



RAMESES II (1279 - 1213 B.C.)

RAMESES THE GREAT

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Ramesses II was the first ruler of the 19th Dynasty. Called Ramesses the Great, he lived to be 96 years old, had 200 wives and concubines, 96 sons and 60 daughters. Ramesses was named co-ruler with his father, Seti I, early in his life.

During 67 year reign, everything was done on a grand scale. No other pharaoh constructed so many temples or erected so many colossal statues and obelisks. No other pharaoh sired so many children as Ramesses II did. By the time he died, aged more than 90, he had set his stamp indelibly on the face of Egypt.

The great king was given the birth name of his grandfather, Re-mise, or Ramesses I (meryamun), which means, "Re has Fashioned Him, Beloved of Amun." We often find his birth name spelled as Ramses.

There could be only one Chief King's Wife at any one time, and Nefertari held that designation from the beginning. What we do know is that Ramesses II lavished upon her at least several important monuments, including the small temple at Abu Simbel and her wonderful tomb in the Valley of the Queens.

From the very beginning of her husband's reign, Nefertari appears as a dutiful wife, supporting Ramesses on all appropriate ceremonial occasions. She received the two titles, Mistress of the South and North, and Lady of the Two Lands, which parallel Ramesses II's titles.

We really do not know for certain who became the Chief King's Wife after Nefertari, but it may well have been one of his daughters. The dynamics these incestuous relationships are largely unknown. In some situations, the father, in this case Ramesses II, married a daughter it would seem as a replacement after the death of her mother. However, at other times the mother and daughter were married to the king at the same time.

In 1290 B.C., Ramesses began a series of wars against the Syrians. The famous Battle of Kadesh is inscribed on the walls of Ramesses temple. Ramesses' building accomplishments are

two temples at Abu Simbel, the hypostyle hall at Karnak, a mortuary complex at Abydos, the Colossus of Ramesses at Memphis, a vast tomb at Thebes, additions at the Luxor Temple, and the famous Ramesseum. Among Ramesses' wives were Nefertari, Queen Istnofret, his two daughters, Binthanath and Merytamon, and the Hittite princess, Maathornefrure.

Within his lifetime, Ramesses II was venerated as a god, particularly in Nubia. This cult following continued to flourish, even after the end of Egypt's pharaonic period. Unlike many Egyptian kings, who always sought to have their name remembered and repeated so that their soul could live on, the Egyptians continued to make pilgrimages to Abydos, Memphis, Tanis and Abu Simbel in order to make offerings to Ramesses the deity for centuries after his death.

It is difficult to tell from most of Ramesses II's statues and depictions on monuments exactly what he looked like physically. This is because the ancient Egyptian artists were not always intend on portraying the king in a totally realistic manner. The king probably never set for specific statues. Rather, they were based upon approved models.

Almost every Egyptian pharaoh seems to have felt a need to prove himself to his people (as well as to the gods). In fact, they wanted to prove themselves superior to their predecessors, and yet, at the same time, many of these kings actually suffered considerable self doubt, particularly when they were not born to a long dynasty of kings and also not to a "Great Wife" of the king, as was the case with Ramesses II.

Hence, Ramesses II's name lived on. In 1822, when we first began to decipher the ancient Egyptian language, many new pharaohs became known to us, and later, as new tombs were discovered, along with other documents, we began to piece together a long line of rulers. Only then did we know the names of Egyptian kings and queens such as Hatshepsut, Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. However, Ramesses II was never in need of rediscovery, for his name, perhaps corrupted somewhat, was not forgotten.

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