

Greatness Eclipsed by Magnitude

Written for Journeys of the Mind

By Jill Kamil

Seti I (1294-1279 BC) was one of the most stately figures ever to sit upon the throne of Egypt. He was the son of an army officer and he achieved more for his country politically and culturally than did his much more famous son, Ramses II.

When Seti I took over leadership after the brief 2-year rule his father Ramses I, the founder of the 19th Dynasty, he indulged a twin ambition - to be the new Tuthmose III (greatest conqueror) and a new Amenhotep III (finest builder). To this end Seti (who ruled for twenty-one years) rallied his army to fight the Libyans, Syrians and Hittites in an effort to win back the empire of Tuthmose III, and succeeded in re-conquering extensive territory. He also effectively secured Egypt's sphere of influence in North Africa and the Near East. Compare this with Ramses II's single battle of Kadesh against the Hittites.

Having achieved fame on the battlefield, Seti then initiated an art and architectural revival. His wish was to return to the traditional canons of Egyptian art prior to the so-called "Amarna period" of the late 18th Dynasty, and the delicate, classical reliefs in his two temples (his mortuary temple at Qurna on the Theban necropolis and his elegant temple at Abydos) as well as those in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, share ranks with the finest ever executed.

Great effort went into his choice of a site on the Theban necropolis for his mortuary temple, and Seti went so far as to take up residence nearby to supervise the work. This was not unusual. Pharaohs often spent time near a building site to watch the progress of their monuments. They stayed in small palaces with state chambers, living quarters and storerooms. Such ruins have been found in the vicinity of his temple.

When he died, Seti's mortuary temple at Qurna was unfinished, and it was left to his son and heir Ramses II to complete it. The younger pharaoh took less care. He did not supervise his workmen, and it is not difficult to identify the fine low relief that characterizes the work of Seti's craftsmen, from the much cruder, sunken reliefs executed under Ramses II.

Ramses made such a point of claiming credit for his piety, in completing the work of his father, that he has not escaped suspicion of having usurped a greater monument - the mortuary temple now known as the Ramasseum - for himself. It has been suggested that the Ramasseum was actually begun by Seti I, who simultaneously built a smaller temple in honor of his father Ramses I (whose short reign did not allow him to build one of his own). Such filial devotion would be totally in accordance with tradition. What was not within the bounds of custom was that, when Ramses II demonstrated filial piety by finishing his father Seti's mortuary temple at Qurna, instead of dedicating it to him alone, he honored Seti I *and* his grandfather Ramses I — whose single achievement in his brief rule his was to transfer the capital from Memphis to the Delta.

There is an anomaly here. Some scholars have come to question whether the Ramasseum might, in fact, have been started and built for Seti, and that Ramses II, wanting the greatest of the monuments for himself, relegated his father to the smaller temple, in a partnership with his grandfather, that he might fulfill his ambition. Was Seti I discredited by an egocentric son who today holds pride of place as one of the greatest pharaohs who ever lived?

If so, then Ramses II was a most thankless son. He grew up in a loving household and was the product of rigorous training by his father. He was just a youth in his mid-teens when Seti I set about his instruction in royal duties. He took the young Ramses on tours of inspection throughout Egypt. He allowed him to accompany campaigns abroad, and ensured that the boy knew all there was to know of the workings of administration and the importance of temple construction. Seti I encouraged his son to go with him on royal missions, and he prepared his people to accept the youth as his successor. The greatness of Ramses II was due, in no small part, to the training and example of his father.

Ramses II is best remembered for what can only be described as extraordinary building activity in his 67-year reign. His monuments, mostly massive, spread from Memphis and Heliopolis to Abydos, Thebes and Nubia. In reliefs of his battle of Kadesh, which are depicted on the walls of many of his temples, he is shown larger than life, while the enemy, mostly dead and wounded, lie in heaps on the ground. The relief of this battle in the Ramasseum has been considered by some as a pretentious interpretation, and while there is no doubt that the complexity of the composition shows development and sophistication, the individual figures indicate a marked deterioration from the expressive detail of the reliefs of Seti I's monuments.

We know who was the most famous pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty. But who was the greater?

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