Ramesses II fought the Hittites and signed the world's first official peace treaty. He undertook an unparalleled building programme, had over one hundred children and reigned for 67 years. Did he deserve the epithet, 'the Great', or was he full of hot air? John Ray investigates.

Jupiter of pharaohs

Ramesses II is the most famous of the Pharaohs, and there is no doubt that he intended this to be so. In astronomical terms, he is the Jupiter of the Pharaonic system, and for once the superlative is appropriate, since the giant planet shines brilliantly at a distance, but on close inspection turns out to be a ball of gas. Ramesses II, or at least the version of him which he chose to feature in his inscriptions, is the hieroglyphic equivalent of hot air.

Nowadays this ruler's name is known to every knickknack-seller in the Nile Valley, a posterity which would not have embarrassed him in the least. Ramesses has gained a multimedia afterlife: his mummy is flown from Cairo to Paris to be exhibited and re-autopsied, and a series of airport-lounge best-sellers by a French writer, Christian Jacq, gives a soap-opera version of his life.

'Ramesses II...is the hieroglyphic equivalent of hot air.'

Yul Brynner captured the essence of his personality in the 1956 film The Ten Commandments, and in popular imagination Ramesses II has become the Pharaoh of the Exodus. The history behind this is much debated, but it is safe to say that the character of Ramesses fits the picture of the overweening ruler who refuses divine demands. The king's battle against the Hittites at Qadesh in Syria was a near defeat, caused by an elementary failure of military intelligence, and saved only by the last-minute arrival of reinforcements from the Lebanese coast. In Ramesses' account, which occupies whole walls on many of his monuments, this goalless draw turns into the mother of all victories, won single-handedly by himself.

One of the best guides to Egypt ever compiled was the work of James Baikie (1866-1931), who wrote his detailed account of the country without ever seeing the place. Baikie's down-to-earth reaction to the interminable accounts of this battle reads as follows:

A growth industry
The traditional capitals, Memphis and Thebes, were not enough for the victor of Qadesh, and he added his own in the Delta, modestly named Pi-Ramesse, one rendering of which would be Ramessopolis. Not even the heretic Akhenaten had dared to name his city after himself. Ramesses, however, thinks large, and this extends to his family, since he boasts that he is the father of more than 100 sons and 60 daughters.

'Ramesses decided to double the rate of temple-building.'

Previous Pharaohs had followed the rule that, in temple design, incised relief was used on the exterior walls, where it could cast strong shadows. Inside the temples, however, bas-relief was employed, since it does not produce such contrasts and creates a serene effect in the semi-dark. Unfortunately, bas-relief takes time, since the background to every detail needs to be cut away. Ramesses decided to double the rate of temple-building, by seeing to it that the work was done in fast, and cheap, incised relief. Akhenaten had sometimes resorted to the same shortcut, but he was in a genuine hurry, since he had abandoned traditional religion and needed a new home for his god. Ramesses II does not have this excuse.

Ozymandias

The empty victory of Qadesh was followed by a greater achievement, an international peace treaty with the Hittites, a copy of which is now on the wall of the General Assembly building of the United Nations. The treaty covers extradition, arbitration of disputes, and mutual economic aid, a clause which was later honoured by the Egyptians when their old enemies were afflicted with food shortage.

The temple-building programme instigated by Ramesses may have been rushed, but it turned out to be the most extensive ever achieved by a single Pharaoh in all Ancient Egypt's 30 dynasties, and some of the king's monuments, such as the delicate temple built at Abydos next to the larger complex of his father, show
refinement and even understatement. The twin temples of Abu Simbel in Nubia, though by no means understated, are masterpieces of land- and river-scaping, as well as being political propaganda skilfully translated into stone.

A more abstract point in the king's defence is that modesty was never considered to be a Pharaonic virtue. If kings of Egypt were great by definition, there could be nothing wrong in going out of one's way to be the greatest: this was simply the logic of Pharaonic kingship.

Another mitigating factor is the humble origin of Ramesses' family. The man who became Ozymandias was the grandson of Ramesses I, a solid figure, but essentially a provincial bureaucrat who had had greatness thrust upon him. This was not inspirational. When Ramesses II turned his attention to recent history, he would have seen the upheavals of the Amarna period, an episode which needed to be purged from the record. Before this, however, lay the family of the Tuthmosids, a dynasty which was associated with prosperity, elegance, and the growth of empire.

Another figure that loomed over the king was his father, Seti I, whose reign saw military success as well as achieving one of the high points of Egyptian art, marked by sensitivity, balance and restraint. These were the hard acts which it was Ramesses' destiny to follow, and one way of doing this would be to upstage the past by ostentation, thereby eclipsing it. Ramesses II was well suited to this kind of role, and the gods gave him a reign of 67 years in which to perfect his act.

### Principal queens

Ramesses may have taken polygamy to excess, but two principal queens shared his affections. One of these, Nefertari, is best known for her exquisitely decorated tomb in the Valley of the Queens at Luxor. This has been restored, thanks to the generosity of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and it is one of the finest sights in Egypt. Good art can be found in Ramesses' reign, especially in the earlier years, and it continued to flourish when not subjected to the dead weight of the king's ego. Nefertari owed her place in the king's affections partly to her charms, but also to the fact that she was the mother of several princes and princesses, including the eldest son and heir, who was given the snappy name Amenhiwenimnemfe, 'Amun is on his right hand'. Nefertari seems to have died before the thirtieth year of her husband's reign.

'Remases may have taken polygamy to excess, but two principal queens shared his affections.'

The second principal wife is Isinofre, who is less well known. The influence of this queen is more detectable.
in the north of the country. She was a contemporary of her rival, and she could boast that she had borne the
king his second son, diplomatically named Ramesses, and a favourite daughter, who was given the Canaanite
name Bintanath, 'Daughter of the goddess Anath'. Isinofre was also the mother of the fourth in line to the
throne, a prince named Khaemwise, who pursued a career in the priesthood of Memphis, and devoted himself
to the study of hieroglyphs and antiquities. He also designed the Serapeum, the catacomb for the sacred Apis
bulls in the desert at Saqqara. As a result of his interests and activities, Khaemwise has been described as the
first Egyptologist in history.

A mixed legacy

The architectural history of Ramesses' reign must now be rewritten, in the light of recent discoveries made in
Tomb 5 of the Valley of the Kings. This tomb was long believed to have been a mere false start for the king's
own burial place, but it is now known to contain more than 100 chambers, arranged on varying levels and
destined to receive the bodies of most of the king's sons. The monument is uniquely intriguing.

'The architectural history of Ramesses' reign must now be rewritten...'

Ramesses outlived many of his sons, and was succeeded by the thirteenth, a prince named Merneptah who
was already advanced in years. One of this king's first acts was to call for an inventory of the wealth of the
temples, and one gains the impression that the excesses of the previous reign had left the throne close to
bankruptcy. This conclusion is supported by the history of the rest of the dynasty, which is disfigured by a
series of feuds between rival branches of the over-extended family.

Ramesses may well deserve the epithet, 'the Great', but, like some others who are honoured with the same
distinction, he left a mixed legacy.

Find out more

Links

*Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II* by K A Kitchen (Warminster, 1982)

*Ramesses: Egypt's Greatest Pharaoh* by Joyce Tyldesley (Viking, 2000)

*The Lost Tomb* by Kent Weeks (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998)

*Reflections of Osiris. Lives from Ancient Egypt* by John Ray (Profile Books, 2001)

*Israel in Egypt* by James K Hoffmeier (Oxford, 1996)

Places to visit

The [British Museum](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/world/egypt/egypt.html) . The granite statue of
Ramesses II, from his mortuary temple, the Ramesseum in western Thebes, is one of the largest pieces of
Egyptian sculpture in the Museum.

The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/department.asp?dep=10) , 1000
Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, New York, 10028-0198. Tel: 212-535-7710. The Metropolitan Museum of Art
has a varied collection from Egypt consisting of approximately 36,000 objects dating from the Palaeolithic to
the Roman period.