

Ramses II

 *DISCovering Biography*, 2003

Born: c. 1304 BC

Died: 1213 BC in Egypt

Other Names: Ramses the Great; Ramses II

Nationality: Egyptian

Occupation: Pharaoh

"King of kings am I, Ozymandias (Ramses). If anyone would know how great I am . . . let him surpass one of my works." Inscription of Ramses II

- CHRONOLOGY (dates approximate):
- 1289 b.c. Accompanied his father into battle
- 1279 b.c. Became pharaoh
- 1275 b.c. Led the battle of Kadesh against the [Hittites](#); managed to save most of his army
- 1259 b.c. Signed a peace treaty with the Hittites
- 1256 b.c. Dedicated the great temples of Abu Simbel
- 1255 b.c. Death of his favorite wife, Nefertari
- 1246 b.c. Married Hittite princess, Ma'at-hor-Neferura
- 1236 b.c. Directed a campaign against the Libyans
- 1213 b.c. Died peacefully at the age of 92; mummy entombed in the Valley of the Kings

The Life and Times of Ramses II (c. 1304 B.C.-1213 B.C.)

At the time of Ramses II's birth:

- The Great Pyramid of Cheops was 1600 years old
- Stonehenge was 150 years old

The times:

- 1552 B.C.-1069 B.C.: New Kingdom in [Egypt](#)
- 1550 B.C.-1150 B.C.: Mycenaean civilization in Greece
- 1523 B.C.-1027 B.C.: Shang Dynasty in China
- 1380 B.C.-1190 B.C.: Hittite Empire in present-day Turkey

Ramses II's contemporaries:

- Moses (c. 1300 B.C.-1200 B.C.) Hebrew prophet

Selected world events:

- 1275 B.C.: The Israelite migration led by Moses began
- 1260 B.C.: Troy was sacked by the Greeks during Trojan War

Egyptian pharaoh, who built numerous impressive [monuments](#), and as a warrior, diplomat, and peacemaker restored Egypt's world power.

Contributed by J. Donald Hughes, Professor of History, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado

Name variations: Rameses or Ramesses (Egyptian hieroglyphics did not record vowels); his inscriptions give him two names: User-ma'at-Ra Setep-en-Ra (Strong in the Justice of Ra [the Sun God], Chosen by Ra), and Ra-mes-es Meri-Amon (Son of Ra, Beloved of Amun [the Creator God]); the Greeks wrote User-ma'at-Ra as Ozymandias, and Ramses as Rhampsanitus. Born circa 1304 to 1315 b.c. in Egypt, probably in the eastern Delta; became pharaoh in 1279; died about 1213 b.c., probably in his capital city, Pi-Ramses in the Delta; son of King Seti I and Queen Tuya; married: many wives, most important of which were Nefertari, Istnofret, Bint-Anath, Meryetamun, and Hentmira; children: too many to count, but one inscription says there were 170; most important were his sons Amun-hir-khopshef, Khaemwaset, and Merneptah, and his daughters Bint-Anath and Meryetamun. Descendants: although his own direct line soon died out, nine [pharaohs](#) of the next dynasty claimed descent from him and took his name (Ramses III-XI). Predecessor: Seti I. Successor: Merneptah.

Ramses II, often called "Ramses the Great," was perhaps the greatest pharaoh ever to reign in Egypt. When he was born, few people could have predicted his rule, because he was the son of a general who was not of the royal family. But when Ramses was eight, Pharaoh Horemheb died without children, shortly after appointing Ramses' grandfather, Pramesse, as his successor. Taking the name Ramses I, Pramesse became the founder of the 19th Dynasty of Egyptian kings. But his death, following a reign of less than two years, saw the rise of young Ramses' father Seti I who became pharaoh, placing Ramses next in line for the throne.

Seti and his wife Tuya lived in a palace near the eastern edge of the Delta, the country where their family originated, and a rich agricultural region famous for its delicious wines. The favorite local god was Set, one of the most powerful of the many [Egyptian gods](#), and Seti was named after him. This northern province was the closest part of Egypt to Canaan (present-day Israel) and Syria, lands where earlier pharaohs had made great conquests over the preceding two centuries. These lands were important to Egypt as the source of fine timber and other products that Egypt lacked. Now, however, there was trouble brewing. In Seti's day, the inhabitants were impatient with Egyptian rule, and the powerful Hittite Empire to the north was eager to take advantage of the situation and make conquests of its own. The Hittites were not the only enemies to threaten Seti's kingdom. The Libyans often made raids on Egypt out of the western desert, and the Nubians kept constant pressure on the southern border, far up the Nile River.

Wanting his son to be a great warrior, Seti made Ramses an honorary commander in chief, though he was certainly too young to lead an army, and took him into battle against the Libyans when he was only 15. Soon afterwards, father and son journeyed to Syria where Ramses watched Seti capture the strong city of Kadesh. At 17, Ramses was officially declared the crown prince and received the formal names he would later use as pharaoh. He married the beautiful young Nefertari, who remained his favorite wife as long as she lived. In her honor, he had hieroglyphics painted that called her "possessor of charm, sweetness, and love" and declared that "for her sake the very sun does shine!" But, as it was the custom for princes to marry more than one wife, Ramses also married Istnofret, and before his father died, he had at least five sons and two daughters. He was a true commander by then, trusted with the defense of the Delta coast against the pirates who roamed the Mediterranean Sea. He had also led an army to Nubia, taking along two of his young sons.

Ramses was 25 years old when his father died. He laid the mummy to rest in the finest tomb in the Valley of the Kings, west of the ancient capital city of Thebes, and completed a memorial temple in Abydos, a place sacred to the god Osiris, protector of the dead. He was now king of Egypt, a living god, and Nefertari was queen and First Wife. While Egyptian pharaohs had absolute power, they were supposed to follow the principles that governed even gods and treat their people fairly; as a hieroglyphic text advised: "Do justice while you endure upon the earth."

Ramses Achieves Fame As Builder

Soon hosts of workers were busy all over Egypt because Ramses was determined to achieve fame as a builder. More of his works survive today than those of any other pharaoh, and his name was inscribed on others that had belonged to earlier pharaohs; sometimes he erased their names and replaced them with his own. Among the projects of his early years were the impressive Hall of Columns at Karnak, begun by Seti; the forecourt at Luxor with its obelisks and [statues](#) of Ramses; and the complex fortress-temple-palace in western Thebes now called the Ramesseum. These monuments show that he closely identified himself with the sun god Ra and used sun symbolism to attract the deep loyalty of his people. Largest of all his constructions were two rock-cut temples in the cliffs at Abu Simbel: one was the Temple of Amun-Ra and Ramses with its four identical statues of the pharaoh, each 67 feet high with shoulders 25 feet broad and weighing 1,200 tons; the other was the Temple of Hathor (goddess of love) and Nefertari, smaller but still very impressive.

As if all these were not enough, Ramses also ordered the [construction](#) of a new capital city for Egypt at Avaris near his birthplace in the eastern Delta. It was named Pi-Ramses A- nakhtu, "Domain of Ramses Great-of-Victories." Today, it has almost disappeared, but archaeologists have recovered glazed tiles with painted mullet fish which were part of a scene of gardens and ponds from the charming, airy palace there. The scribe Pebesa characterized the city:

Its lakes are full of fish, its marshes throng with birds. Its meadows are green with plants. Its orchards have pomegranates, apples, olives, and figs; its vineyards bear sweet wine. Its bees make the best honey. Ships sail in and out of its harbor, so there is always food to eat. Happiness dwells inside it. Even the poor in it are like the rich anywhere else.

The Bible notes that Israelites were among those who labored on Ramses' new city. The Hebrews were probably then living in the eastern Delta and were hired or drafted to share in brickmaking. Ramses' own inscriptions boast of his kindness to his workmen, but the Bible notes that the Egyptians made the lives of the children of Israel "bitter with hard service" (Exod. 1:14). The architect May, who was in charge of building Pi-Ramses, could have been the overseer who oppressed the Israelites. Historians do not know exactly when the Hebrews left Egypt, but a 1208 b.c. inscription of Ramses' son Merneptah mentions the name of Israel, indicating that the Hebrews had left Egypt and arrived in Canaan by that time.

Ramses was not only a builder, he was also driven to prepare for war. Deeply resenting the Hittites conquest of the Syrian city of Kadesh not long after Seti had captured it, Ramses intended to reclaim it. He led an army north to Phoenicia (now Lebanon) and took Amurru, a city that controlled the road to Kadesh. But word reached Muwatallis, the Hittite king, who began to gather an army to oppose the Egyptian advance. Soon the Hittites had 2,500 chariots and 37,000 men ready.

The next year, 1275 B.C., was Ramses' fifth as pharaoh and the year of his greatest battle. Dividing the Egyptian force in two, he sent a small force up the coast, then he himself went inland with four divisions of about 5,000 men each, named in order after four Egyptian gods: Amun, Ra, Ptah, and

Seth. As they approached Kadesh, Muwatallis fooled Ramses by sending tribesmen to him with the false report that the Hittite army was far to the north. Actually, it was hiding behind the walled city. Ramses brought the Amun division west of Kadesh, where they camped. The Egyptians then captured Hittite spies, who revealed how close the enemy was, and Ramses sent messages to the rest of his divisions to hurry. But it was too late. Hittite chariots charged forth in a surprise attack, scattering the division of Ra and smashing into Ramses' camp. The division of Amun also began to flee in panic, but Ramses saw that his only hope of victory, or even of survival, depended on his rallying as many of his troops as he could. Ramses did so, managing to hold off the Hittite chariots until the second Egyptian force arrived from the coast and the division of Ptah finally caught up. The Hittites were pushed back across the Orontes River which flowed near the city, and the next day Ramses attacked. But the Hittites outnumbered the Egyptians, and the result was a stalemate. A truce was called, and Ramses and his army returned to Egypt without capturing Kadesh.

Several of Ramses' great monuments bear **relief** carvings and triumphal inscriptions describing the battle of Kadesh as a great victory in which the pharaoh had singlehandedly destroyed his foes. The hieroglyphics show Ramses saying, "All foreign lands are my subjects, [the god] placed my border at the limits of heaven." In fact, in the next few years the Hittites conquered more of Egypt's northern possessions, while a new power, Assyria, took advantage of the conflict and claimed all the territory east of the Euphrates River. Ramses led more campaigns in Canaan and Syria that helped to strengthen Egypt's position there, but the northern frontier remained vulnerable.

Rulers Sign First International Peace Treaty

Ten years after the Kadesh battle, a new king named Hattushilis III gained power over the Hittites, and Ramses found that the new ruler was open to negotiations. Then in his 40s, Ramses' experience had made him wiser, willing to gain by peaceful means what he had failed to win by war; in addition, both sides had a common enemy in the advancing Assyrians. In 1259 B.C., Ramses and Hattushilis signed the first known international peace treaty between independent powers. Archaeologists have found both Egyptian and Hittite copies of the treaty in which the two kings recognized each other as "brothers" and promised that they would continue to observe the treaty with each other's sons. Guaranteeing each other's territories in a mutual nonaggression pact, they pledged to defend each other against any attack by a third power; their ships would be welcome in each other's ports; and anyone who fled from one kingdom to the other would be returned but was promised humane treatment. Finally, the gods of Egypt and the Hittite Empire were invoked as witnesses. The treaty was never broken during Ramses' long reign.

In his 24th year as pharaoh, 1256 B.C., Ramses traveled up the Nile with Nefertari to dedicate the completed temples at Abu Simbel. There, he performed impressive ceremonies in front of the four huge statues of himself, moments that may have marked the zenith of his career. For, in the following year, his beloved Queen Nefertari died, continuing a series of losses Ramses would endure until his death at age 92. The queen mother Tuya—a powerful presence at the royal court—had died only three years before, and, even earlier, Ramses' firstborn son Amem-hir-khopshef and at least three other sons had died. Merneptah, who would later succeed him as pharaoh, was his 13th son.

The 30th year of a pharaoh was celebrated as his first jubilee, a renewal of the reign and a recognition of the king's vigor and continuing life. The presiding priest for Ramses' first jubilee, held in 1250 B.C., was his son Khaemwaset, high priest of Ptah, who had made a careful study of ancient rituals. Khaemwaset was the first archaeologist in Egyptian history. A scholar and philosopher, he possessed, said K.A. Kitchen, "intellectual quality, avid mastery of reading and writing, a penchant for religion,

theology, magic, and the scribal arts." He investigated the [pyramids](#) and caused the names of their builders to be inscribed on them, and originated the burial place of the sacred bulls at Sakkara. From Ramses' 50th to 55th regnal years, Khaemwaset was the heir apparent to the throne, and up to the time of his death, took charge of Ramses' jubilees, which were celebrated every three years after the first. His father survived him. Ramses would live long enough for 13 jubilees, the greatest number ever for an Egyptian pharaoh. But the year after his first, a terrible omen had occurred: an earthquake struck Nubia, and the head and upper body of the second of the four great statues at Abu Simbel collapsed.

Ramses Marries Sisters

Turning his attention once again to the north, Ramses decided to cement the good relations with the Hittites by marrying a daughter of King Hattushilis. The Hittite princess left for Egypt with a huge dowry of animals, slaves, gold, and jewels. When she arrived, she was given a splendid marriage and the very Egyptian name, Ma'at-Hor-Neferura. Upon her death seven years later, Ramses renewed the alliance by marrying her younger sister. To show the friendship of the two empires, the crown prince of the Hittites came on a state visit to Egypt in Ramses' 36th year as pharaoh (1244 B.C.). While it was the hope of both rulers that Hattushilis himself would come to Egypt, he died before that could happen, and the crown prince ascended the Hittite throne as Tudhaliyas IV.

Ramses was an internationalist king; he encouraged his people to worship foreign gods and goddesses such as the Syrian Hauron, and Kadesh, the goddess of the city he had tried to conquer. He named one of his daughters Bint-Anath, "daughter of Anath," after a goddess of Canaan who was associated with Isis of Egypt. Besides his Hittite wife, he married Syrian and Babylonian princesses. And he sent Pariamakhu, a learned herb doctor, to treat members of the Hittite court and to collect medicinal herbs in the north that might prove to be of use in Egypt.

Some of Ramses' neighbors were not as friendly. In 1236 B.C., he led a campaign against the aggressive Libyans which was to be his last military expedition; he was then 68 years old. Still, he had 23 remaining years as pharaoh, a long period during which Egypt remained at peace, enjoyed good crops, and generally prospered. In generations to come, Egyptians would remember Ramses as a king who had brought them security and wealth.

Suffering from arthritis and bad teeth, Ramses must have consulted his doctors often as he grew older. In the 67th year of his reign (1213 B.C.), Ramses died, and his mummy was buried in a tomb with 20 treasure-filled rooms in the Valley of the Kings. Unfortunately, it did not remain there long. Robbers stole all his golden treasure, unwrapped his mummy, and set the wooden contents of the tomb on fire. In 1075 B.C., during the reign of Ramses XI, Herihor, the high priest of Amun, caused the mummy to be rewrapped, adorned with floral garlands, placed in a wooden coffin, and reburied in the tomb of Seti I. But robberies continued, so in the 21st Dynasty (969 B.C.), priests again moved it, with 40 other royal mummies, to the well-hidden tomb of Queen Inhapy. This tomb was rediscovered in 1871 A.D. by modern thieves, who were caught by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization in 1881. Finally, the mummy, with its few remaining treasures, was moved to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

No pharaoh is represented by as many monuments as Ramses II, but the temples of Abu Simbel, among his greatest, were threatened with destruction when the Aswan High Dam was built in the 1950s. Because the water that filled Lake Nasser behind the dam would have submerged the temples, the Egyptian government, with the help of many other nations including the United States, cut them into 1,042 huge blocks and reassembled them 212 feet higher on the edge of the desert. The interior of the

temple sanctuaries, which had been carved into solid rock, were protected by concrete domes. In relocating the larger sanctuary, the engineers were careful to preserve the angle of orientation so that the rising sun would shine all the way down the corridor twice a year, as it had since the temple was built.

The most famous piece of literature written about Ramses II in modern times is *Ozymandias* (User-Ma'at-Ra) by British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, published in 1818 and containing the lines, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings/ Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Ramses' works were impressive indeed, not only the many stone monuments that still ornament the land of Egypt, but also his achievements as king. He asserted Egypt's power in the ancient world, first as a warrior, but then much more effectively as a diplomat and peacemaker. He demonstrated that international cooperation was a way to security and prosperity. Although it is certain that he cared more than anything else for his own undying fame, inscriptions say he cared for his people. He was an absolute ruler, and there was no democracy in his time, but Ramses practiced justice; even peasants were confident of a hearing at the pharaoh's court. His was a long reign, the longest in the Egyptian New Kingdom, and his names and imperial style were imitated: he was held as an ideal by Ramses III, who worshipped him as an ancestor and a god, and his name was taken by all the following kings of the Twentieth Dynasty.

- [Ramses II](#)

Further Readings

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