

The Pyramids of Ancient Egypt

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.01.17

Word Count **765**

Level **870L**



The Great Pyramid of Giza, also called the Pyramid of Khufu or Cheops, is the oldest and largest of the three pyramids in the Giza Necropolis bordering what is now Cairo, Egypt. The Great Pyramid was originally covered by casing stones that formed a smooth outer surface. Photo: Jerome Bon/Wikimedia Commons

The pyramids of Egypt are among history's greatest buildings. A pyramid is a building with four triangle-shaped sides and a square base. The peak of pyramid building began late in Egypt's third dynasty. It continued until about the sixth, around 2325 B.C. In ancient Egypt, a dynasty was a period where all of the rulers were from a single family.

The Egyptian pyramids are still a sight to see. They give us a peek into the country's rich and glorious past.

The Pharaoh in Egyptian Society

During the third and fourth dynasties, Egypt prospered greatly. Kings, or pharaohs, held a special position in Egyptian society. They were believed to have been chosen by the gods. Ancient Egyptians believed that when the pharaoh died, part of his spirit remained with his body.

To properly care for his spirit, his body was mummified. Everything the king would need in the afterlife was buried with him. This included gold bowls and cups, food, furniture and other offerings. The Egyptians built pyramids as tombs for their pharaohs. A tomb is a place where a person is buried after they die.

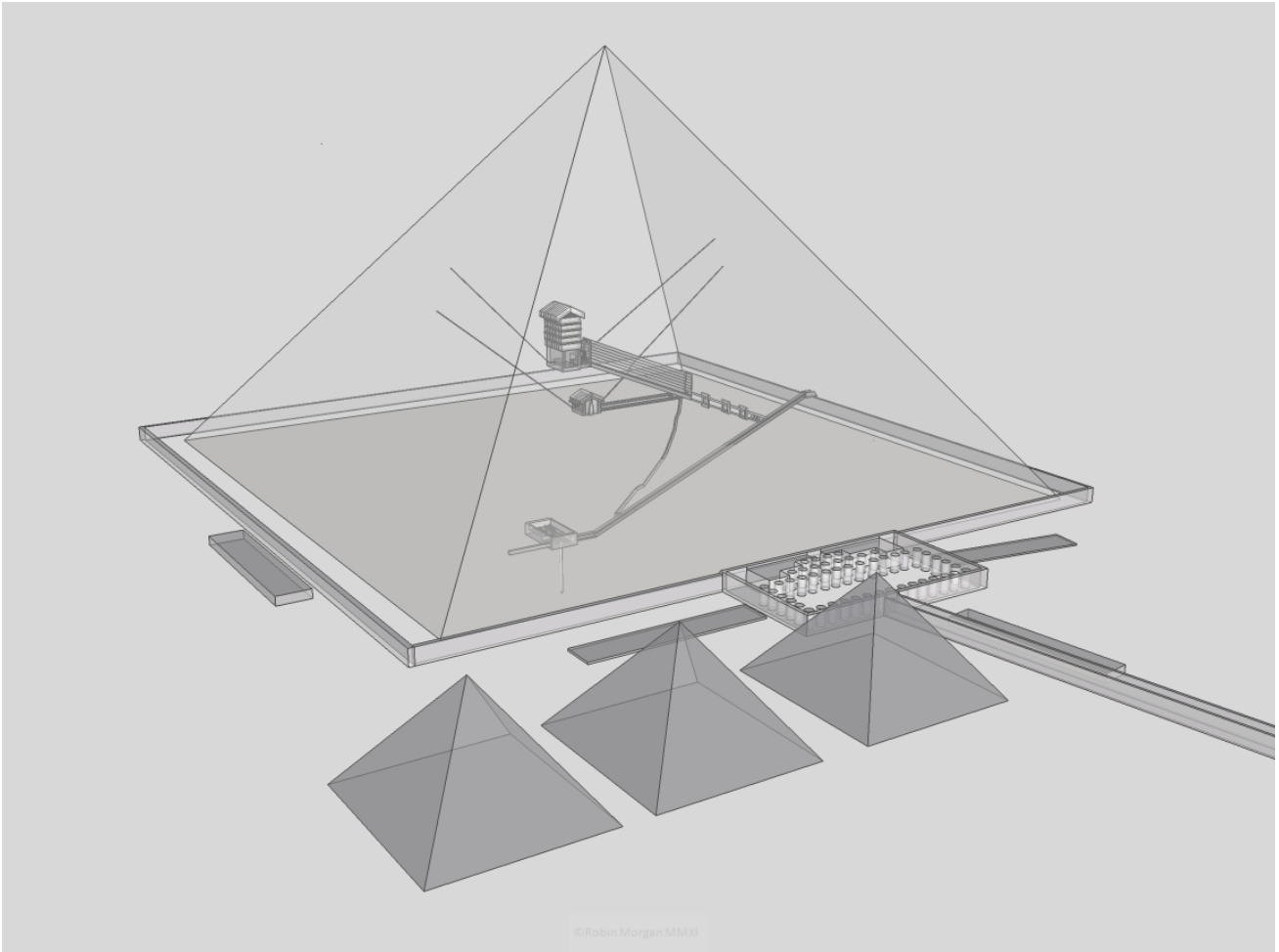
The Early Pyramids



Starting in about 2950 B.C., royal tombs were carved into rock. They were then covered with flat-roofed rectangular buildings known as “mastabas.” The pyramids we know developed from these mastabas. The oldest known pyramid in Egypt was built around 2630 B.C. It was built for King Djoser at Saqqara and known as the Step Pyramid. The Step Pyramid was surrounded by courtyards and temples where Djoser would enjoy his afterlife.

The Red Pyramid was the earliest tomb to have smooth sides instead of stepped sides. This pyramid was built at Dahshur. It was built for the first king of the fourth dynasty, Sneferu, who ruled from 2613 B.C. to 2589 B.C. The stone blocks used to construct the pyramid’s core were red, so that is why it is called the Red Pyramid.

The Great Pyramids of Giza



No pyramids are more famous than the Great Pyramids of Giza. These three pyramids are located on the west bank of the Nile River near Cairo. The oldest of these is called the Great Pyramid. It was built for Khufu, the second of the eight kings of the fourth dynasty. The sides of the pyramid's base average 755 feet, and its original height was just more than 481 feet. This makes it the largest pyramid in the world. Smaller tombs were built nearby for Khufu's queens and his mother.

The middle pyramid at Giza was built for Khufu's son Khafre, who ruled from 2558 B.C. to 2532 B.C. Next to Khafre's pyramid is the Great Sphinx. This statue was carved in limestone. It had the head of a man and the body of a lion. The largest statue in the ancient world, it measured 240 feet long and 66 feet high. The third pyramid at Giza was built for Khafre's son Menkaure, who ruled from 2532 B.C. to 2503 B.C.

The Great Pyramid was built using 2.3 million blocks of stone. Each stone weighed about 2.5 tons. These stones had to be cut, transported and put together. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote that it took 20 years and the labor of 100,000 men to build. But it was later learned that about 20,000 laborers worked on it.

The End of the Pyramid Era



Pyramids continued to be built in the fifth and sixth dynasties. Builders of later pyramids wrote stories about the pharaoh on the pyramids' inside walls. These writings are known as pyramid texts. They are some of the earliest writings known from ancient Egypt.

The last pharaoh to have a pyramid was Pepy II, who ruled from 2278 B.C. to 2184 B.C. With Pepy's death, the kingdom and strong central government crashed. Later kings would try to bring back pyramid building, but never on the same scale as the Great Pyramids.

The Pyramids Today

Tomb robbers in both ancient and modern times removed most of the bodies and funeral goods from Egypt's pyramids. They plundered the outsides of the pyramids as well, taking away most of their smooth white limestone coverings.

Yet millions of people are still drawn to the pyramids' greatness and appeal each year.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "The Pharaoh in Egyptian Society."
Select the sentence that shows why tomb raiders later had an interest in the pyramids.
- (A) During the third and fourth dynasties, Egypt prospered greatly.
 - (B) Kings, or pharaohs, held a special position in Egyptian society.
 - (C) Everything the king would need in the afterlife was buried with him.
 - (D) The Egyptians built pyramids as tombs for their pharaohs.
- 2 Read the section "The Great Pyramids of Giza."
Select the paragraph from the section that explains the preparations that had to be made before stones could be put in place.
- 3 Use the images and information from the article to select the TRUE statement.
- (A) The pyramids were built out of stone and clay that was difficult to transport.
 - (B) The largest pyramids were built for the kings who followed the pharaohs.
 - (C) All pyramids in Egypt had written stories, chambers and gardens inside them.
 - (D) Pyramids in Egypt were constructed in different sizes, shapes and colors.
- 4 Which sentence from the article is BEST illustrated by the photograph at the top of the article?
- (A) The Red Pyramid was the earliest tomb to have smooth sides instead of stepped sides.
 - (B) These three pyramids are located on the west bank of the Nile River near Cairo.
 - (C) Later kings would try to bring back pyramid building, but never on the same scale as the Great Pyramids.
 - (D) Yet millions of people are still drawn to the pyramids' greatness and appeal each year.