

Egypt's Golden Empires

Episode 3 - The Last Great Pharaoh

Keith David - Narrator: For over 3,000 years Egypt was ruled by Pharaohs. But in that last sweep of time, one pharaoh stands out. He would reign for 67 years, command the largest empire on earth and capture the imagination of the world. His name was Ramesses. Ramesses built a reputation that has resounded through history. It was a reputation deliberately crafted by the pharaoh himself. Ramesses was in fact a master of propaganda, projecting his power beyond the battlefield across the ancient world.

Narrator: This is the story of how one man created his own legend. The legend of Ramesses the Great, and how in the end, not even a legendary pharaoh could save Egypt's Golden Empire from destruction.

Narrator: In 1327 BC, a tragic event brought Egypt to the verge of crisis. The Pharaoh Tutankhamen had died. His death marked the end of Egypt's most powerful dynasty and the beginning of a period of great uncertainty. A great deal was at stake. In just two centuries, Egypt's royal family had built a massive empire stretching far beyond the Nile: from Syria in the north, to the gold fields of Nubia (modern day Sudan) in the south. A succession of powerful pharaohs had made Egypt the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

Nicole Douek, London University: When Tutankhamen died, the big problem was that there was no heir to the throne. So obviously Egypt must have been in a bad state. There was nobody there to take over, and things were in a state of flux.

Narrator: But now with the end of the great dynasty, a new enemy had emerged to challenge Egypt's might: the Hittites. The Hittites, living in what is now Turkey, were a more technologically advanced power than Egypt. Already they were pushing against the northern border of Egypt's empire. In 1279 BC, the fate of the threatened empire became the responsibility of a young boy, the new pharaoh of Egypt. He was crowned Ramesses, meaning 'Offspring of the Re'.

John Ray, Cambridge University: Ramesses comes to the throne fairly young, probably about the age of 15, and he has got an enormous task ahead of him. He looks back over the history of his country, a hundred years or so earlier, there were kings who would be the epitome of wealth, power and good taste. That's an enormous legacy to have to live up to.

Narrator: Ramesses had not come from a royal background. In fact, the boy king had been born a commoner.

Nicole Douek: His family was a military family, who were fairly new on the throne. They were certainly not from the royal line. They lived and worked for the kings of Egypt but they did not belong to the royal family.

Narrator: It was military prowess that had won his family its place on the throne. And it would be through military action that the young Ramesses would have to prove himself. To the north of Egypt, the Hittites were preparing for war. They intended to take advantage of the young and inexperienced boy king. Ramesses was about to face the biggest challenge of his life.

Nicole Douek: You have two super powers, each one trying to grab bits from the other. Eventually they are going to clash.

Narrator: By the fifth year of his reign, the massive Hittite army moved into Egypt's territory, advancing towards the town of Kadesh. The crossroads for trade with the near east Kadesh was of extreme strategic importance.

Professor Antonio Loprieno, University of California, Los Angeles: Ramesses II realises that the battle for the eye of Kadesh is the battle that will eventually decide which of these two empires will be the leaders of the world in the entire 13th century.

Narrator: Here was the opportunity Ramesses had been waiting for. It was a chance to prove his power and

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Egypt's Golden Empires

might to the world. There was only one problem. Egypt was not ready for war. Ramesses needed an army quickly. He mobilised, not just Egyptian soldiers, but other subjects of his empire including Nubians and Libyans. The primitive bronze weapons of the Egyptian forces were soon to be pitted against the Hittites iron armoury. The odds didn't look good.

Professor Kent Weeks, American University Cairo: I can't imagine what it must have been like to be a soldier in pharaoh's army. First, in all likelihood, you don't want to be there. You've been conscripted. Second, you're rather poorly fed, you're rather poorly clothed, you have a spear, or if you're lucky a bow and arrow, and that's it. You are expected to give your all.

Narrator: Soon the army was ready. The pharaoh's scribes also came along to record what the pharaoh was confident would be a glorious victory.

John Ray: He had the self-confidence that can go with being young. He thought that everything was doable. He thought that problems would not exist. He probably thought that compromises would not need to be made. You could just go out, do it and get it.

Narrator: Finally, the 20-year-old king set off with his army, leading an advanced guard out of the lush Nile Delta, into the scorching heat of the Sinai Desert. The figure he cut at the helm of his army was impressive.

Professor Kent Weeks: I can imagine that he had a great deal of power and authority. He was very strong and muscular. He was himself about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches tall. That is about four inches or so taller than the average Egyptian man. But he was taller nevertheless. He had red hair, which was a very unusual feature in ancient Egypt, and it set him apart.

Narrator: The Egyptian army surged across the desert through Israel and Lebanon. A few miles from Kadesh, Ramesses and his advance guard made camp and waited for the rest of the army to catch up.

Professor Kent Weeks: When Ramesses established this camp, he obviously was not thinking that there was going to be a battle any time soon. This was a time to stop, have a picnic, talk about life in general, and wait. Maybe a week, two weeks, three weeks later, some kind of a battle would take place, which of course the Egyptians knew they would win.

Narrator: But things weren't going to be so easy. We know from scribal accounts that the inexperienced pharaoh was about to be the victim of a dangerous trap.

Professor Kent Weeks: There were two Bedouin in the desert who were brought in by the pharaoh's soldiers, and interrogated. Ramesses, or whoever, said, "Where is the king of the Hittites?" They said, "Oh, he's way off there, don't worry about him, he's far away."

Narrator: What Ramesses didn't realise was that his informants were Hittite spies sent to mislead him.

Professor Kent Weeks: They released them, sent them off and said, "Oh great, let's set up camp and relax. We've got plenty of time before the battle begins."

Narrator: The pharaoh had fallen for a simple trick.

Professor Kent Weeks: Ramesses goofed seriously and badly to have taken those two Bedouins at their word. To have avoided sending out scouts to check the veracity of what they were saying, I think, was a terrible military mistake.

Narrator: Egyptian soldiers captured two more spies. This time, when Ramesses had them beaten and interrogated, he got a very different story. The Hittites were not hundreds of miles away. They were just across the river, ready to attack. In panic, the pharaoh sent word back for reinforcements. Suddenly the Hittites attacked. Ramesses' scribes left an eyewitness account of the battle.

Egypt's Golden Empires

Reconstruction voiceover: "The Hittite wretch, with his army, forded the river south of Kadesh, smashing into his majesty's army when it least expected an attack."

Professor Kent Weeks: The dust, the choking dust, the blood pouring onto the desert sands, these soldiers who looked death in the face at every moment in one of these battles must have had absolute hell.

Narrator: Egyptian troops fell before the Hittites' iron weapons. The army stood on the brink of defeat. Then, at the last minute, Ramesses' reinforcements arrived, and took the Hittites by surprise.

John Ray: Ramesses has been unbelievably lucky. And he ends up at the end of the day holding the battlefield. Actually, it was something of a goalless draw, snatched from defeat at the last minute by the arrival of the Egyptian equivalent of the US Cavalry.

Narrator: Ramesses had failed in his mission. The Hittites would be back and Egypt's trade routes and empire were still vulnerable.

Professor Antonio Loprieno: The battle of Kadesh did not go according to plan. At the most, it was a way for the Egyptians to prevent the Hittites from moving further south. But it was certainly not the flamboyant victory that Ramesses wanted.

Narrator: Ramesses, however, was determined to have his victory. Back in Egypt he would tell a far different story of the battle of Kadesh.

John Ray: What Ramesses does is say, "Right I'm going to rewrite history, so it's going to be the big gesture, the vain glorious boast. It's going to be the huge publicity machine. It's going to be the hieroglyphic equivalent of spin doctoring."

Narrator: Ramesses now masterminded an extraordinary propaganda campaign. He sent out legions of artisans to carve epic depictions of the battle of Kadesh on temple walls around the empire. The story he told begins truthfully but then veers off into fantasy. The young king claimed he had won a clear victory at Kadesh and it was not the Egyptian reinforcements, but he himself, who all alone had saved the day. In his version, he transformed himself from a gullible inexperienced commander into a god-like warrior. Every temple wall carried the same story.

Reconstruction voiceover: "His majesty leapt up, waging against them. He grabbed his weapons, and set off at a gallop, completely alone. His majesty was an unstoppable fighting force. Everything near him was ablaze with fire. All the foreign lands were blasted by his scorching breath.

Professor Kent Weeks: He claims that single-handedly after his troops had deserted him, he went into the field of battle slashing, swaying his sword back and forth, and decimating the enemies of Egypt.

Reconstruction voiceover: "He charged straight into the Hittite troops. The infantry and charioteers fell on their faces. His majesty struck them down and killed them where they stood."

Professor Kent Weeks: The claims of Ramesses II that his army had totally abandoned him, that he was left alone on a field of battle and single-handedly defeated the Hittites, of course is an utter load of rubbish.

Narrator: Despite his boasting, Ramesses knew that his army could not defeat the Hittites. He had to cut a deal. Secretly, Ramesses began to negotiate with the Hittites. After lengthy debate, Ramesses signed a treaty with the Hittite king. Ramesses the spin doctor was now Ramesses the statesman. A copy of the treaty is still preserved in the most holy of temples at Karnak, chiselled onto a wall.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I the great Hittite ruler am at peace with Ramesses the great King of Egypt, and enjoy his brotherhood. All the people of Egypt and all the Hittite people will be at peace like us forever."

Narrator: Covering issues of royal succession, extradition and amnesty for refugees, the treaty remains a

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Egypt's Golden Empires

model that is still followed today.

John Ray: Here you have the two super-powers of the day sitting down around a table and saying what we need to do is to build up a lasting peace – to build up an alliance that will mutually benefit both sides.

Narrator: To seal the treaty, Ramesses married one of the Hittite king's daughters.

John Ray: The Hittite princess was part of the terms of the peace treaty. She was, if you like, the cement in the treaty. She is brought into the presence of Ramesses and therefore by extension into the Egyptian empire.

Narrator: The Hittite princess was brought to Egypt's new capital, located in the Nile Delta in northern Egypt. It was called Per Ramesses, meaning the House of Ramesses. Far from the old aristocracy's centre of power in Thebes, Per Ramesses was carefully situated in the north to keep an eye on the Hittites. It was to be a new capital for a new regime.

John Ray: This is the Brasilia of ancient Egypt. This was the new capital. This was something that was going to be the beginning of a regeneration of the country. He is saying, "I am a new man, this is a new Egypt, and the traditional aristocracy had just better come to terms with this."

Narrator: On the banks of the Nile, Ramesses adorned his capital with all the treasures the empire had to offer. Eyewitnesses tell of the lushness and opulence unsurpassed in Egypt.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I have reached Per Ramesses. It seems like an amazing place – a beautiful area unlike any other. Its pools are alive with fish, and its lakes are covered in ducks. Its gardens are lush with vegetation. From the riverbanks, comes fruit as sweet as honey. Everyone who lives there is happy, and no one has any regrets. Even the lowliest person there lives in style."

Narrator: Not content with glorifying himself in this world, Ramesses turned his attention to the afterlife. Far from Per Ramesses, deep in the south of Egypt was a place dedicated to securing his immortality. Hidden behind the mountain that looms over the Valley of the Kings, was the carefully guarded village of Deir el-Medineh.

John Ray: They lived in a self-contained community that was quite tightly policed because they had secrets, which were not meant to be divulged to the public at large. The workers can be watched on their journey from the village to their point of work, therefore they can't be accosted. They can't be asked for information.

Narrator: This security was vital, because these villagers were the pharaohs' tomb builders. They held the key to the greatest secrets of the empire – the locations of the royal tombs. Buried in the hills around them lay the treasures of the richest and most powerful kings in history. The mountain, which the tomb builders climbed over to work each day was literally a mountain of gold. At work, these men not only dug the pharaoh's tombs out of the mountain, they also were designers, artists and painters. They produced exquisite scenes and hieroglyphic texts on tomb walls – spells and rituals that were essential for guiding the pharaoh to the afterlife.

Professor Kent Weeks: What could be more important? After all, you were ensuring that the pharaohs would be able to travel from this life to the next. One mistake in those hieroglyphic texts, one error in those scenes and there might have to be a detour – and the king wouldn't make it from this life to the next.

Narrator: But Ramesses did not intend to spend the afterlife alone. The greatest grip of the villagers at Deir el-Medineh was not in Ramesses' own tomb, but in the tomb of the most important woman in his life. In 1312, Ramesses married an Egyptian noblewoman, Nefertari, and made her his chief wife. For Ramesses, the building of her tomb was to be the ultimate tribute to his greatest love.

Nicole Douek: It is really the very best, possibly the last of the marvellous tombs of ancient Egypt. The reliefs, the finest of the drawings, the ways the colours were applied, almost indicates a love affair between

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Egypt's Golden Empires

the man who did it, and the figure of the queen.

Reconstruction voiceover: "My love is unique; no one can rival her, for she is the most beautiful woman alive...Gold is nothing compared to her arms, and her fingers are like the lotus flowers. Her buttocks are full, but her waist is narrow. Just by passing, she has stolen away my heart".

Nicole Douek: The tomb is decorated in the most exquisite taste of the time. Some snippets of life then have appeared now. They discovered a thumb imprint of one of the ancient workmen. He must have held his hand to the ceiling while he was painting, took his fingers away and forgot to repaint and retouch that part. So there is the fingerprint of one of the ancient workmen still there.

Narrator: The villagers who once walked these streets have left an incredibly detailed picture of daily life during the reign of Ramesses. Written on stone flakes and pottery shards that littered the remains of the village, archaeologists have found the tomb builders' notes and correspondence. Laundry lists, recipes, news, poems and love letters.

Professor Kent Weeks: It is an archaeological goldmine – a cultural goldmine. The people of Deir el-Medineh were inveterate record keepers. They kept tabs on everything, and they left it behind on ostracod, the ancient Egyptian equivalent of a 'post-it' note I suppose. These records are about who was ill on which day and who was going on holiday. They covered when the in-laws were coming to visit; whose son went out carousing, got drunk and did unspeakable things to the girl next door. All of this kind of thing is there, and in glorious, wonderful details.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Why are you treating me so badly? I'm no better than a donkey in your eyes."

Reconstruction voiceover: "If, God forbid, I was the type who couldn't hold their drink, then you'd be right not to invite me, but I'm just someone who's a bit short of beer in his own house."

Reconstruction voiceover: "When it's feeding time you fetch an ox, but when there's beer you never invite me. You're only after me when there's work to be done."

Narrator: When they weren't working on the royal tombs, the villagers used their unique skills on their own tombs. Instead of the formal religious scenes of the royal tombs, their tombs portrayed pictures of the after-life that the tomb builders hoped for. These were idealised versions of everyday life.

John Ray: In their spare time, the family would make their own tomb and add to the decoration. Probably at dinner parties, the question would be "How is the tomb getting on then?"

Narrator: From the paintings and writings left behind by Ramesses' villagers, we know who lived in each house and even the intimate details of their relationships. Nowhere else in the ancient world can we listen to ordinary people and eavesdrop on their scandals and gossip.

John Ray: There was a foreman called Paneb, whom we know a lot about because we have a whole series of complaints about him. He did various things. He stole equipment from the Valley of the Kings. He embezzled the salary of some of his colleagues. He went around seducing the wives of villagers – presumably, when the villagers were out at work.

Narrator: Even Paneb's own son denounced him for his behaviour.

Reconstruction voiceover: "My father slept with Tiy while she was married to Kenna and with Hunro when she was with Paneb; after he had slept with Hunro, he even slept with her daughter."

Professor Kent Weeks: These people at Deir el-Medineh quite clearly are human beings. To read what they are writing, to see what they are doing – what they have in their homes, what kinds of drawings they have made, is to realise that we and they are truly kindred spirits.

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Egypt's Golden Empires

Reconstruction voiceover: "You've been arguing with my mother and threatening to throw her out. Your mother never does anything for you."

Reconstruction voiceover: "I didn't tell you just what your wife has been up to, just for you to turn a blind eye to it. I'm going to make you face up to her whoring around."

Reconstruction voiceover: "Well, you told me to give him a job. I did exactly that, but he takes ages to bring a jug of water."

Reconstruction voiceover: "...You can't even get your wife pregnant. And another thing, you're the biggest miser around, you never give anyone anything."

Narrator: By the time Ramesses was in his forties, his tomb had been finished for several years. With the average Egyptian life expectancy at around 35 years, Ramesses must have known that he was already living on borrowed time. He focused his attention on securing his legacy, siring children to succeed him on the golden throne. As well as his chief wife, Nefertari, Ramesses had a number of minor wives in his harem. He even married three of his own daughters.

John Ray: In his inscriptions, he boasts of having something like 80 sons, and 60 daughters – although the number of daughters is vaguer than the number of sons. But he boasts of a huge offspring and he is rather like one of those modern dictators who are known as father of their country – in many cases literally.

Narrator: Confident that he had produced an heir, Ramesses turned with renewed vigour to his building programme. Soon the Nile Valley began to overflow with monuments dedicated to Egypt's greatest king.

Nicole Douek: When Ramesses built, he built big. It is enormous. It is on a scale that has never really been seen in Egypt.

Narrator: Everywhere, Ramesses' title could be seen carved into rock. There were hieroglyphs that read, "Ruler of Rulers".

John Ray: Practically every town in Egypt gets its temple either rebuilt, or refounded or revamped. Ramesses isn't modest. If he sees a rather nice monument, let's say an obelisk put up by a previous king, he puts his own names all over the obelisk as well.

Narrator: Where great temples already existed, such as the one at Luxor, Ramesses simply erected a new entrance with four statues of himself to claim the temple as his own. At Karnak, Egypt's holiest temple, all the pharaohs of the New Kingdom had built monuments, but Ramesses soon outdid them all. In the great hypostyle hall begun by his grandfather, Ramesses ordered a work of awesome proportions. An army of artisans carved a field of 134 columns in the shape of papyrus. Each column stood 69 feet tall, 6 feet wide, and weighed over a hundred tons. The Greeks, the Romans, even Napoleon would one day attempt to emulate its grandeur.

Nicole Douek: It doesn't seem to be the work of human beings it is on such a scale. It looks as though it is very much part of the personality of the man who has to prove a point. He's always scoring points over everybody else.

Narrator: Through propaganda, diplomacy and a building programme that humbled his rivals, Ramesses had finally become the legend he had set out to create. The boy king, born a commoner, was truly Ramesses the great. But at the height of his reign, just when his empire seemed stronger than ever, tragedy struck. His chief wife, Nefertari died. Ramesses had her body sealed in her exquisite tomb. After Nefertari died, Ramesses completed the ultimate tribute to his wife. In an audacious act, Ramesses turned two entire mountains into temples. Side by side, one dedicated to himself and one to his wife Nefertari. Abu Simbel was not intended simply as a memorial to Nefertari. He had chosen the location of the temples carefully.

Nicole Douek: The two temples at Abu Simbel are another piece of the propaganda exercise of Ramesses.

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Egypt's Golden Empires

They are situated at the southernmost border of Egypt, to indicate the power of Egypt to people living further south. It shows to everybody you can't really mess around with the Egyptian kings.

Narrator: Here, overlooking the Nile 3,000 years later, Ramesses still stands beside the woman he once called "The one for whom the sun shines". Nefertari left Ramesses an important legacy – sons to rule Egypt after his death. But the long life that had been the pharaoh's greatest blessing was now fast becoming his curse. While he lived on, his children began to die. One by one, he groomed 12 of his heirs for power. He named each as Crown Prince only to watch them die. While bereavements wore down the old king, Ramesses made sure that the world still only heard of his successes. Tales of his greatness were manufactured at a new temple the pharaoh had built for himself, the Ramessium. Behind the temple, sanctuary was the intellectual heart of the empire, the House of Life. The scribes who worked here were responsible for carefully crafting the image Ramesses projected to the world. They composed the texts glorifying the pharaoh. They managed his campaign funds, and they were the designers of his buildings and monuments. The House of Life was Ramesses ministry of propaganda. Its task was to create and exploit the larger than life image of their king.

Professor Antonio Loprieno: They were masterminding the royal presentation of pharaoh as this superhuman hero. They were image-makers, or spin doctors, as we would say in modern terminology. They would use traditional knowledge and apply it to the promotion of a particular individual, in this case of King Ramesses II.

Narrator: All of this knowledge was written on rolls of papyrus and stored in the House of Life.

John Ray: The temple library might have contained 10,000 papyrus works. Some of them were copied from books that were already 2,000 years old when Ramesses was on the throne of Egypt. It would have been a storehouse of intellectual wisdom.

Narrator: This library of knowledge would not have been possible without the invention of papyrus. The papyrus plant that grew along the Nile provided a medium to record Egypt's knowledge. The papyrus scrolls that filled the House of Life gave Egypt a recorded history. Ramesses' scribes continued to build the image of the pharaoh as a strong and vibrant warrior king. The reality however was, that by 1213 BC, the 93-year-old king was ailing.

Professor Kent Weeks: At the end of his life, he was in rather frail condition. He had lost his teeth. He had dental abscesses. He had curvature of the spine and scoliosis – numerous problems. He must have been in great pain. This is a terrible thing for a man, who, in his younger days was strong, virile, very muscular and very enthusiastic.

Narrator: At the end of that year preparations were under way to celebrate Ramesses' 67th year in power. The ordinary people of Egypt could have been forgiven for thinking that he would live forever. Yet they were wrong. Just before the celebrations began, news broke that Ramesses the Great was dead.

Professor Kent Weeks: The death of Ramesses must have been so traumatic. Most of the people of Egypt had never known another king. Probably not more than a few dozen people could remember what happened before Ramesses had ascended the throne. This could be the end of the universe. The sun may stop rising, the moon waxing and waning, the Nile won't rise. It must have been panic time. This is truly an important event, and nobody knows quite what to do.

Narrator: The frail body of Ramesses that rests in the Cairo museum today bears little resemblance to the heroic figure carved on nearly every temple facade along the Nile. The small, shrivelled corpse with tufts of red hair was the man who cast his shadow over Egyptian history. Every pharaoh who followed would strive to recreate his greatness.

Nicole Douek: The legacy of Ramesses the Great is that everybody tried to be like him. It is the name of Ramesses that they take on. So from Ramesses II, the one we know, the great one, we go on a whole series of Ramesses until Ramesses XI. But they are all Ramesses of a minor scale. They are nothing that

Egypt's Golden Empires

can be compared to Ramesses II.

Narrator: Through sheer determination and the power of his personality, Ramesses had maintained the empire for over half a century. He had assumed that his legacy would last forever. The world was changing, and within a generation, Ramesses' legacy was in peril. At the edges of the empire, city after city began to fall under pressure from the invading hordes. Well armed, aggressive and dangerous, these foreigners arrived by ship and decimated everyone in their sight. Ancient texts refer to them only as the Sea People. Eventually the Sea People even destroyed the powerful Hittite empire. With its greatest ally gone, Egypt itself was now vulnerable.

Reconstruction voiceover: "No country could withstand their onslaught, the Hittite land was the first to fall, and then they came onwards armed towards Egypt itself."

Narrator: The fading reliefs on the walls of this Egyptian temple are the only record that remains of the Sea People. Yet they were changing the whole political structure of the ancient world. The Sea People were attacking the edges of the empire. Allies were lost and trade routes blocked. Egypt's once vibrant economy began to falter and now problems within Egypt began to mount. Ramesses' successors expected the same standards of craftsmanship from their builders as during the reign of the great king. But they no longer had the means to finance these great works.

Professor Antonio Loprieno: The Egyptian state was living as if it was still the time of Ramesses II. But what is important here is that it was not the time of Ramesses II. It was not the time of Ramesses II internationally and it was not the time internally. Egypt had begun to crumble.

Narrator: The government couldn't even pay its elite craftsmen at Deir el-Medineh.

Professor Kent Weeks: There came to be a frustration with the Egyptian administration. Promises are made, and then broken. Promises are made and then forgotten, and of course, as usual, it is the little man who suffers.

Narrator: The tomb workers faced starvation. Putting down their tools, the villagers went on strike – the first recorded industrial strike in history.

Reconstruction voiceover: "We have no clothes, no oil, no fish and no vegetables. Send a message to our good lord the pharaoh asking for them, and send another message to our boss telling him to provide us with emergency rations."

Professor Kent Weeks: The little people wouldn't take it any more. They did go on strike, and they did protest at not being paid. It didn't do them much good. At least for a couple of months, they had to make several protests, but additionally they went off in search of treasure to try to pay their bills, if you will.

Narrator: In desperate circumstances the tomb builders did the unthinkable. They knew the secret location of the royal tombs, and now they betrayed the pharaohs of the New Kingdom and violated their sacred burial chambers. Even the tomb of Ramesses the great did not escape desecration. The confessions beaten out of the few that were caught allow us a glimpse of the magnificent treasure they found.

Reconstruction voiceover: "We fetched our copper picks, and tunnelled into this royal tomb. We discovered the king's mummy lying at the back of the tomb. It was covered with gold from head to toe. The mummy cases were also lined with silver and gold, inside and out. And they were studded with all sorts of precious stones. We tore off the gold, took the amulets and jewellery. We split the gold we had found into equal shares, and then we sailed back across the river to Thebes. "

Narrator: By 1080 BC, most of the treasures buried with the pharaohs had been plundered. The mountain of gold had been stripped bare. The same people who had built the royal tombs had desecrated them. The very men who had assisted the pharaohs in their quest for immortality had taken it away. As order broke down within Egypt, the empire finally collapsed. States in the Near East were no longer loyal to the Egyptian

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Egypt's Golden Empires

pharaoh. Even Nubia seized their chance for independence, cutting Egypt's last lifeline – its access to gold.

Nicole Douek: The loss of Nubia meant the loss of gold and the loss of gold means that you do not have any clout on the international political scene. So other people are going to become the dominant ones and Egypt becomes a little bit of a backwater.

Narrator: In a final humiliating act, the priests of Karnak were forced to perform a sorry duty. They gathered together 40 royal mummies from the desecrated tombs and carried them to secret locations where they might finally find peace; Ahmose founder of the New Kingdom, Tuthmosis III, warrior and empire builder – Even Ramesses the last great pharaoh. Once they had been treated like gods: now their bodies were piled up in caves in a mountainside where they would rest for 3,000 years. It seemed that Ramesses' struggle for immortality had been in vain. Less than 200 years after the end of his reign, the empire had fallen. And with the death of Ramesses XI, the Ramessite dynasty became extinct. The New Kingdom was over.

Professor Antonio Loprieno: During the New Kingdom, Egypt became this mixture of reality and fiction that has always represented the most fascinating aspect of their civilisation. It is the reality of a very powerful and successful empire, but also the fiction of a display of power that goes well beyond that reality.

Nicole Douek: All the other empires of the ancient world tried to emulate Egypt. From the Assyrians, to the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans, you always look back to the greatest empire of all – which is the empire of Egypt. Everybody wants to be like the Egyptian pharaohs.

Narrator: Today millions still come to pay tribute to the pharaohs. Some 3,000 years later, Egypt's Golden Empire is still conquering the imagination of the world.

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