

# TOMB BUILDERS

## THE PYRAMID AGE / THE OLD KINGDOM

What if you were an Egyptian tomb builder? Life for you 4,500 years ago may have gone this way:

The barge floated upstream, bumping to a stop at the dock alongside a small farming village located a week's journey south of the capital of *Mennefer*. The king's men disembarked and marched double file over the pier heading for the village center. Word of their arrival rippled from house to mud-brick house. Men and women trickled out of their homes and formed a loose ring around the king's messengers. Curious and shy, the youngest children peeked out from behind their mothers' legs. One of the king's men—a scribe—unrolled a scroll and held it at arm's length. He shouted out names. You caught your breath. Would you be on the list?

Your grandfather set the first stones in King Khufu's *mer*. Now 20 years later, the eternal home is nearly finished, but there is still much work to be done. A king's eternal home is more than just a *mer*. There are temples and causeways and walls and the queen's tombs to be built. A papyrus inscription, called the Turin Papyrus, written long after you had traveled to the afterlife, and long after kings had stopped being buried at Giza, claims the Great Pyramid was built in less than 23 years. But for all the years you can remember, you have watched your friends board the king's barge when the harvest was done. When the floods receded, and they came back, the women fussed over them, and the men treated them with respect. You caught them sometimes walking with a swagger. They had seen the world.

Not everyone came home. Those that came back brought news of the ones that stayed. They had married and had children and learned trades other than farming. They chose to stay on at the Giza Plateau and work for the king.

“ TOMB GRAFFITI  
AT GIZA PYRAMID  
COMPLEX, PYRAMID  
TEXTS, AND  
DREAM STELA

*mennefer* = “eternal beauty”  
During the reign of King Khufu (the Greeks called him Cheops), *Mennefer* was the capital city. We know it as Memphis, near modern-day Cairo.

### LET THEM EAT MER

The Egyptians called the pyramids *mer*, a word whose etymology and significance is debated. Our word “pyramid” comes from the Greek word *pyramis*, a type of wheat cake shaped like a pyramid.





*King Khufu's pyramid is the farthest to the right. Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, it is the oldest and only one surviving. An Arab proverb best captures the pyramids' endurance: "Man fears Time, yet Time fears the pyramids."*

For two weeks now you have felt the restlessness of the flood time. If the king's men call your name, will you be one who never returns? Will this be the last time you see your village and your family?

When the scribe shouts out your name, you are afraid you heard wrong. Your knees feel a little weak. You've never left your village before. What will the world be like in the north across the Nile from the capital?

You rush home to pack your things. While piling your clothing in a square and tying it into a bundle, you suddenly feel too old for your mother's kisses. She's weeping behind you. But when you turn you see the pride in her eyes. Maybe she is thinking that if you help build the king's pathway to the heavens you will get to journey to the after-life, too.

The barge is waiting by the dock. You and several others from the village hurry to board. The boat is already loaded with young men from villages even farther south. As



the river currents carry you swiftly northward, you watch your village grow smaller and smaller until you aren't sure if you can see it. The ship is noisy with bragging men who have worked many flood seasons at Giza. Their voices fade, because suddenly you wish you were back in your village, watching your mother weave reed sandals, and not on a barge among men you don't know.

What was it like for young people who worked on the pyramids of King Khufu and the pyramids of his sons? To come from small farming villages, float up the Nile to the Giza Plateau and live in a barracks town of thousands? As they approached Giza, the Great Pyramid must have appeared to thrust out of the plateau as if it would pierce the sky. The monument was so massive that it took more than 4,000 years for humans to build anything taller. Until the Eiffel Tower was built in Paris in 1889, the Great Pyramid was the tallest building on earth. What would it have felt like to a simple Egyptian peasant to be part of such a huge project? How would you have felt that first day at Giza?

Your transport barge snakes its way up one of the heavily trafficked canals that connects the Nile to the Mouth of the Lake, a delivery area near the pyramid complex. Barges loaded with stone and wood for building choke the canals, alongside barges loaded with food and supplies for the gangs of workmen, gangs of a thousand men with names like those found in a later pyramid—"Friends of Menkaure" and "Drunkards of Menkaure." Is it the vastness of the construction project that makes you stagger? Or is it the people? So many people! Thousands!

The clang of copper hammers trimming limestone and inscribing stone makes your head ache. On the south side of the pyramid, men are pounding wood wedges into the rock walls of the quarry and then soaking the wood with water. The wood expands and the rock splits.

Watch out! You are jostled by two men hustling past with clay jars slopping water. They slosh it onto mud-covered wooden tracks. Eight men push a block of limestone so large you can't imagine it moving, yet it glides over the slick, wet mud as if the stone were hollow and filled with

66 Graffiti inside Menkaure's pyramid, Giza, about 2532–2504 BCE



### PYRAMID MATH

Napoleon calculated that if King Khufu and his two sons' pyramids were taken apart and used to build a protective wall, it would stand ten feet high, one foot thick, and go the entire way around France.

If the Great Pyramid were chopped into 12-inch cubes there would be enough cubes to circle the moon almost three times.

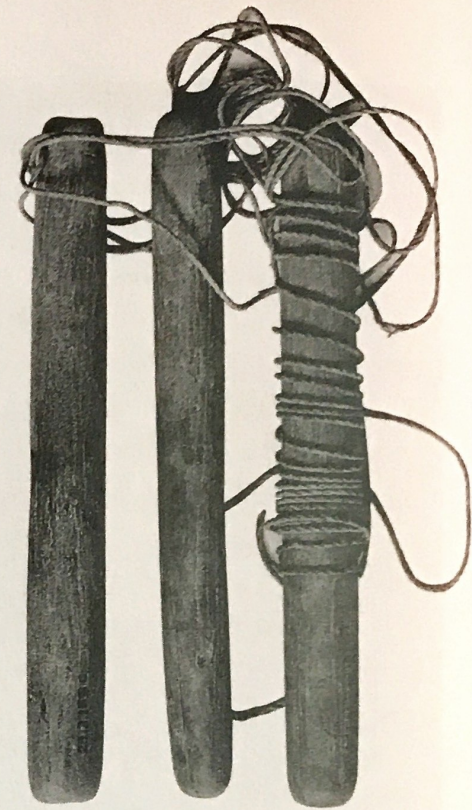
*It is hard to believe that with simple tools such as this one, masons carved the building blocks for the pyramids that fit together so snugly that a razor blade would not fit between them. This tool was used to "dress" the limestone, or make it perfectly flat.*

feathers. Above you, on the wide, wedge-shaped ramp built out of broken bits of stone and rubble, there are more groups of men pushing two-and-a-half-ton blocks with the same ease as the men by your side. Still more crews at the top of the ramp are positioning the stones by

lifting them into place with ropes and levers. When it is done, 2,300,000 blocks will have been hauled into place. Some of the stones inside the pyramid are granite cubes weighing as much as 40 tons.

You try to imagine what it had looked like that first season your grandfather worked here. Then it was nothing more than an empty plateau. You remember his stories of how they chose where to place the very first stones. The priests had tracked the movement of the stars in the Great Bear constellation across the night sky. Using the stars for bearings and applying "the instrument of knowing," a simple handheld rod with a string that dropped straight to the ground, they had staked out the base. Then, in a symbolic ceremony, King Khufu himself had pointed out true north by lining up the headdress of a priestess with the star that was the hoof of the Great Bear. The calculations were so precise that thousands of years later modern scholars would discover the Great Pyramid was less than a tenth of a degree off true north.

The orientation was critical for the king's entrance to the afterlife. The pyramid represented his rampway to heaven. From the Pyramid Texts we learn that the pyramid was the



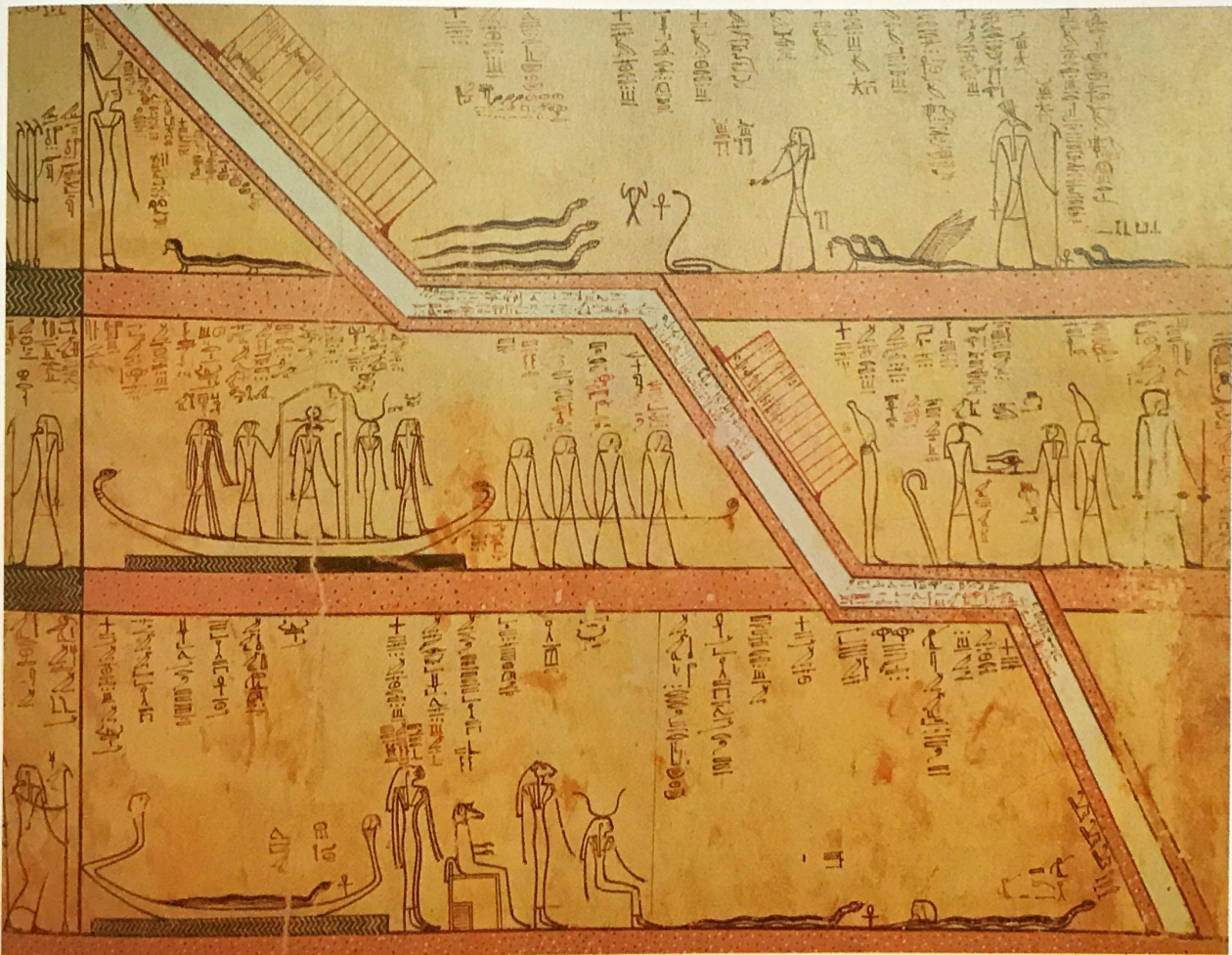


“stairway in order to reach the heights . . . stairs to the sky, which are laid down for the king, that he may ascend thereon to the heavens.” And your grandfather was there to see the first rock put in place.

When you arrive at the barracks, the smell of fresh baking bread makes your mouth water. Bakers pull loaves out of ovens large enough for you to stand in. You take some bread for yourself and then some for your grandfather’s Ka. You wander to the west side of the pyramid looking for his tomb. Your mother told you that his tomb is a miniature version of King Khufu’s *mer*, except grandfather’s is made from mud brick instead of stone. You pass the tomb of a husband and wife who worked on the Great Pyramid. You are one of the few who can read bits and pieces of hieroglyphs. What you read makes you quicken your pace past

“ Pyramid Texts, about 2375–2184 BCE

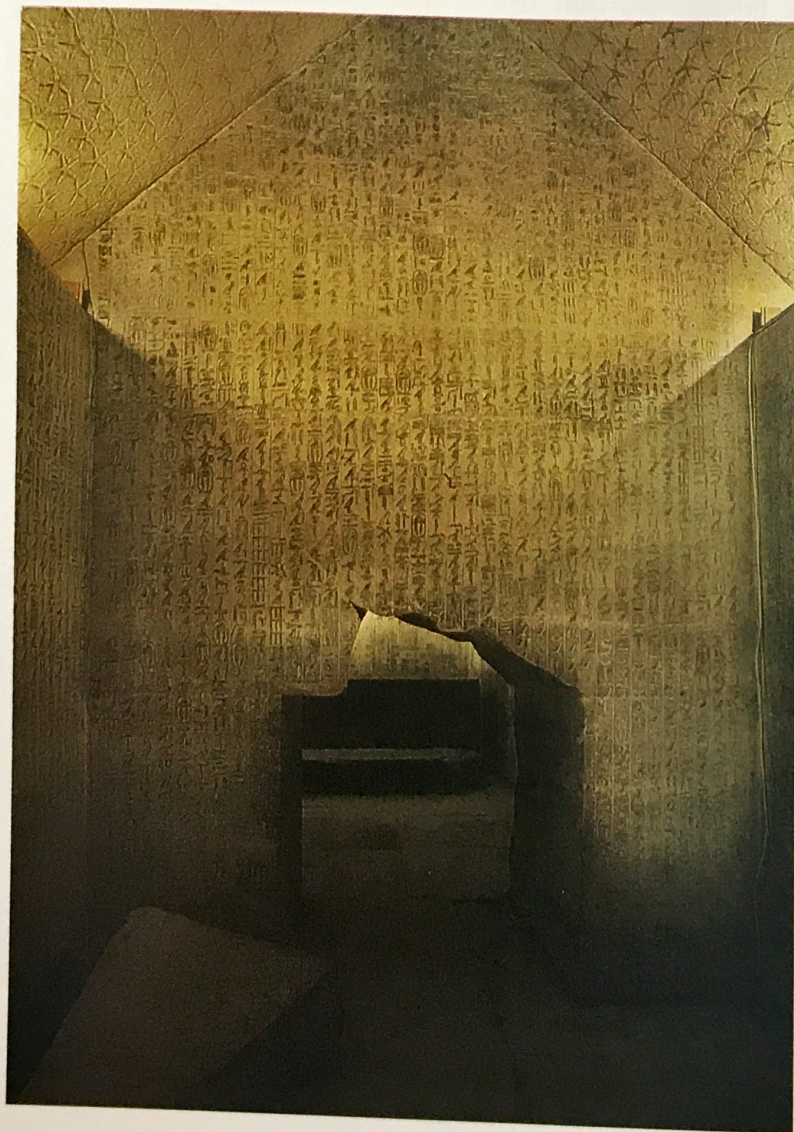
*Egyptians built tombs with many secret passageways in hopes of foiling tomb robbers. This wall painting shows a sarcophagus being taken into the depths of the tomb, while the gods wait for the deceased to arrive in the kingdom of the Underworld.*





“ Graffiti inside Menkaure’s pyramid, Giza, about 2532–2504 BCE

*Written all over the walls inside King Unas’s pyramid are the oldest surviving inscriptions of the Pyramid Texts. The Pyramid Texts guide the deceased on the treacherous journey through the Underworld.*



the tomb. It is cursed. “O all people who enter this tomb who will make evil against this tomb and destroy it; may the crocodile be against them on water, and snakes be against them on land; may the hippopotamus be against them on water, the scorpion against them on land.” Even though you would never rob a tomb, the curse gives you the creeps, and you watch the ground ahead for snakes and scorpions.

Maybe you had better head back. The Overseer of All the King’s Works will have assigned your job and you are anxious to see what you will be doing. Most of the farmers have to do all the heavy lifting, but maybe you will be lucky since you can read a little. Maybe you will be assigned a

more skilled job. You hope that you can work on one of the boats in one of the boat pits. Wouldn’t it be fabulous to be a boat builder for the afterlife? To help build the boat that King Khufu will use to navigate the stars?

One day, maybe your children will work at Giza on King Khufu’s children’s pyramids. Maybe when your grandchildren row into the Mouth of the Lake they will tremble at the sight of the Great Sphinx. The statue has the body of a lion and the head of man. The Great Sphinx guards the Giza Plateau. It faces east with its face tilted slightly back to catch the first rays of the rising sun. It was built by the Pharaoh Khafre (Chephren), the son of King Khufu; he also built the second of the three pyramids at Giza.

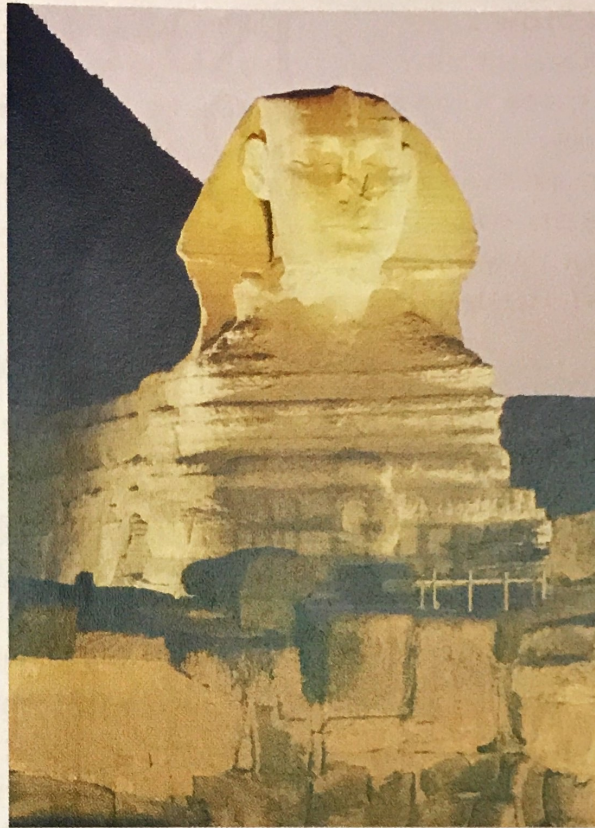
In modern times the Sphinx still has the power to make one tremble even though its face is battered and its body scored from



*Scholars believe that the Great Sphinx—silent guardian of the Giza pyramids—is the largest stone sculpture ever made by man. Today, the Great Sphinx is getting smaller, crumbling from the effects of wind, humidity, and Cairo’s smog.*

erosion. From its tail curled around its right haunch to the tip of its paws, the Sphinx would stretch out over most of a football field. It’s tall enough to see over the top of a six-story building. The braided beard that once hung from the Sphinx’s chin fell long ago and smashed into bits. A scrap of faded color near one ear is all that’s left of its once bright paint. All of the Sphinx would have crumbled if it hadn’t spent most of its life protectively buried in sand that had blown around it.

The Sphinx was up to its neck in sand 3,400 years ago. According to the inscriptions on a stone tablet known as the Dream Stela, which sits between the Sphinx’s paws, Prince Thutmose “came traveling at the time of midday. He rested in the shadow of the great god.” In a dream, the Sphinx whispered in the prince’s ear promising him, “I shall give you the kingship,” if the prince would just clear away the sand. Some say that the prince made the whole story up to get away with murder. He was not next in line for the throne. His brother should have been king. Prince Thutmose had his brother killed and became King Thutmose IV. The Egyptians might have driven a murderer off the throne, but who was going to argue with the word of the Sphinx? If you had been there, would you?



“ Dream Stela, about 1419–1386 BCE

#### MODERN TALES

Urban legend has it that Napoleon’s soldiers used the Sphinx’s nose for target practice and shot it off. But the nose was missing long before Napoleon came along. In a fit of religious fervor against “graven images,” an offended Muslim knocked it off several hundred years earlier.