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# Ramses II

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## Introduction

Ramses II—known as "Ramses the Great"—stands among the most illustrious figures of the ancient world. His reign, which began more than 3,300 years ago, helped define the zenith of Egypt's New Kingdom and left an indelible mark upon history. Over the course of sixty-six years, Ramses II forged a legacy of unprecedented military ambition, monumental building, and shifting diplomatic triumphs, becoming not only the subject of legend in his own lifetime but also an enduring symbol of ancient power for all ages to follow.

Born into a family whose rise to the throne was as extraordinary as his own reign, Ramses II was the grandson of a military officer who founded Egypt's 19th Dynasty. His upbringing, much of it under the watchful eye of his father Seti I, was steeped in statecraft, tradition, and the art of war. By the time he ascended the throne, Ramses was already seasoned in leadership, having served as prince regent and accompanied his father on both diplomatic and military campaigns.

His long rule saw Egypt become a crucible of power struggles, not just with traditional enemies on its borders, but also with emerging rivals such as the Hittite Empire. The legendary Battle of Kadesh exemplified both the perils of war and the power of royal propaganda; while history judges the battle itself to have been inconclusive, Ramses' mastery in shaping his own narrative turned it into a model of Pharaonic valor—an accomplishment immortalized in reliefs and inscriptions across Egypt's temples.

Yet the true grandeur of Ramses II is not woven only through stories of war. His reign marked an era of architectural wonder and cultural efflorescence. The scale and ambition of his building programs, from the grandeur of Abu Simbel on the Nubian frontier to the vast new city of Pi-Ramesses in the Delta, redefined what it meant for a ruler to shape the physical and spiritual landscape of a civilization. Through temples, statues, and colossal monuments, Ramses sought not only to glorify the gods but to ensure that his memory would never fade.

As a man, Ramses II was remarkable for his longevity, his large family, and his complex relationships within the royal household. His marriages—most notably to the beloved Nefertari and to Hittite princesses—were both deeply personal and shrewd tools of diplomacy. His children, depicted in grand processions and on temple walls, fulfilled royal and priestly roles, binding the royal family to both the gods and the land they ruled.

Over three millennia after his death, the mummy of Ramses II continues to be a figure of fascination, lending new insights into his life and era. His legacy persists not only in

the stones of ruined temples, but in the very idea of earthly greatness and enduring memory. Through the chapters that follow, this book seeks to unravel the remarkable story of Ramses II—his rise, his rule, his achievements, and the echoes of his greatness that continue to shape our understanding of ancient Egypt.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The World into Which Ramses II Was Born**

To understand Ramses II, the pharaoh who would come to be known as "the Great," it is essential to first understand the world that awaited his arrival. He was born into Egypt's New Kingdom, an era widely celebrated as the apex of the civilization's power, prosperity, and international influence. Yet, this golden age, sprawling across the 18th, 19th, and 20th Dynasties, was not without its complexities, its recent turmoils, and its burgeoning external pressures.

Around the year 1303 BCE, when the future Ramses II first drew breath, Egypt was in a period of transition and reorientation. Just a few decades earlier, the country had been shaken to its core by the radical religious and political experiment of Pharaoh Akhenaten. His attempt to sideline the traditional gods, particularly the powerful state deity Amun-Re, and elevate a single solar Aten to supremacy, had caused immense upheaval, disrupting not only religious practices but also the entire administrative and social fabric of the land.

Akhenaten had abandoned the ancient capital of Thebes and built a new city, Akhetaten (modern Amarna), dedicated to his Aten. This period, now known as the Amarna era, was marked by artistic innovation but also administrative neglect and international retrenchment. Egypt's hold over its territories in the Levant weakened, and internal factions, especially the powerful priesthood of Amun, seethed with resentment.

Following Akhenaten's death, a succession of pharaohs, including the young Tutankhamun, gradually worked to dismantle the Amarna revolution. They reopened the temples of the traditional gods, restored the priesthoods to their former glory and wealth, and eventually abandoned Akhetaten, allowing it to crumble back into the desert sands. This period of restoration was crucial, but it left Egypt needing to fully reassert its authority both at home and abroad.

By the time Ramses II was born, the task of solidifying this restoration had fallen primarily to Pharaoh Horemheb. Horemheb was not of royal blood; he was a highly respected military commander who had served under Tutankhamun and his immediate successor, Ay. In an unprecedented move, or perhaps simply a pragmatic necessity given the lack of clear royal heirs, Horemheb had seized the throne, or possibly been appointed to it, marking a definitive break from the direct royal line of the 18th Dynasty.

Horemheb dedicated his reign to internal reform. He issued decrees aimed at curbing corruption within the administration and the military, restoring order, and ensuring the equitable application of justice. He worked tirelessly to dismantle the remaining vestiges of the Amarna heresy, even going so far as to erase Akhenaten and his immediate successors from official king lists, effectively consigning them to non-history.

Under Horemheb, the Egyptian state apparatus, particularly the military, was reorganized and strengthened. He understood that Egypt's power relied not just on divine favour but on a robust and disciplined army capable of projecting influence beyond the Nile Valley. This emphasis on military strength would become a hallmark of the dynasty he would eventually found, though indirectly.

While Horemheb focused on domestic stability and military readiness, the external landscape was complex and increasingly challenging. Egypt was not an isolated superpower; it was a prominent player in a dynamic system of competing empires and kingdoms that stretched across the ancient Near East. This was a world of elaborate diplomacy, shifting alliances, and frequent military confrontations.

The most significant rival to Egypt's power in this era was the Hittite Empire, based in Anatolia (modern Turkey). The Hittites had been steadily consolidating their power and expanding their influence southward into Syria, a region Egypt considered part of its traditional sphere. This created a collision course between the two great powers, with the valuable city-states and trade routes of the Levant serving as the primary flashpoint.

Syria and Palestine were not simply a buffer zone; they were vital to both empires. For Egypt, they provided valuable resources, strategic depth, and control over crucial trade routes connecting the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia and the wider East. For the Hittites, they offered access to the Mediterranean coast and prevented Egyptian encroachment further north. The local rulers in this region often played a complex game of switching allegiances between the two giants.

Further to the east, the once-powerful kingdom of Mitanni in northern Mesopotamia had been significantly weakened and reduced by the Hittites and the rising power of Assyria. While no longer a major direct threat to Egypt, the power vacuum and shifting dynamics in this region contributed to the overall instability of the Near East and influenced the strategic calculations of both Egypt and the Hittites.

To the south, Egypt maintained firm control over Nubia. This region was a vital source of gold, ivory, ebony, and other precious resources. The Egyptians administered Nubia directly, building fortresses and temples to assert their authority and facilitate the extraction of wealth. While generally under control, periodic uprisings required military

intervention.

To the west, Egypt faced occasional incursions from Libyan tribes dwelling in the desert fringes. These were typically smaller-scale raids rather than existential threats, but they necessitated vigilance and punitive military expeditions to keep the western frontier secure.

Diplomacy played a crucial role in managing relationships between these powers. Royal courts exchanged ambassadors, lavish gifts, and correspondence, much of which is preserved in archives like the Amarna Letters. Treaties were negotiated, often sealed by royal marriages, creating a complex web of relationships that could shift rapidly based on perceived advantage or threat.

Within Egypt itself, society was structured around the Nile River, the lifeblood of the nation. Agriculture was the foundation of the economy, with the annual inundation providing fertile soil. The surplus food supported a complex hierarchical society, with the pharaoh at the apex, considered a divine intermediary between the gods and the people.

Beneath the pharaoh were powerful institutions: the priesthoods, especially that of Amun-Re at Thebes, which owned vast estates and wielded considerable influence; the military, which was increasingly professionalized and vital for both external security and internal control; and the state bureaucracy, a vast network of scribes and officials who managed everything from tax collection and irrigation to temple administration and foreign affairs.

The majority of the population were farmers, laborers, and craftsmen, living in villages along the Nile. While subject to state demands for labour and resources, they participated in religious festivals and daily life shaped by ancient traditions and the rhythms of the agricultural cycle. Cities like Thebes, Memphis, and the new Delta capital (which would become Pi-Ramesses) were centers of administration, trade, and religious activity.

Religion permeated every aspect of life. The pantheon of gods and goddesses governed the cosmos and human affairs. Maintaining *maat*—the concept of cosmic order, truth, and justice—through proper rituals and righteous rule was the pharaoh's primary responsibility. Temples were not just places of worship; they were economic powerhouses and centers of learning.

This, then, was the world into which Ramses II was born: a powerful yet recently fractured empire, led by a military man consolidating his rule, facing a formidable rival in the Hittites over control of the Levant, and relying on a complex social structure built on agriculture, bureaucracy, military strength, and deep religious tradition. It was a world poised between the restoration of past glory and the challenges of a dynamic

and competitive present. The stage was set for the arrival of a pharaoh who would embody the aspirations and confront the realities of this era like no other.

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