

ANCIENT HISTORY

Explain the political and religious significance of the building programs of the pharaohs of this period.

Undertaking extensive building programs carried many benefits for New Kingdom Egyptian pharaohs. It allowed them to fulfill a political, as well as a religious role through their building works. The political significance of building programs was that it allowed pharaohs to express their enormous power through colossal statues and impressive buildings. This use of propaganda resulted in the pharaoh being loved and respected by his subjects and feared by his enemies. The religious significance of a pharaohs building programs was that it allowed the pharaoh to openly demonstrate his or her respect for particular gods. By displaying this level of admiration for the gods, as well as offering them daily prayers and provisions, the pharaoh believed that they would be rewarded with peace and prosperity throughout the land, which ultimately helped them maintain ma'at.

The mortuary temple built and dedicated to Amenhotep III, the Temple of Seti I at Abydos and the Great Temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, are examples of building programs undertaken by pharaohs, in New Kingdom Egypt, which contain a significant amount of political and religious influence on Egypt as a whole.

Amenhotep III's mortuary temple is the largest temple to be built on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes. It is roughly five hundred and fifty meters wide and seven hundred meters long,¹ covering an area of approximately thirty eight hectares. The temple was dedicated to the creator god, Amun-Re, but there was also a smaller temple dedicated to the mortuary god Ptah-Sokar-Osiris² as well. Much of the temple has been destroyed by the flood waters of the Nile and all that is left are two colossal statues of Amenhotep III, known as the Colossi of Memnon, which has smaller statues of Queen Tiye and Queen Mutemwiya at his feet.³

Political propaganda is evident in Amenhotep III's mortuary temple through the two monumental statues of the pharaoh guarding the front entrance of the temple. The Colossi of Memnon, as they are referred to, are two statues approximately twenty three meters high and made from quartzite and sandstone.⁴ On the base of the statues is a relief depicting the Nile god, Hapi, bringing together the papyrus and lotus plants, which represents the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt.⁵ As pharaoh, Amenhotep III has control over Upper and Lower Egypt. Since the god of the Nile is bringing together the two parts of Egypt on a statue of the pharaoh, it is clear that Amenhotep was attempting to represent the gods desire for him to control Egypt as a whole. Therefore, the Colossi of Memnon, has a defined political purpose as it represents the pharaoh's enormous power and influence over all of Egypt and its people.

Amenhotep III's mortuary temple held enormous amounts of religious, as well as political, significance. His mortuary temple, or Temple of a Million Years as the ancient Egyptians referred to it, was built as a centre for worship of the cult of Amenhotep III. It was built specifically so that during the annual inundation the water from the Nile would flood the entire temple, leaving only the inner sanctuaries dry. Whilst everything else was flooded, the dry inner sanctuary was meant to represent the primeval mound of creation,⁶ known as the sacred *benben* mound where Ra-Atum first created himself and the world.⁷ Therefore, once a year, the flooding of the temple would imitate how the

¹ Andrews, Mark (2010) "The Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III on the West Bank at Luxor"

² Bayfield, Su (2009) "Temple of Amenhotep III"

³ ibid

⁴ Andrews, Mark (2010) "Colossi of Memnon"

⁵ Hill, Jenny (2009) "Colossus Memnon (Colossi Memnon)"

⁶ Hill, Jenny (2009) "Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III"

⁷ Demovic, Mary and Baker, Catherine (1999) page 21

ancient Egyptians believed the world was created. By constructing his temple in such a way, Amenhotep III was displaying his loyalty and respect for the gods, as well as representing his divine relationship to them simultaneously, which allowed him to gain the respect of his subjects.

The Temple of Seti I at Abydos is said to be the most impressive temple in Egypt.⁸ It has seven sanctuaries dedicated to the gods Amun-Re, Re-Harakhte, Ptah, Osiris, Isis, Horus and the deified Seti I himself, with a statue of each god in their sanctuaries. Each of the sanctuaries are also decorated with ritual scenes from the festivals of that particular god.⁹ It was constructed using white limestone and became a national shrine in Egypt¹⁰ as it was dedicated to many of the popular gods, as well as former pharaohs dating as far back as the first dynasty.

Seti I's temple holds a significant amount of political influence as it allowed him to prove that he is worthy of the position as king. Seti I's father, Ramesses I, was not born into the royal family he, like Horemheb and Aye before him, was chosen by the previous pharaoh to be his successor. As a result, Ramesses I and his son, Seti I, had to prove their right to the throne to gain the respect of the Egyptian people, as well as their enemies and allies alike. Seti I managed to do this by affiliating himself with the gods, thus ensuring that his family had a divine right to the throne.¹¹ Seti I achieved this by dedicating one of the seven sanctuaries to a deified version of himself, representing his close relationship with the gods and gaining the unquestionable loyalty of his people because they believed that he, like his father before him, was a god.

Seti I's temple is dedicated to approximately seven gods, thus holding a significant amount of religious influence. Inside the temple is a hallway decorated in raised relief and depicts Seti I, with a young Ramesses II, his son, standing next to a complete list of all the names of the pharaohs, starting from Menes-Narmer of the first dynasty, up to Seti himself, then Ramesses II, causing it to have a total of seventy six cartouches.¹² This list of the pharaohs is known as Gallery of the List.¹³ However, some pharaoh's names are missing, including Akhenaten,¹⁴ indicating Seti's desire to erase the memory of the heretic king and his monotheistic religious practices due to his own preference of worshipping numerous gods, rather than just one.

Seti I's polytheistic religious beliefs is displayed in the sanctuaries dedicated to the seven gods. Each of the sanctuaries dedicated to the different gods are highly decorated.¹⁵ The meticulous nature of each of the reliefs of the gods represents Seti I's admiration and respect for all of the gods of ancient Egypt.

Another indication of the religious significance of the Temple of Seti I is shown in the sanctuary of Seti I. It has wall reliefs of Seti being blessed by the gods, then being taken to the god Seshat, the consort of Thoth, who writes Seti I's name and ensures that it will be remembered for eternity.¹⁶ The significance of this is that it displays Seti's relationship with the gods, further emphasising his divine right to the throne.

The twin temples at Abu Simbel are two of Ramesses II's most monumental building structures. However, the largest of the two temples, known as the Great Temple of Ramesses II, carries the most political and religious significance than any of his other building works. It seats four twenty meter high statues of Ramesses, with smaller statues of his great royal wife, Queen Nefertari, his mother, Queen Tuya and eight of his children surrounding him,¹⁷ which forms the facade of the main

⁸ Dunn, Jimmy (2010) "Seti I"

⁹ Rome, Peter (2010) "The Temple of Seti I and the Osireion at Abydos"

¹⁰ Jonsson, K.M. (2008) "Abedjou (Abydos): The Temple of Seti I"

¹¹ Jonsson, K.M. (op cit)

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Rome, Peter (op cit)

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ Bayfield, Su (2009) "Abu Simbel"

temple. Also, in the middle of the four statues, a niche with a statue of the sun god, Re, is situated, with a war scepter in one hand, which represents the word 'user' and a figure of ma'at in the other hand. Together this entire image in the niche forms Ramesses II's throne name, 'User-Ma'at-Re'.¹⁸ By displaying his throne name in such a way, Ramesses was expressing his power and influence not only to the people of Egypt, but also to the people of the vassal country, Nubia.

The four colossal statues of Ramesses II out the front of the temple carries enormous amounts of political propaganda. They accentuates his immense power and influence over Egypt and its conquered lands. Like Seti I and Ramesses I, Ramesses II needed to prove his right to the throne. Ramesses II's use of propaganda through the colossal statues allowed the people of Egypt, as well as Egypt's neighbouring countries, to understand the extent of his power and influence in Egypt, thus earning their respect, in some cases, through fear or sheer amazement.

Ramesses II also used reliefs inside the temple at Abu Simbel as a means of propaganda. The greatest example of this being the relief of the Battle of Kadesh, which shows Ramesses II as a military leader, riding a chariot with a bow and arrow in his hands. Ramesses is depicted as much larger than the other figures in the relief, another display of his power, as well as his heroic abilities on the battle field.

Ramesses II also performed his political role by keeping the peace between Egypt and neighbouring counties by acting as a diplomatic leader. The marriage between Ramesses and the Hittite princess, which cemented the peace treaty between Egypt and the Hittites, is recorded on a stela inside the temple. This stela is called the marriage stela and documents the unity between Ramesses II and his Hittite bride.¹⁹

Through his heavy use of propaganda, Ramesses II was able to express his enormous power and influence over both Upper and Lower Egypt, as well as over Egypt's conquered lands. In doing this, Ramesses was ultimately earning the loyalty of his people whilst simultaneously gaining the fear and respect of his enemies, which prevented them from attacking Ramesses empire on Egyptian soil.

The temple at Abu Simbel also carries enormous amount of religious significance. The entire temple itself is dedicated to the creator gods, Amun-Re, Re-Harakhte, Ptah, as well as the deified Ramesses himself.²⁰ Inside the temple, at the far end, is a shrine of the seated statues of the four gods. Twice a year the rising sun illuminates three of the statues, all but Ptah, due to the lack of solar connections of his cult.²¹ In front of the statues there is a block in which the sacred barque used during religious festivals would have been placed.

Overall, the Great Temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel holds enormous amounts of religious significance, as it not only allows Ramesses II to express his divine right to the throne, but also allows him to please the gods by dedicating the temple to them. This ultimately allowed Ramesses II to maintain ma'at within Egypt as he was pleasing the gods, to which they rewarded him with a prosperous and peaceful land to rule.

Amenhotep III's mortuary temple, the Temple of Seti I at Abydos and the Great Temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel all share similar characteristics in that they all carry large amounts of political and religious significance. Each of the building programs executed by the three pharaoh's contain a significant amount of political propaganda which influenced the ancient Egyptian's views on each of the pharaohs at the time. The large displays of propaganda allowed all the pharaohs to express their enormous power and influence, which ultimately caused the ordinary Egyptians to trust them, and their enemies to fear them. The religious significance of the building programs was

¹⁸ Dunn, Jimmy (2010) "The Temple of Re-Harakhte"

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ Bayfield, Su (op cit)

²¹ ibid

that it ultimately allowed the pharaohs to please the gods through prayers and offerings, thus allowing them to fulfill their role as pharaoh by maintain ma'at. Therefore, the building programs of the New Kingdom pharaoh's was extremely important as it allowed them to display their wealth and power, whilst simultaneously pleasing the gods and gaining the respect of their people.