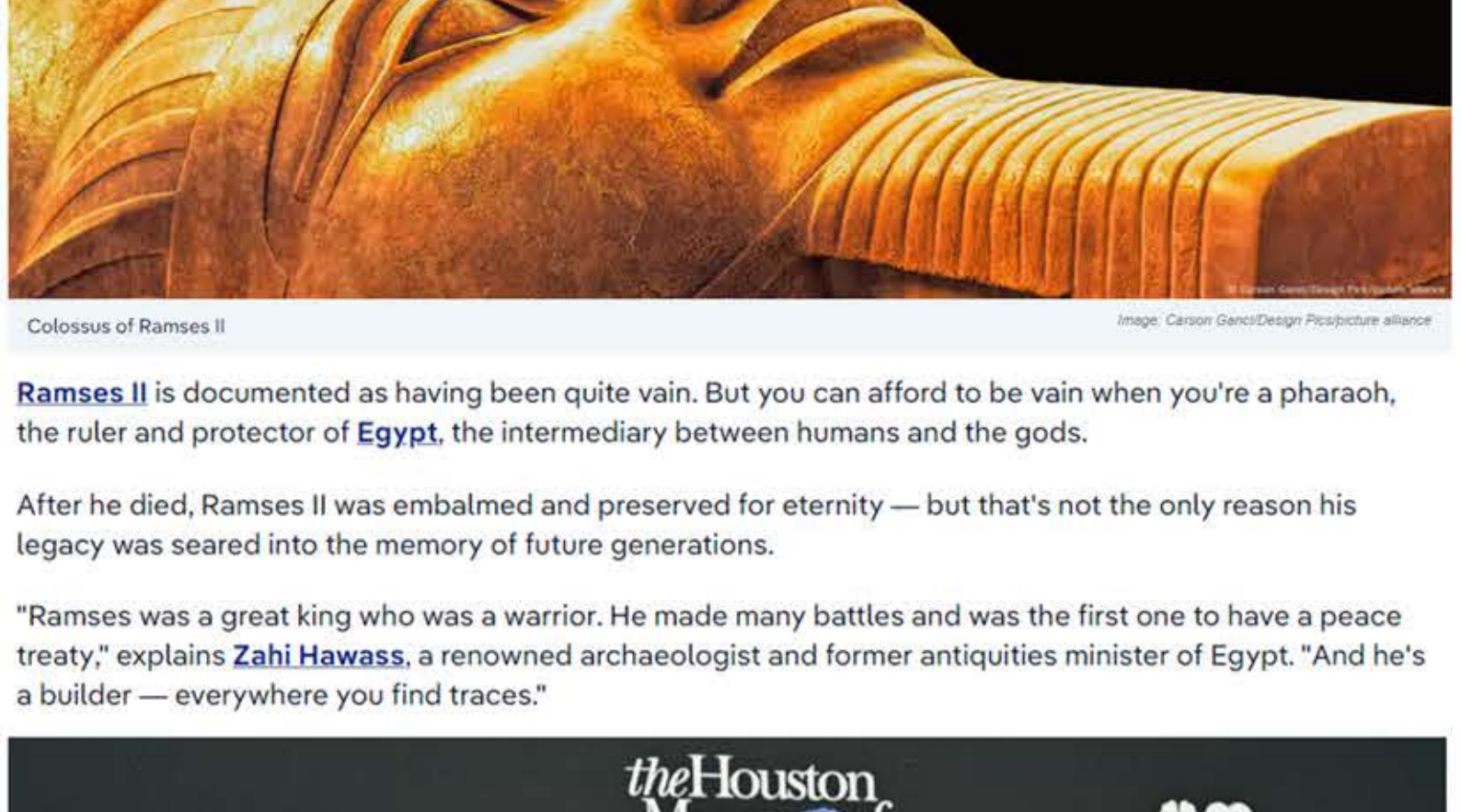


# CULTURE | EGYPT

## Opulence of pharaoh Ramses II unveiled at exhibition

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The opulence of the reign of Ramses II, Egypt's most powerful pharaoh, is on display at a touring exhibition currently in Cologne, Germany.

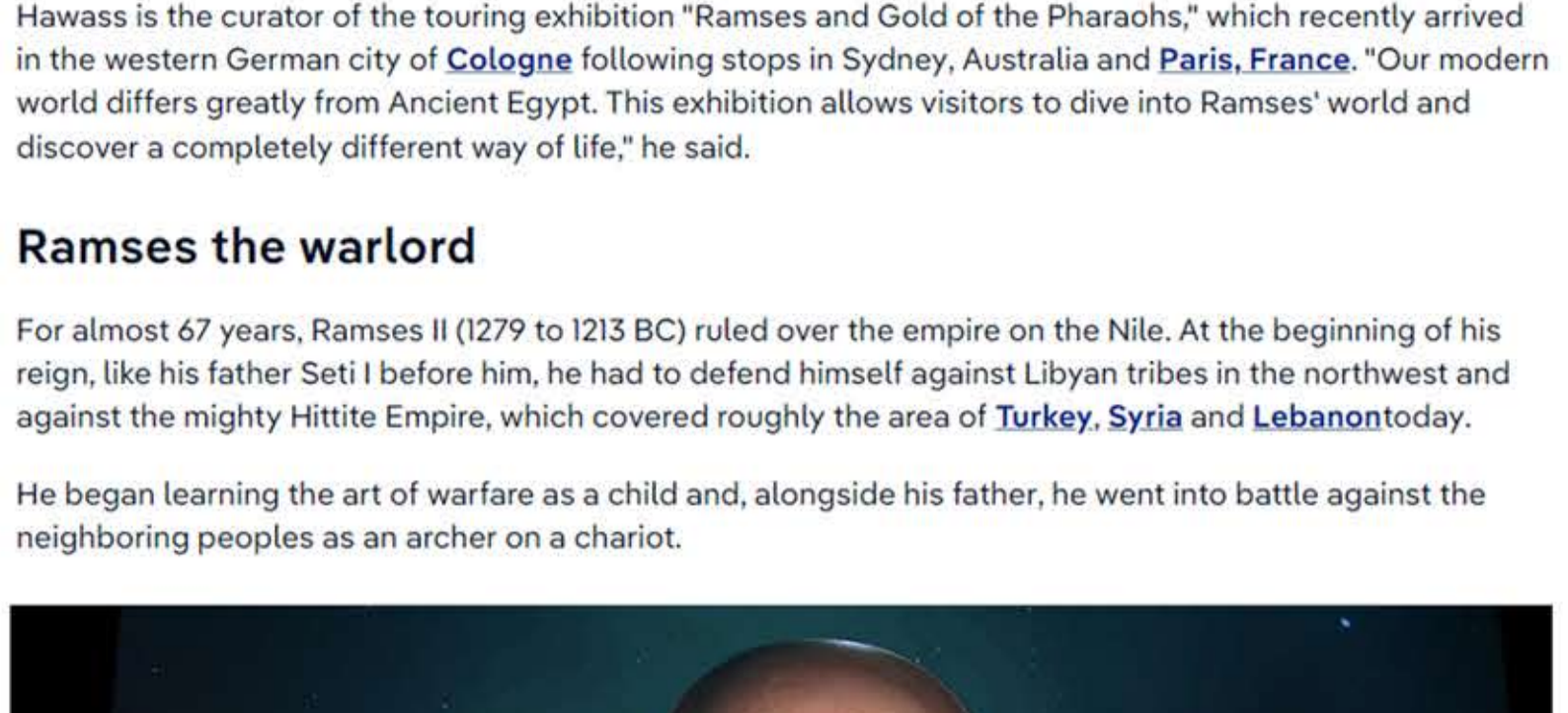


Colossus of Ramses II | Image: Carson Genco/Design Pictobureau alliance

**Ramses II** is documented as having been quite vain. But you can afford to be vain when you're a pharaoh, the ruler and protector of **Egypt**, the intermediary between humans and the gods.

After he died, Ramses II was embalmed and preserved for eternity — but that's not the only reason his legacy was seared into the memory of future generations.

"Ramses was a great king who was a warrior. He made many battles and was the first one to have a peace treaty," explains **Zahi Hawass**, a renowned archaeologist and former antiquities minister of Egypt. "And he's a builder — everywhere you find traces."



Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass at the opening of the Cologne stop of the Ramses exhibition | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

Hawass is the curator of the touring exhibition "Ramses and Gold of the Pharaohs," which recently arrived in the western German city of **Cologne** following stops in Sydney, Australia and **Paris, France**. "Our modern world differs greatly from Ancient Egypt. This exhibition allows visitors to dive into Ramses' world and discover a completely different way of life," he said.

### Ramses the warlord

For almost 67 years, Ramses II (1279 to 1213 BC) ruled over the empire on the Nile. At the beginning of his reign, like his father Seti I before him, he had to defend himself against **Libyan** tribes in the northwest and against the mighty Hittite Empire, which covered roughly the area of **Turkey, Syria** and **Lebanon** today.

He began learning the art of warfare as a child and, alongside his father, he went into battle against the neighboring peoples as an archer on a chariot.



A digital reconstruction of how Ramses II might have looked | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

He was 25 years old when he was crowned as pharaoh.

One of his most famous campaigns during his reign was the battle for the important trading city of Kadesh. Under his command, some 20,000 warriors marched against the enemy, flanked by 2,000 chariots. It was possibly the largest army a pharaoh had ever assembled, yet he almost nearly suffered a devastating defeat. Ramses was certain of victory, but he was deceived by spies who told him the Hittites were still far away from the camp of his forces. In reality, they were lying in ambush. Only at the last moment did reinforcements arrive for the Egyptians, and the battle ended in a draw.



No other Egyptian pharaoh had as many statues of himself erected as Ramses II | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

### PR strategies of the ancient world

But that outcome was out of the question for the pharaoh, so he instructed his sculptors to carve temple inscriptions throughout Egypt proclaiming his victory. "I conquered all foreigners, I alone, when my troops and chariot fighters had abandoned me," he dictated to his scribes. Today, we would probably call that "fake news." It was only thanks to a Hittite inscription that the truth later came to light.



Master of self-promotion: one of countless statues of Ramses II | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

Ramses was not only a master of self-promotion; 16 years later, he managed to negotiate the first recorded peace treaty in world history with the Hittites. The erstwhile rivals promised to never attack each other again and even signed a pact of mutual assistance. A copy of the treaty is now on display at **United Nations** headquarters in New York.

### The pharaoh — an ambitious building contractor

Thanks to that alliance, Egypt was able to focus on a cultural and economic upswing — and Ramses II was able to devote himself entirely to ambitious building projects. Probably no other pharaoh was responsible for so much new construction, including a new capital: Pi-Ramesses (Hose of Ramses).

His gigantic burial palace, the Ramesseum in Western **Thebes**, near the modern city of **Luxor**, housed a library with more than 10,000 **papyrus scrolls**. He also had himself immortalized as a gigantic stone statue weighing 1,000 tons and standing 17 meters high.

Ramses' most famous works include the temples of Karnak, Luxor and Abu Simbel, which was cut into rock.



Ramses II also had the temple complex at Abu Simbel decorated with depictions of himself | Image: NEON World Heritage Exhibitions

The pharaoh was celebrated for his monumental buildings and quickly became known as "Ramses the Great."

He married eight women, fathering some 100 children. His 66-year reign during the 19th dynasty is regarded as the pinnacle of the empire's glory and power. "He has surpassed everything," he said of himself.

### Ramses' mummy has been abroad only once

Ramses II entered the realm of the dead in 1213 BC, at the age of 90.

His **mummy** has been preserved to this day and only left Egypt once: In 1976, the remains of Ramses II were taken to Paris for preservation because they were in danger of decay. The mummy was received like a high-ranking state guest, with gun salutes thundering into the sky to greet him.

Today, it rests in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in the Egyptian capital Cairo.



The mummy of Ramses II rests in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

At the touring exhibition now in Cologne, visitors can only admire his cedar coffin, which is decorated with hieroglyphs that pay homage to the pharaoh. The coffin has been moved several times over the millennia to protect it from grave robbers, but with little success.

"A pharaoh like Ramses — can you imagine how rich he was and what kind of artifacts could be inside? The tomb full of gold and silver," Hawass told DW. "In addition, statues depicting him or his family members, opulent pieces of jewelry, animal mummies and death masks bear witness to a world long gone."



The coffin of Ramses II is the showpiece of the traveling exhibition | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

Did John Norman, managing director of World Heritage Exhibitions, which organized the show, have nightmares at the thought that something might happen to the original artifacts on their journey to Cologne? "No," he told DW, "The care that we give these objects, the way they're moved, transported, is all like a military operation basically with security."



Animal mummies were offered as sacrifices to the gods | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

### Exhibition proceeds support archaeological heritage

Ramses II most likely could never have imagined that his treasures would be shown to people 3,000 years after his death.

The funerary objects were meant to accompany him into the afterlife, while valuable works of art were reserved for the upper classes. It is even said that disturbing the peace of the tomb carried a curse.



Elaborate jewelry was among the burial objects. | Image: Horst Krauth/DW

So why is Egypt sending these treasures to be displayed around the world? The reason is simple: "We need money for the conservation," Zahi Hawass told DW. "There is no civilization that has what Egypt has, with the pharaonic monuments. Not the Greco-Roman, Jewish-Christian (sic), Islamic. All this needs millions to billions for the conservation."

The exhibition, he continues, is also intended to encourage visitors to travel to Egypt themselves one day and to pour money into the state coffers.

The Egyptologist also took the opportunity in Cologne to repeat a heartfelt request: "We want **Nefertiti** back. I am not after other Egypt artifacts; you can keep them in Munich or Berlin. But we want one that is not legally here: Nefertiti."



The exhibition "Ramses and the Gold of the Pharaohs" runs until January 6, 2025 at the Odysseum in Cologne. It is scheduled to open in the Japanese capital Tokyo in the spring of 2025.

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