pyramids. Khaemwaset identified the original owners of these pyramids, setting out the fact in new inscriptions on these structures. These inscriptions were like enormous museum labels. He designed new burial vaults for the sacred Apis bulls of Ptah in the Memphite necropolis at Saqqara.

#### *Jubilees and the Royal Cult*

After thirty years' reign a pharaoh could enact the Sed festival for renewal of his kingship and repeat it at three- or four-year intervals. So, probably for the first time in about seventy-five years, Ramesses II celebrated such a jubilee in his year 30 and then the longest-ever series of thirteen or fourteen such jubilees during the rest of his reign. A great jubilee hall was rapidly erected in Pi-Ramsese (reusing old buildings), and likewise the splendid west hall at the temple of Ptah in Memphis, for these ancient ceremonies.

But throughout his reign, Ramesses II sought more widely to focus his people's loyalty on the monarchy by encouraging popular cults deifying himself in various aspects of kingship. In humble chapels constructed by ordinary people, the named colossal statues of the king before temples in Pi-Ramsese, Abu Simbel, and elsewhere served as symbols for these cults: Ramesses as "Ruler of Rulers," "Sun of Rulers," "Beloved of Atum," "the God," and so on. His temple at Aksha in Lower Nubia honored Ramesses II as "Lord of Nubia." Here he developed on a grand scale a concept already pio-

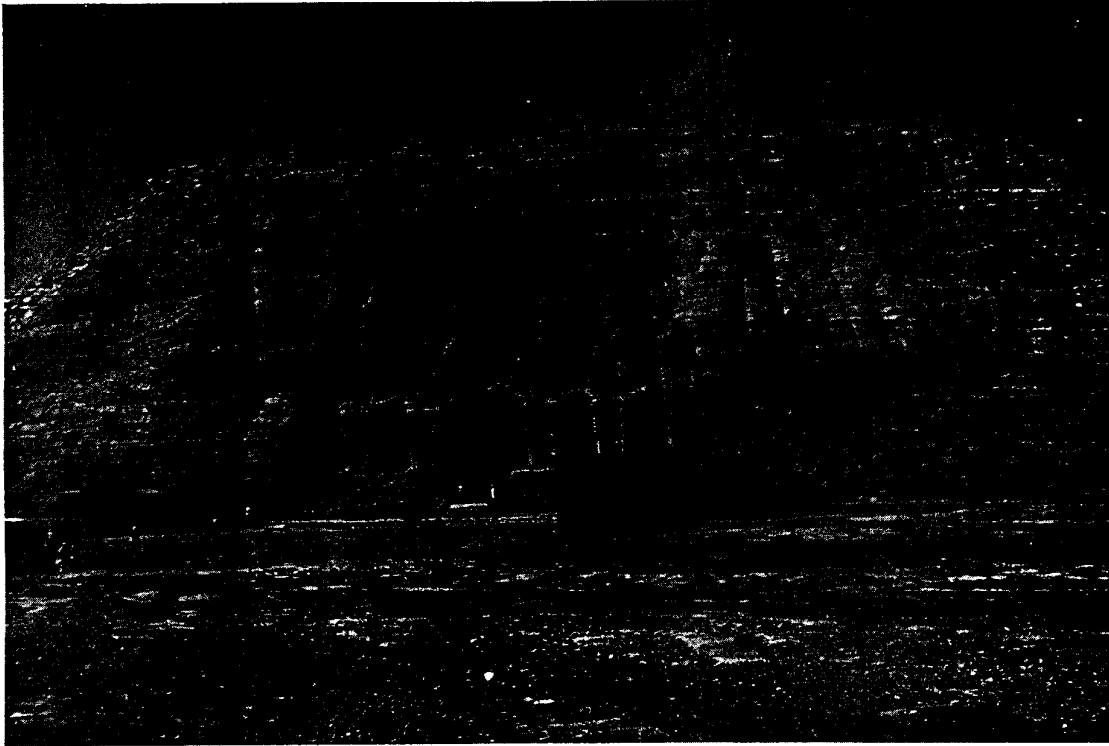


Fig. 3. The Abu Simbel Temple, constructed circa 1270 BCE, contains four colossal statues of Ramesses II with smaller statues of his relatives positioned at the ruler's legs. The rock temple was opened in 1817 CE, but in the 1960s it was moved to higher ground to avoid flooding from the Aswan High Dam. COURTESY OF JOHN RUFFLE

neered by Amenhotep III and Tutankhamun. Forms of the major gods themselves were linked with the king—Amun of Ramesses, Ptah of Ramesses—as were goddesses, such as Anath of Ramesses.

#### *The Sunset Years*

Decade by decade, Ramesses seemed to reign interminably, outliving three successive heirs apparent: Amenirkhopshef, Ramesses, and the famed sage Khaemwaset. In Ramesses's latest years, his thirteenth son and fourth heir, Merneptah, became the old king's right-hand man, after a military career. Finally, early in his sixty-seventh year of reign, the old king passed away, leaving Merneptah (already elderly, at least sixty-plus) the new pharaoh of Egypt.

### LIFE IN RAMESSES II'S EGYPT

#### *The Hierarchy*

No pharaoh ruled Egypt single-handedly. By this time, two men commonly held the concurrent posts of southern (senior) and northern vizier, as chief executive(s) under the king. With responsibility in Thebes, the southern vizier had direct charge of the royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings and of the special work force and community maintained to hew out and decorate the great royal tombs. Highly efficient was Paser, under both Sety I and Ramesses II. Sometimes the dual office was held by one man, as by Khay, Paser's successor. Close to the vizier stood the chief of the treasury (concerned with revenues), the superintendent of



granaries of north and south, and the high stewards of temple and royal estates.

The vast southern province of Nubia came under the "king's son of Kush," or viceroy of Nubia, aided by his two deputies in Upper and Lower Nubia. Forces under the troop commander of Kush maintained Egyptian authority, crushing periodic rebellions by Nubians tired of Egyptian taxation. The viceroy Setau used this force to press-gang people from the southern oases into slave labor to build the later Nubian temples of Ramesses II as, for example, at Wadi el-Sebu'a in the forties of the king's reign.

Back in Egypt, the major temples had their committees of chief priest and senior priests, plus the learned lecturers, who knew the rituals, and the ordinary "lay priests," who served one month thrice per year on rotas. High stewards cared for the vast properties of the greatest temples.

The Egypt of Ramesses II appears to have been relatively prosperous at most levels of society, to judge from the sheer quantity (and social spread) of material remains from the reign. Many stelae and small items belonged to people of relatively modest station. In western Thebes, large numbers of painted tomb-chapels date to this reign, ranging socially from a vizier like Paser down to middle-rank priests and officials (to say nothing of the special workmen for the royal tombs). At Saqqara, the vast city cemeteries of Memphis possess a long series of tomb chapels likewise from the epoch of Ramesses II.

### Religion

Egypt's vast temples were never places of congregational worship, but more like powerhouses on a spiritual plane. Offerings to the gods were intended to gain their corresponding blessings upon Egypt and its people. Beyond the open courts and columned halls, deep within the sanctuary area, a body of priests faithfully carried out the appropriate rites before the image of the deity morning, noon, and evening. Such rites centered on the presentation of well-prepared food offerings, accompanied by invocations rich in mythological

allusions. After presentation to the deities of the temples, the offerings went by "reversion" to the spirit of the reigning king and all of his predecessors, and then before statues of privileged notables, before the offerings passed back to the officiating priests for consumption. On the great festivals, proportionally richer fare benefited a wider circle of celebrants. Veiled within the cabin of a gilded model bark, borne upon the shoulders of the priests, the god's portable image would go in procession and might travel to another temple, then sometimes on a great gilded barge upon the Nile. So Amun did, from Karnak to and from Luxor (Al-Aqsar), as when Ramesses II was there in his first year. Only on such magnificent occasions did the populace see much of their nation's great gods. Theological thinking among the learned began by this time to speculate that all deity might be summed up in Amun, Re, and Ptah, and they in turn might be but aspects of one great god. But this concept remained the property of literati and the priests rather than of ordinary folk.

The religion of the ordinary people centered in modest chapels (as at Dayr al-Madina, village of the west-Theban royal workmen). As papyri of Ramesses II's time indicate, the same basic rites were enacted here before the gods as in the great temples, but much more modestly. Alongside the great gods, local gods, and royal cults, we find the deities of hearth and home, like the monstrous dwarf Bes and Taweret, a goddess of childbirth.

The Egyptians had long believed in a life after death, for which they developed their elaborate construction of tombs with chapels for ongoing personal cult, the rites of mummification, and the provision of funerary furnishings for the next life. Those who passed the "last judgment" before Osiris (and who did not?) might live in an ideal Egypt beyond. Their souls might ascend from the burial chamber to greet the sunrise in this world's Egypt, and return home to the body at eventide. Even if no more offerings came, the rich scenes on tomb-chapel walls could magically secure their otherworldly needs. Then, as in any community, skeptics were to be found; in some tombs, two very different "Songs of the Harpist," one praising the happy state to come, one saying

"but none return to tell us" of it, might be carved on facing walls.

### *The Arts*

In the service of temple and tomb, wall paintings and painted reliefs, as well as statuary, had long since attained peaks of excellence. The reign of Sety I and the early years of Ramesses II saw the end of one such peak, exemplified by the Turin statue of Ramesses II, the splendid painted reliefs of Sety I at Abydos, some work in both of their tombs in the Valley of the Kings, and some very fine painting in the tombs of officials in western Thebes. But the complacent prosperity of the age produced few masterworks. The decorative arts often crafted delightful pieces: ointment spoons and pots and the like.

In literature, the schools still brought up budding scribes on ancient "classics" such as *The Story of Sinuhe* and the *Satire on the Trades*—both more than five hundred years old by Ramesses's day. But new works were now being added to the curriculum, in the language of the day, constituting a modest "educational reform." They included the satirical letter in Papyrus Anastasi I, in which one scribe teases another over his inability to deal with erecting colossi, to feed an army on campaign, or to cope with Syro-Palestinian geography. New works of instructional wisdom, such as those by Any and Amenemope (forerunners of biblical Proverbs), appeared. New folktales were written down in the popular language: the tale of the doomed prince, decreed to die by dog, snake, or crocodile; ghost stories; and an allegory of truth and falsehood, among a variety of pieces.

But most attractive to the modern reader are probably the lyric love-poems of the age, in which boy and girl ("brother" and "sister") long for each other. In one, the young lady invites her boyfriend:

My wish is to enter the water pool),  
to bathe myself before you.  
so may I allow you to see my beauty,  
in finest linen, soaked in fragrant oils,  
[in a pool edged] with reeds.  
I'll go down into the water with you,  
I'll emerge, a red carp glistening in my fingers,  
[I'll invite] my brother, "Come, see me!"

## THE SUCCESSION: LIFE AFTER RAMESSES II

### *Merneptah the Determined*

How does one follow a career like that of Ramesses II (especially in one's sixties)? Despite his age, Merneptah lacked neither energy nor determination. He chose radically different epithets for his five-part titulary, to express much the same ideals. He soon made it clear to the wider world that he had every intention of maintaining his father's empire in full. So, early in his reign, he dispatched his army to Canaan to quell all trace of revolt, putting down dissidents at Gezer (modern Tell Jezar) and Ashqelon (or Ascalon) in the southwest and at Yanoam (modern al-'Abaydiya) in the north. Probably up in the hills, his troops briefly collided with a new entity: Israel—in its only occurrence so far recovered in Egyptian records.

This mention, on Merneptah's later victory stela of his year 5, is of considerable historical importance. The context and spelling of the name make it clear that a distinctive tribal (not territorial) entity named Israel was already present in Canaan by Merneptah's fifth year at the latest. In biblical tradition uniformly (contrary to some ill-founded modern hypotheses), the Hebrew clans had escaped from Egypt to Sinai (there becoming a community by covenant with their deity). Then, via Transjordan, they had penetrated into Canaan. Traditionally, this passage from Nile to Jordan took a full generation, forty years (compare the specific thirty-eight years of Deuteronomy 2:14). If one allowed up to half a century for this sequence, then the Exodus from Egypt would have fallen under Ramesses II no less, and conceivably within his years 15 to 25 as broad limits. Vestigial Egyptian features of the Late Bronze Age within the Exodus narratives would agree with this possibility: mentions of the town (Pi) Ramsese (see Genesis 47:11, Exodus 12:37, and Numbers 33:3,5), which fell into desuetude within 140 years; the precise nature of the Nile plagues; the technology of the "tabernacle" shrine; the rectangular encampment around it; the silver trumpets; and so on.

In year 5, however, Merneptah had to fend off a double threat from Libya westward and

Nubia southward. A six-hour battle broke the Libyan tide, while his viceroy quelled the Nubian revolt. Thus, Egypt had security for another generation and Merneptah's ten-year reign ended worthy of his great predecessor.

### *The End of Ramesses II's Dynasty*

But who succeeded the doughty Merneptah, his heir Sety II or the obscure usurper Amenmesse? Either way, the latter lasted only 3 or 4 years, while, for 6 years, as pharaoh Sety II added no achievements to his generalship under his father. At his death, a young son (by a lesser wife), Siptah, reigned for another six years, real power resting in the hands of the dowager queen Tewosret and the chancellor Bay, a high official of foreign origin. Later rulers (in their own propaganda interest) viewed these years as a time of corruption and decline with a foreigner ruling Egypt at his whim. At Siptah's early death, Tewosret herself briefly took over as female pharaoh in her own right. But with her, the dynasty of Ramesses II disappeared forever. Instead, a new man, Sethnakhte, took the throne (founding the Twentieth Dynasty), and his son Ramesses III—an ardent admirer of Ramesses II—had to safeguard Egypt through a turbulent world, fending off would-be invaders from west and north.

## RAMESES II IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### *Ramesses II: Idealized Pharaoh*

For an entire century, beginning with Ramesses III, every pharaoh was (or became) a Ramesses (now numbered IV to XI), such was the aura of the name. His vast buildings and heroic war scenes, with perhaps folk memory of the peace and prosperity of his era, combined to confer a halo of greatness on Ramesses II, a highly visible level of attainment for later kings to aspire to. Thus, Ramesses IV claimed to have benefited the gods more in four years than Ramesses II did in sixty-seven years, asking for corresponding reward; but his boast was not accepted and his wish left unfulfilled.

### *Ramesses II in Later Tradition*

In Egypt's Late Period, the title "king's son of Ramesses" was still found at court for some time after such kings ceased to reign, and the Ramesside style in royal titulary persisted for nearly four hundred years thereafter. The cult of Ramesses II lasted at Abydos and Memphis practically to Hellenistic times. So did tales of Egyptian deities sent to foreign lands to heal distant royalties in Ramesses II's time. One such was used to bolster the cult of Khons in Thebes. Such tales were a reflex of Egyptian doctors going to the Hittite court almost one thousand years before. Still later, into Roman times, the tales about Prince Setna Khaemwaset made exciting reading. Tourists of the Greco-Roman period took in at Thebes the "tomb of Ozymandias" (the Ramesseum), reinterpreting the Qadesh reliefs as wars in Bactria, the "back of beyond" in their time. Along with fleeting mention of the name Ramesses in the Bible, these late classical accounts were our sole surviving record of the king from late antiquity to the eve of modern times.

### *Ramesses II in Modern Perspective*

The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs early in the nineteenth century led to the recovery of Egypt's history. Work intensified this century and has restored to view the epoch of Ramesses II as of other pharaohs. With the recovery of the royal mummies in the 1880s, Ramesses II himself was brought to our gaze. Combined with the works of Sety I and Ramesses III, the great buildings and heroic war scenes of Ramesses II impressed some Victorian-age observers as they did the Twentieth Dynasty. Ramesses II became the popular archetype of all conquering and builder pharaohs. This lurks behind such works as Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (story line inspired by the Egyptologist Auguste Mariette) and Cecil B. DeMille's film epics *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956). Even in the international UNESCO campaign to save the archaeological heritage of Nubia from the waters of the Aswan High Dam, the images of Ramesses II and Abu Simbel were the ones used to stir the world's imagination.

What of the man himself, in his own epoch? He could be a headstrong and stubborn individual, as at Qadesh and in persistent wars thereafter. But he learned with time and was shrewd enough to agree peace with Khattushili III when the opportunity came. He and his father seem to have been able to pick good subordinates, so that Egypt appears to have been prosperous and well-run under their regime, by contrast with the following dynasty. Both kings also showed interest in their work forces, sometimes offering them the equivalent of bonuses for special or sustained effort. Within his limits, and even if some other kings were more truly great, Ramesses II may well have fulfilled *maat* (right and justice) for his people much of the time.

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