Thinking Symbols
Interdisciplinary Studies

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Ramses II and the art of narrating history

Abstract: When we speak about pharaonic Egypt, a structured civilisation based on mythical thought that expressed itself in a profoundly symbolic language, we realise that historical characters, especially royal ones, are not simply interpreters of a narrative. They are par excellence, symbols of that narrative always evoking a multiplicity of senses, which cannot be reduced to only one meaning. But Ramses II (1279-1213 BC), third pharaoh of the 19th dynasty – New Kingdom, given his unusual capability of understanding the importance of memory and given his fine perception of history, surpassed all his ancestors and consecrated himself in time, in history, as a legend and the major symbol of Egyptian civilisation.

Keywords: Ramses II, memory, History

How did he manage it?
Through his ingenious art of narrating history, imprisoning it in symbols and images, he bequeathed to posterity. The creative dimension of the word and the magical strength inherent to signs and images were his privileged weapons in the construction of this absolutely singular narrative.

What is a symbol?
“Something used for or regarded as representing something else”.

Can a man be a symbol?
...

Like all Pre-Classical civilisations, pharaonic Egypt was structured on mythical beliefs and thereby used a deeply symbolic language. Reality was “absorbed” by metaphoric interpretation, and historical characters, particularly royalty, could never be perceived as mere characters in a narrative. They were, above everything, symbols that permanently evoked a variety of sentiments, which cannot be reduced to one specific meaning. The third pharaoh of the 19th dynasty of the New Kingdom, Ramses II (1279-1213 BC), was endowed with an exceptional understanding of the importance of memory and possessed a shrewd perception of history. He exceeded all his ancestors, and became both a legend and the greatest symbol of Egyptian civilisation (Fig. 48).

How did he do this?
By fulfilling all his royal responsibilities better than any king before him. This, as representative of the Demiurge, meant playing the lead role in history. However, Ramses II went further... apart from playing his role in the theatre of history, he sought to write the

plot of his reign, shaping the times and events according to his wishes and perception of the world. Then, because proclaiming was equivalent to creating,\(^4\) he left us the legacy of his creation, the proof of his achievements, in symbols and images.

Thus let us see:

Ramses II was born in 1304 BC\(^5\) during the reign of king Horemheb, the last pharaoh of the 18\(^{th}\) dynasty. This period of Egyptian history, set in the wake of the Amarna episode,\(^6\) is a time of profound political, social and mental change. After the son of Akhenaton, Tutankhamon, died prematurely without heirs, an old official of the court, Ay,\(^7\) swiftly filled the power vacuum. He in turn was succeeded by Horemheb, a military officer who had served under both Akhenaton and Tutankhamon. Ay’s rule was brief, but Horemheb reigned long enough to re-establish internal authority. However, neither of these two men were descendants of the original family that had founded the 18\(^{th}\) dynasty. Both legitimised their accession to the Egyptian throne\(^8\) through marriage to a royal princess, or with the backing of the priests and the army, the two most important social groups of the Empire. The priests, who justified – ideologically – all royal acts, had become a great economic force, owning a considerable amount of land and slaves. The army’s expansion and subsequent enrichment was perpetrated by the actual ideal of the Empire, and with the deterrent force of arms, in the long run, guaranteed the ideological validity granted by the priests. Horemheb,\(^9\) an ambitious and seasoned military commander who had originated from Heracleopolis in Middle Egypt and had served successively under Amenhotep III, Akhenaton, Tutankhamon and Ay, proclaimed himself king upon the death of the latter with the support of an army that had accompanied him for many years.

However, History does not always follow the plans laid out by its protagonists, and Horemheb was childless, whereby he was obliged to appoint an heir to the Egyptian throne. The obvious choice was a military officer whom he was very close to, Ramses I, the future grandfather of other Ramses. And that was how the family of Ramses II fortuitously ascended to the pharaonic rule.

Ramses I’s reign introduced a new dynasty, the 19\(^{th}\). This king came from Avaris in northern Egypt and descended from a long line of soldiers, but due to his advanced age his rule was

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short- lived. Upon his death he was succeeded by his son, Seti I\(^{10}\) (father of the future king Ramses II), who carried out the internal reorganisation of the country, strengthened Egypt’s supremacy beyond its borders in Libya, Nubia and Syria, and was responsible for intense building activity. This was the setting into which the boy Ramses II\(^{11}\) was born at the end of the 18\(^{th}\) dynasty, and grew into manhood.

Ramses II, “the beloved of Amon”, assumed the throne name of “The justice of Re is powerful” and became pharaoh of the Two Lands at the age of twenty-five. He was a man shaped by wartime and attempts to restore Egypt’s prestige abroad. However the world that this remarkable man was confronted with upon the death of Seti I was one of profound transmutation (Fig. 49). The Empire erected by the Egyptian pharaohs of the 18\(^{th}\) dynasty\(^{12}\) had ceased to exist. It needed to be redefined and re-conquered. Or else re-invented... And this is what Ramses II chose as the plan for his reign. He would “re-invent” the Empire of the old pharaohs, and re-inventing meant creating an illusion... knowing how to build a fantasy that would be transformed, through propaganda and repetition, into an undeniable truth. This would be the great purpose of his reign, the first step to be taken. But this goal would also serve for what this determined, pragmatic and wise man intended: to build the legend of Ramses II.

Ramses II rapidly perceived the world around him and became aware of two things; the first had to do with the western and southern borders of Egypt. Libya and Nubia were not a threat to the centralising and expansionist power of this pharaoh. But one particular situation alerted him to the new political reality in the Orient: Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia had joined forces (Fig. 50).

The main focus of the first years of Ramses II’s reign, between 1275 BC and 1261 BC, was to gain control of two strategic territories: the Syrian-Palestinian coastal area and Syria.\(^{13}\) This is where both the future of the world, and of Ramses II, were at stake. Domination of these territories would bring about, on the one hand, the submission of the coastal cities that were vital for the sea routes, and on the other hand, a challenge to the power of the Syrian princes and their Hittite allies in the north who controlled the Levant from Anatolia onwards. Ultimately, the key issue was control of the main maritime and land trade routes.

However, Ramses II knew how to put the king and politician at the service of the army, and be the commander of his troops. He was aware that his army barely had the capacity to fight his enemies. But he also knew that he could not show weakness or fear and that his first years as pharaoh would set the tone for (Egypt’s) relations with the world. Therefore, he invested, attacked and advanced against his enemies without hesitating, and left evidence of his presence in territories that had been part of the Egyptian Empire in the recent past. He understood that time could be his ally; what happened yesterday was not necessarily true today, and what one witnessed today could well not be the case tomorrow. Understanding this peculiar phenomenon empowered him to react when it was necessary to react, though never recklessly.

As he carried out his military plan during the first decade and a half of his reign, he narrated and recorded his actions shrewdly and incisively. Having been trained to rule during the first twenty-five years of his life, Ramses II probably knew better than anyone


the power inherent in words and images. Signs and images had a magic that made things happen. That is why it was important to spread representations of the plot that he had woven throughout the world he moved in.

History has left us some of these records, but the most detailed and incisive account of his military campaigns, and probably the most famous of the whole 2nd millennium BC, is the one that depicts the battle of Kadesh in which the forces of the Egyptian pharaoh confronted the coalition led by the powerful Hittite emperor, Muwatalli II (Fig. 51).

This narrative of Egyptian power in an international, political context was a breakthrough in the use of propaganda. Ramses II had it documented ten times in different formats: carved on the walls of the temples in Karnak, Luxor, Ramessaeum, Abydos and Abu Simbel, and written up in two texts – the “heroic poem of Pentaur” recorded by the court scribe with

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18 See: A. Spalinger, Re-Reading Egyptian Military Reliefs, [in:] Collier, Snape (eds), Ramesside Studies, pp. 475-491.


that name, and a smaller version called “The Bulletin”. The written versions present two overlapping accounts. In the first one, the scribe eulogises the royal protagonist, and then describes the setting in which Ramses’ victorious campaign will develop. The second account is a sequence of declarations made by Ramses himself, who slowly narrates the difficulties he encounters and how he overcomes them, invoking and obtaining the protection of the gods, and finally declaring himself the definitive victor.

Hence, we learn that the army of the Egyptian pharaoh consisted of four divisions, Amon, Re, Ptah and Seth, with 5,000 men each, and that it departed from Pi-Ramses in the spring of 1274 BC. After that the description of his advance to the Orontes River is narrated as a simple military digression, which would have gone as planned if the Egyptian advance guards had not been met by two Bedouin spies who deceived them into believing that the Hittite army was stationed in Aleppo, to the north of Tunip.

This false information misled Ramses II into calmly crossing the Orontes River to the west, and setting up camp in a large open area to the northeast of the city of Kadesh.

In the meantime, a few kilometers away, on the other side of the city, the Hittite forces were awaiting the arrival of the Egyptian army. Ramses II was alone with the Amon division. The Re division was preparing to cross the plain and join the camp, but the Ptah and Seth divisions were still on the far side of the Orontes. As the Re division was crossing the plain, Muwatalli ambushed them with an incredible war force. The unexpected attack was brutal, and the Re division was practically decimated. What happened after that (Fig. 52)?

According to the legend, Ramses II invoked Amon, and with the support and protection of this god he decided to advance alone into the battlefield, showing great bravery and courage. He killed all those he encountered in his path and spread terror among Muwatalli’s troops.

Soon the situation had inverted and Muwatalli assisted, impotent, to the flight of his troops from the battlefield...

According to the report, this change of events was exclusively thanks to the pharaoh.

Shortly after the first battle the Ptah division arrived, and by nightfall, the Seth division appeared. But Ramses II, aware that this campaign was not over, prepared his men for the next day, when once again, with great bravery and valour he managed to intimidate the Hittite forces, compelling their proud emperor to propose a peace treaty.

Neither party was truly interested in prolonging the campaign; Muwatalli had been temporarily weakened after the devastation of his army, and the Egyptian king was aware of the ephemeral nature of his superiority. Nonetheless, the saga of Kadesh definitely established the heroism of the king who had saved Egypt from a disastrous defeat by the coalition led by the Hittite king.

From that moment on, not only did all the princes of Syria know that their Hittite ally had capitulated to Ramses II’s might and influence, but also that all present and future Egyptians would acknowledge the greatness and excellence of their king.

Although the Kadesh episode did not bring about the end of hostilities in the region of Syria nor the Egyptian king’s definitive control of the Levant, Ramses II knew enough to wait. This allowed him to witness both the first dynastic crisis of the Hittite kingdom and soon after the disappearance of the Hanigalbat kingdom after it was occupied by Assyria, the

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23 For the bulletin, see: KRI II, pp. 102: 2-124: 15.
24 Two spies at the service of the Hittite emperor, see: SPALINGER, War in Ancient Egypt, p. 211.
27 See: SPALINGER, The Transformation of an Ancient Egyptian Narrative.
28 See: Murname, The Kingship of the Nineteenth Dynasty, p. 211.
30 Morris, The Architecture of Imperialism, pp. 374-375
new military power of Mesopotamia, which shared its northern border with an increasingly isolated Hittite kingdom.

In the sequence of these events, Hattusili III, worried about the danger and proximity of Assyria, initiated a new phase of contacts with Egypt with the objective of negotiating a lasting peace. With the ensuing treaty,31 which was well disseminated and became famous around the world, Ramses II established Egypt’s historical superiority over the kingdom of the Hittites (Fig. 53).

The text,32 (the original of which was lost), was written in Akkadian, the diplomatic language of that period, and listed the various clauses. It exalted Ramses II’s bravery in Syria, and it proposed an end to the hostilities between Egypt and Hatti, stipulating that in the future the following obligations be guaranteed: “fraternity” between the two kingdoms; mutual agreement to observe a pact of non-aggression; a defensive alliance in the case of an attack from outside; reciprocal recognition of royal succession, an aspect that was particularly important for Hattususili since Ramses II had previously taken his exiled nephew Mursili into his court and refused to recognise Hattususili as the legitimate king of the Hittites; mutual extradition of fugitives and their compassionate and humane treatment. The final guarantee of legitimacy of this contract rested on the invocation of the respective Hittite and Egyptian gods, who would naturally punish anyone who breached the agreement. Ramses II instantly realised the implications of this treaty. In immediate and practical terms it assured the free and safe circulation of Egyptians throughout the trading routes, and especially provided access to the important seaport city of Ugarit in northern Syria, which guaranteed contact with the world (Fig. 54).

But in political terms it had more far-reaching repercussions. Ramses II would definitively legitimise his own legend in history, becoming a symbol par excellence of the sacred royalty of Ancient Egypt. He was able to shape events and history according to his plans, but he was never reckless or acted hastily. He knew he had to wait... Then, better than any other Egyptian king, he also understood that if a “statement” was repeated endlessly it would become an absolute truth. Consequently, he disseminated colossal images of himself all over Egypt, depicting in stone the greatness and might of an absolutely exceptional king. He left stelae illustrating his presence in Syria and Palestine.33 The walls of the most important temples of Egypt were carved with depictions of his exploits in the field of battle and his performance as a king, recounting what was to become the biggest historical reality of his time: Ramses II was, beyond a doubt, the most important pharaoh that Egypt, or the world, would ever know.

Fig. 47. The map of signs appearance (source: google map, processed by Ł. Karol)

Fig. 48. Ramses II (© The Trustees of the British Museum, EA 19, AN)

Fig. 49. Map of Egypt’s territorial control during the New Kingdom (Modified from Image:Egypt_1450_BC.svg by [en:User: Andrei Nacu], accessed 9 September, 2015)
Fig. 50. Map of the Ancient Near East (http://www.bible-history.com/geography/maps/Map-Ancient-Near-East.jpg, accessed 9 September, 2015)

Fig. 51. Ramses II at the battle of Kadesh (Abu Simbel temple) (http://www.pbase.com/chammett/image/74261626, accessed 9 September, 2015)
Fig. 52. Battle of Kadesh (© CC BY-SA 3.0)
Fig. 53. The Egyptian-Hittite peace treaty between Ramses II and Hattusili III (Hittite version) (© Istanbul – Archaeological Museum – Treaty of Kadesh between the Hittites and the Egyptians, 1269 BC (photograph by G. Dall’Orto 28-5-2006.jpg)
Fig. 54. Map of the Egypt’s borders in the New Kingdom (© 2000 South African Cultural History Museum E3)