UCH IS KNOWN ABOUT THE LIFE and achievements of King Seti I, the second ruler of the 19th Dynasty and the father of Ramesses the Great. However Seti has also been bizarrely associated with pseudo-archaeology and mysticism for several centuries. This article will attempt to follow the meandering roads of masonic rituals, alien conspiracies and downright fakery which have dogged the memory of one of Egypt’s greatest rulers.
FATHER OF GREATNESS

Seti I was not born to be king. His father, Paramessu was a military commander during the reigns of Tutankhamun, Ay and Horemheb. With Horemheb’s ascent, Paramessu rose in the hierarchy, eventually becoming Horemheb’s vizier and chosen successor. Seti rose along with his father, holding titles such as “Fortress Commander”, “Master of Horse” and “High Priest of (the god) Seth”—a hint to his birth in the eastern Nile Delta near the cult-site of Seth at Avaris.

When Horemheb died childless, Paramessu took the throne as Ramesses I and Seti, the soldier’s son, became Seti the Prince Regent and Heir Apparent. During his father’s short reign Seti headed up the state administration as his father’s vizier and also undertook small-scale military expeditions against nomadic tribes close to Egypt’s borders. Ramesses I died after less than two years on the throne and suddenly Seti was thrust onto the world stage—a young man in his early twenties at the helm of an ailing superpower.

All Egyptian rulers chose five names which made up their full royal titulary. Most important were the prenomen (throne name) and nomen (birth name). Seti’s choice of prenomen is particularly illuminating. He chose the name Menmaatre, “Established is the Truth of Re”. This name is an amalgam, a mix, between the prenomens of two important 18th-Dynasty rulers: Thutmose III (Menkheperre, “Established is the Manifestation of Re”) and Amenhotep III (Nebmaatre, “Lord of Truth is Re”).

Seti I’s Valley of the Kings tomb (KV 17) had been plundered during the late New Kingdom, with few of the king’s funerary goods remaining intact for Giovanni Belzoni’s discovery in 1817. The ancient thieves, however, showed little interest in the hundreds of faience shabtis found by Belzoni in the king’s burial chamber.
With this name Seti signalled that he wished to be as great a military leader as Thutmose III, and as great a builder as Amenhotep III. Arguably, he was quite successful in achieving both aims.

From the very first year of his reign, Seti pursued an aggressive foreign policy, leading several military campaigns into the Levant and Libya, as well as quelling a rebellion in Nubia. His exploits in modern-day Lebanon and Syria brought him onto a collision course with the Hittite Empire. After several decisive victories, Seti secured control of the region of Amuru and the strategically vital citadel of Qadesh—a control which would slip from Egypt’s grasp shortly after his death and which his son, Ramesses II, never managed to regain.

Alongside his active foreign policy, Seti also began an ambitious programme of construction throughout the country. A great temple at Abydos dedicated to Osiris (and to Seti himself of course), the Great Hypostyle Hall in Karnak, his mortuary temple in Qurna and several additions to the temple of Re-Horakhty at Heliopolis, are only some of the monumental fingerprints he left on the Egyptian landscape.

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However, like his father, Seti’s reign would be all too brief. After only eleven years on the throne, he died, possibly due to complications arising from arteriosclerosis. He was laid to rest in KV 17, one of the largest and most beautifully decorated tombs constructed in the Valley of the Kings. Seti I’s successful reign laid the foundations upon which his son, Ramesses, would build his own career and go on to rule Egypt for an astonishing 68 years.

**THE ITALIAN STRONGMAN**

Any discussion of the life and death of Seti I would be incomplete without mention of the man who did more than most to spread the fame of this monarch throughout the world: Giovanni Battista Belzoni. Judged by some historians as perhaps “the most colourful man ever to rob an
ancient Egyptian tomb”, Belzoni was born far from the desert and the Delta in the northern Italian town of Padua on 5 November 1778. He was the son of Giacomo Belzoni, a barber who desired little more than for his son to follow in his footsteps and become a barber himself. But the younger Belzoni had other ideas. At the age of 16, he left Padua and travelled to Rome, where he claimed to have studied hydraulic engineering.

Leaving Rome to avoid a French army pressgang, Belzoni eventually arrived in London where, in 1802, he was employed as a strongman in Saddler’s Wells Theatre. In London he also met his wife, Sarah with whom he travelled around Europe seeking circus and theatre work.

At the urging of Ismael Gibraltar, an envoy of the ruler of Egypt Muhammad Ali, the Belzoni’s travelled to Alexandria in 1815 and onwards to Cairo. After failing to impress the pasha with his hydraulic water wheel Belzoni found employment with the British consul, Henry Salt. Together with Sarah, Belzoni travelled throughout Egypt securing ancient artefacts for Salt’s growing collection.

On 16 October 1817, Belzoni was in Thebes, working in the Valley of the Kings, or Behun el Malook as Belzoni referred to it. Less than a week before, he had found the paltry tomb of Ramesses I, which he wasted little time on. Instead, he told his workmen to focus their efforts on an area some 15 feet (4.5 metres) from this tomb, an area Belzoni believed to be promising. Belzoni’s hunch proved right. His workmen uncovered the entrance to Seti’s tomb and Belzoni spent weeks exploring the tomb, drafting facsimiles of the decoration and collecting the hundreds of shabtis which were standing around the king’s alabaster sarcophagus.

Seti himself would remain in hiding for another 70 years, ensconced in the Deir el-Bahari Royal Cache (DB 320) along with many other illustrious and priestly mummies.

Three years after his momentous discoveries in the Valley of the Kings, Belzoni published his memoirs, Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia; and of a Journey to the Coast of the Red Sea, in Search of the Ancient Berenice; and Another to the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon to widespread acclaim. A year later, in 1821, Belzoni staged a vast display in The Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London and recreated, using plaster casts, several rooms from the tomb of Seti I (see pp. 49–50).

The plaster casts were accompanied by a plethora of artefacts collected by Belzoni and the tall Italian himself, garbed in Arab dress, with his long black hair and beard flowing down his shoulders, acted as host, guide and storyteller; every inch the showman.

SETI THE FREEMASON?

While Belzoni’s discovery of Seti I’s tomb brought the king to the attention of the broader public, some writings about his life had already begun to appear. These were largely based on ancient authors who themselves were not too sure about who Seti was or what he achieved during his reign.

The Egyptian priest Manetho, who lived during the
early Ptolemaic Period (ca. 300 B.C.), ascribed Seti with a completely overstated reign of 51 or even 55 years. The first-century scholar Josephus quoted Manetho in his *Contra Apionem* and relates the story of a 19th-Dynasty ruler by the name of “Sethos”, whom Manetho seems to have mistakenly considered the son of Harnaness Miamun—a king who had ruled for 67 years (evidently Ramesses II, who ruled for 68). He claimed that the power of Sethos lay in his cavalry and his fleet, and that he undertook many campaigns including against Cyprus and the Lebanese city states. He also claimed that Sethos’ nickname was Aegyptus, and that the land was named after him. This story is largely fantasy.

Another blatant fantasy is the novel *Life of Sethos, Taken from Private Memoirs of the Ancient Egyptians*, published in 1731. It was written by the French priest Abbe Jean Terrasson (1670–1750) and claims to tell the story of Seti’s early life and upbringing on the basis of “ancient manuscripts” entrusted to the author. It follows Seti as he is inducted into the mysteries and rites of the ancient Egyptian religion, which Terrasson mixed and merged with the arcana of Freemasonry. Despite the completely fictitious nature of the novel, Terrasson became accepted as a specialist in Egyptian religion and the novel eventually served as the inspiration for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s opera *Die Zauberflöte*, or *The Magic Flute*, which premiered in 1791, sixty years after Terrasson penned his book (see above).

Seti’s links to Freemasonry were further explored by the American author and medical doctor John Adam Weisse (1810–1888) who in 1880 published *The Obelisk and Freemasonry According to the Discoveries of Belzoni and Commander Goring*. Also *Egyptian Symbols Compared with Those Discovered in American Mounds*. This is a frankly perplexing work in which the author argues that Seti’s tomb should be renamed “The Masonic Temple of Seti I and Ramesses II”, and claims that the kilts commonly worn by Egyptian pharaohs in sculptures and reliefs were in fact Masonic aprons.

The book also includes a series of rather opaque calculations, which aim to numerically link the measurements of Egyptian obelisks to various stones found in or around Native American burial mounds. The author goes on to describe several conversations he claims to have had with Sarah Belzoni, including one in which he alleges that she entrusted several mysterious documents to him. These were documents that she had inherited from Giovanni prior to his death, and which, very conveniently, supported Dr. Weisse’s outlandish theories.

Weisse was writing at a time when the relationship between the Catholic Church and various Masonic lodges

“Of all the noises known to man,” wrote French playwright Molière, “opera is the most expensive.” While this was written around 150 years before Simon Quaglio’s version of *The Magic Flute*, it describes his 1818 Munich production perfectly. The sets that the German stage designer had created were the most spectacular and “Egyptianesque” yet (above). Quaglio was inspired by the sensational discovery of Seti I’s tomb the year before by Belzoni.
In October 1817 Giovanni Belzoni discovered the spectacular Tomb of Seti I in the Valley of the Kings. Throughout the following year, he and his hired assistant, Alessandro Ricci, produced a colourful record of some of the tomb’s wall relief paintings. These formed the basis of a reconstruction of two of the most important of the tomb’s rooms, together with a scale model of the whole tomb, which was exhibited at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in 1821.

It may not seem so in the images on this page, but the wall reliefs on the Piccadilly “tomb” were highly accurate; produced from moulds made from the original tomb decoration. They were then hand painted, referencing the watercolours made by Ricci and Belzoni. Many of Belzoni and Ricci’s original watercolours were acquired by the Bristol Museum in 1900, and remain in the collection today.

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was at an all-time low. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Pope Pius IX had issued numerous rather virulent bulls against freemasonry and freemasons, whom he claimed represented a “Synagogue of Satan” (*Etsi Multa*, 1873). The relationship between the Church and the Order of the Grand Orient would grow increasingly hysterical during the latter part of the 19th century and include such rather grotesque interludes as “The Taxil Hoax” during which a known French fraudster, Leo Taxil, gained both significant notoriety and the open support of members of the Catholic Church by writing increasingly outlandish “exposés” of freemasonry—exposés which Taxil later admitted were entirely fabricated.

So while it may seem difficult to unpick the precise purpose of Dr. Weisse’s rambling dissertation, it seems that his intention was to argue against the persecution of Freemasonry by the Catholic Church by claiming that many great men throughout history, including Seti I and Ramesses II, had been the very founders of Freemasonry. As a result, freemasonry had, in the author’s words, “been the means of promoting civilisation, fostering the mechanical arts, and of holding together the more advanced minds for mutual protection and charity.”

A similar connection between freemasonry and ancient Egyptian New Kingdom royalty was made in 1916 by the American Freemason Harvey Spencer Lewis, who claimed that the Rosicrucian order of Freemasons had been founded
on Thursday April 1st 1489 B.C. by Thutmose III. Conspiracy seems to dog Seti’s inheritance even into the present day. His association with Freemasonry at the pens of Terrasson and Weisse have led to modern conspiracy theorists to link him with everything from Satanism to extra-terrestrial intelligence—particularly in less salubrious sectors of the World Wide Web.

One of the most enduring of these modern conspiracy theories concerns Seti’s great temple at Abydos: it holds that some of the signs and depictions carved into the walls are not hieroglyphs, but rather depictions of helicopters and alien spacecraft (above). The inscriptions in question were carved during the reign of Seti I, but later plastered over and recarved by his successor Ramesses II. The partial removal of some of the plaster has created optical illusions which some have interpreted as modern machinery depicted on ancient monuments. Several of the images purporting to show this phenomenon have also demonstrably been edited and retouched in order to make this effect more noticeable and trick the casual observer.

Seti has in some ways been punished quite harshly by history. Despite a very successful reign, he was overshadowed by his famous son. Ramesses II’s astounding 68-year-long reign allowed him to establish himself as the very archetype of an Egyptian Pharaoh—the greatest warrior and builder in Pharaonic history.

In terms of scholarly reception, Seti has barely received a hundredth of the attention lavished upon his son. However, within the arcane world of freemasonry, alien conspiracies and occultism, Seti has been a dominant figure for several centuries—for better, or, perhaps more likely, for worse.
Working at Luxor at the time was British archaeologist Joseph Bonomi, who learned of Champollion’s intent and urgently wrote to the Frenchman: “If it be true that such is your intention I feel it my duty as an Englishman and a lover of antiquity to use every argument to dissuade you from so Gothic a purpose…”

Champollion was unconvinced, and replied that he was, in fact, “acting as a real lover of antiquity, since I shall be taking them away only to preserve and not to sell. The relief was duly removed and restored (left), and today stands in the Louvre (Acc. No. B7).