

CHAPTER 3

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

THE OLD KINGDOM

“ INSCRIPTIONS
AT SEHEL AND EDWIN
SMITH PAPYRUS

The king who followed Narmer was named Aha. Aha means “the fighter.” That should give you a clue as to what life was like in Egypt after the “unification.” Either no one had bothered to get the word out to the Egyptians that they were now unified, or not everyone bought into the deal, because for the next several hundred years, from about 3100 to 2670 BCE, the kings of Egypt spent most of their time squelching turf wars that flared up like forest fires. Every town with muscle and a headsman with attitude challenged the king. Each province struggled to hang on to its power. It took several hundred years and a king with a name that meant “divine body” to truly unify Egypt. A king named Djoser.

Egypt’s list of kings is a long one. What makes the list run even longer is that most of the kings had several names. Take this one king, for example:

Hor Ka-nakht tut-mesut, Nebti Nefer-hepu Segereh-tawy, Sehetep-netjeru Nebu, Hor Neb Wetjes-khau Sehetep-netjeru, Nesut Bit Nebkheperure, Sa re Tutankhamun Heqaiunushema.

In English, this name means:

The Horus Strong Bull, Fitting from Created Forms, He of the Two Ladies, Dynamic of Laws, Who Calms the Two Lands, Who Propitiates all the Gods, the Golden Horus Who Displays the Regalia, Who Propitiates the Gods, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of Manifestations is Re, Son of Re, Living Image of Amun, Ruler of Upper Egyptian Iunu.

Fortunately for us, we know him as King Tut.

You can imagine how unwieldy the list became with more than 170 kings. Most of their names would have been

TOP TEN PERIODS

3050–2686 BCEEarly Dynastic Period
(Dynasties 1–2)**2700–2184 BCE**Old Kingdom Period
(Dynasties 3–6)**2181–2040 BCE**First Intermediate Period
(Dynasties 7–10)**2040–1782 BCE**Middle Kingdom Period
(Dynasties 11–12)**1782–1570 BCE**Second Intermediate
Period (Dynasties 13–17)**1570–1070 BCE**New Kingdom Period
(Dynasties 18–20)**1069–525 BCE**Third Intermediate
Period (Dynasties 21–26)**525–332 BCE**Late Period (Dynasties
27–31)**332–30 BCE**Hellenistic (Greek)
Period**30 BCE–395 CE**

Roman Period

lost if it weren't for an Egyptian priest and historian named Manetho, who lived in the third century BCE. He sorted out the entire disaster by collecting the records from various temples and putting them in order. To organize the list into something manageable, Manetho grouped the kings into thirty ruling families that we call dynasties.

Of course, once scholars start organizing there is no stopping them. In the 19th century, a German scholar decided to group the dynasties. Ordinarily this is where things fall apart. "Order" becomes so confusing you need to form a Ministry of Explanations for Scholarly Simplifications, or MESS, just to make sense of things. Mysteriously, something went terribly wrong and this time scholarly attempts to organize really did simplify things. The grouping of the dynasties goes something like this:

If Egypt was in a period of political stability with one king following the next fairly smoothly, the times were called "kingdoms." During these long stretches, Egypt enjoyed *ma'at*—the harmony of peace and prosperity that came from a strong central government. There are three such time periods, or "kingdoms"—the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom.

But, humans being human, sustaining peace forever (to date, at least) is impossible. So for those times in between when Egypt plunged into chaos—when the king's authority was challenged from outside Egypt and within—the groups of dynasties are called "intermediate periods." Although the dates of each kingship are not always clear or logical, and scholars argue over the specifics, the general design established by Manetho is still followed by historians today.

There are challenges to living in a country that is mostly desert. By the time the Old Kingdom rolled around, about 2700 BCE, Egyptians were up to meeting those challenges—the most obvious would concern water. Although the desert continually tried to push in on the farmland along the edge of the Nile, the Egyptians had learned how to push back. They coaxed the waters of the Nile inland, filling the buckets of their shadufs and emptying them into channels they had dug through their gardens. Not only were they irrigat-



ing their farmlands, they were expanding them. Farmers grew more food than the people could possibly eat. The king's granaries filled. The government organized and financed massive irrigation projects. When you grow more food than you can possibly eat you are left with something to trade with other nations—grain. What Egyptians didn't have they could now get through trade.

A challenge less obvious to those not used to surviving in a desert environment is the lack of wood. There are no tall trees in a desert. Actually, there are no trees at all, with the exception of what grew right along the edge of the Nile and in the occasional oasis. Egyptians needed wood—a lot of wood—especially for boats and coffins. They had their eye on the cedar that grew to the northeast, in the land that we now call Lebanon. It was ideal for both boats and coffins because cedar resists rot, and a rotting boat or a rotting coffin can be a problem. And so it began—we've got grain, we need wood, you've got wood, you need grain, let's trade. It was not much different, in principle, from trading baseball cards.

The richer the country, the more powerful its leader—and Egypt was becoming very rich indeed. The king became as distant and as "imperishable" as the stars—a god-king on earth, and in death truly divine. He was responsible for the stability, the order, the balance—*ma'at*. The simple tombs

While the boat owner sits in the back wrapped in his cloak, servants paddle the rivers of the Underworld. Wooden model boats like this one were often placed in Middle Kingdom tombs to provide the dead person with water transport in the afterlife.

STAR STRUCK

Inscriptions on the walls of Old Kingdom tombs compare kings to the "imperishable stars" over and over again. In one spell from the Pyramid Texts, the king asks for a ferry boat. "I will cross to that side on which are the Imperishable Stars, that I may be among them."

lined with brick and topped with a flat rectangular stone that had buried royalty in the past were no longer grand enough. What would the people think?

King Djoser wanted something that showed Egypt and the world just how powerful he was—showed this world and the next. He was fortunate enough to have a true genius for an architect—an architect capable of envisioning (and building) a tomb worthy of a god-king's passageway to the afterlife: a stairway to heaven. The architect's name was Imhotep and he built the first pyramid.

King Djoser must have traveled from the capital city of Memphis to the burial grounds at Saqqara now and again to inspect Imhotep's progress. King Djoser and Imhotep would have entered through a narrow passage positioned to capture the sun's first rays at daybreak. There were many false entrances along the nearly 20-foot-high wall surrounding the burial grounds, but only one way inside. They would have passed under the stone roof at the entrance carved to look like split logs and then through two giant doors permanently flung open. What did King Djoser think the first time he inspected the work site? How did he feel when he walked between the two parallel lines of stone columns

carved to look like reeds bound in bunches? At the far end, the columns were placed closer and closer together to give the illusion of an even longer passageway. It must have seemed to him to stretch forever. This was no brick-lined hole in the ground. The burial complex was as big as 24 soccer fields.

King Djoser's Step Pyramid is the earliest known tomb made entirely out of stone. This was such an impressive feat that Djoser's architect Imhotep was granted "god" status after his death.

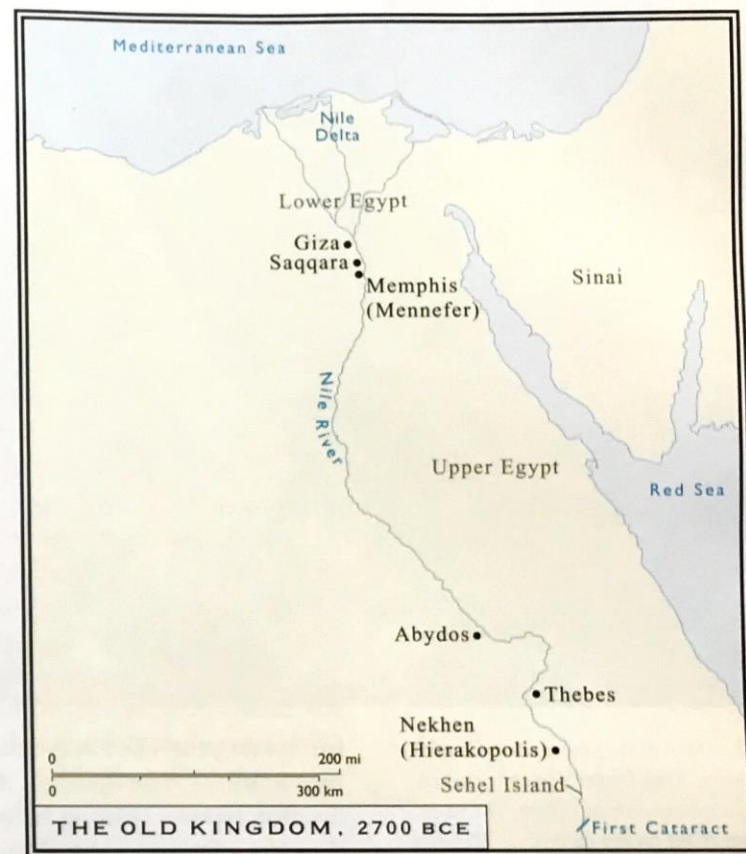


When King Djoser and Imhotep walked through the complex, winding their way through the columns carved with spitting cobras poised to protect the king, the clang of copper chisels would have made conversation difficult. Thousands of masons and sculptors worked the stone. It was the time of the inundation—the flooding of the Nile—and the farmers who were waiting for the waters to recede came to Saqqara to work for their king.

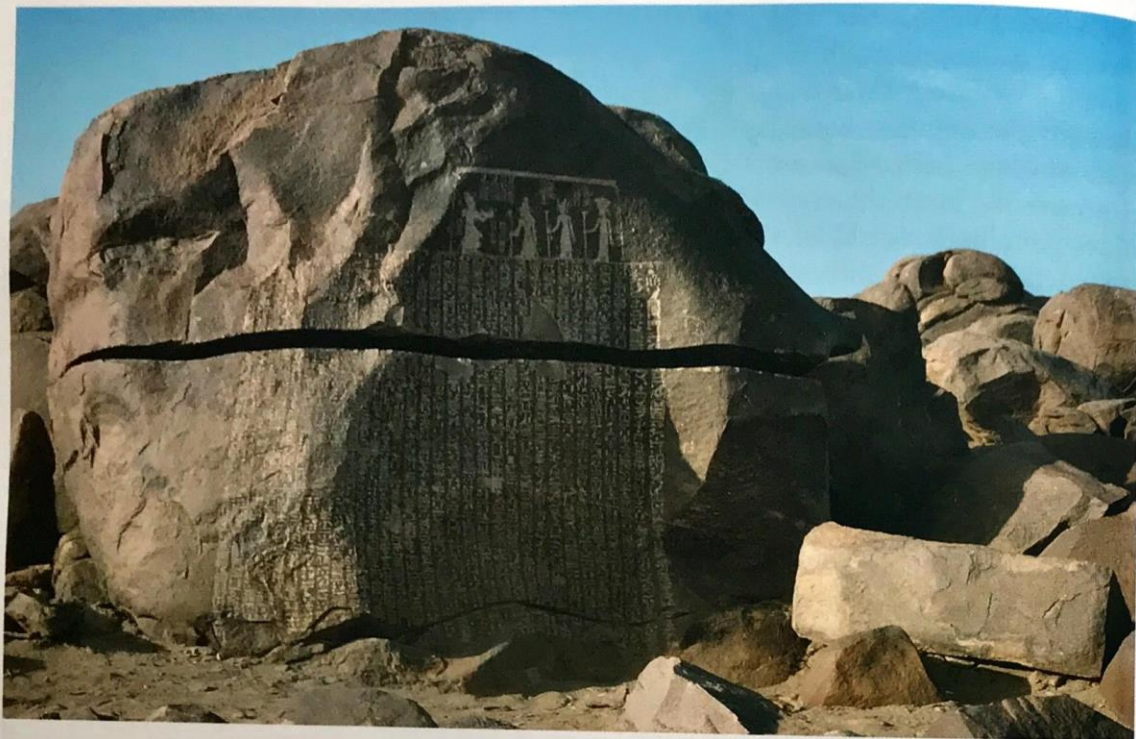
Imhotep would have carried drawings of his grand vision rolled in a papyrus scroll tucked under his arm. When the two walked through the complex they would have stopped here and there to watch an artisan at work. Surely, King Djoser would have felt the swell of pride when he looked out over the sheer magnitude of the project. Only a great king could command such an endeavor—with so many merit—Egyptian peasants—working hard for the glory of their king.

The daily nilometer report would have filtered through the construction site, spreading from worker to worker, passed along with bread and beer. Were the waters as high as this time last year? Would there be enough? Too much?

Centuries later, a long inscription was carved into a granite stone on an island near the First Cataract. It claimed to record what King Djoser said after years of low floods, "I am distressed as I sit on the Great Throne . . . because the waters of the Nile have not risen to their proper height



66 Inscription, Sehel Island, near Aswan, about 2000 BCE



The story of the seven-year drought during King Djoser's reign is carved into a nine-foot-tall stone. "I was in mourning on my throne. . . . Those of the palace were in grief. . . . Temples were shut, Shrines covered with dust, Everyone was in distress. . . ."

for seven years. Grain is scarce, there are no garden vegetables at all. . . . The children are wailing."

But reports coming in on nilometer readings the years that King Djoser and Imhotep worked together on the burial complex indicated that the growing conditions would be good. The workers must have bustled about the burial complex with the energy that comes from high spirits.

Would Imhotep have saved the best for last? Would it have been at the end of the tour when he led King Djoser across the courtyard to the tomb? Finally they would have reached the base of the world's first pyramid and the world's first building constructed out of stone. Did Imhotep unroll a papyrus scroll and point to where he had planned the stacking of solid rectangles, each just a bit smaller than the one under it until a staircase rose 200 feet toward the sky? Would the construction noise have faded for King Djoser as he stood at the base of his eternal home? Even a god-king must feel awe at the sight of a structure larger than anything

The Edwin Smith Papyrus is a collection of 48 medical cases, each with a description of the injury, directions on how to examine the patient, a diagnosis, and a treatment. There were three possible diagnoses: for simple problems, "an ailment which I will treat," for trickier cases, "an ailment with which I will contend," and for incurables, "an ailment not to be treated."

built before it—a structure built not from mud brick that crumbles and decays with time, but built from stone, a monument built to be everlasting.

The laborers ten stories above King Djoser and Imhotep would have looked like ants pushing stones and fitting them into that highest step. Perhaps it didn't happen on a day that King Djoser was there, but it did happen all too often—a loose stone would fall. Dropping from that height even a pebble could be deadly. Scuffed loose, it would seriously wound someone below if it struck him. Imhotep had set up a small hospital for his workers. Anyone injured on the job would be cared for. Imhotep was not only an architect; he was a doctor as well. He wrote detailed directions on how to recognize an injury and how to treat it. The oldest known medical document is believed by some to have been written about 3000 BCE by Imhotep. It is called the Edwin Smith Papyrus, named after the Egyptologist Edwin Smith who bought the papyrus in 1862. One of the many instructions in the papyrus is what to do if a stone falls on a worker's head:

Title: Instructions concerning a wound in his head penetrating to the bone of his skull.

Treatment: . . . bind it with fresh meat the first day and treat afterward with grease, honey and lint every day until he recovers.

Today when archaeologists dig up the bodies of pyramid builders it is clear that many survived serious injuries thanks to Imhotep and his long list of cures. But many did not. And, during the Old Kingdom, life everlasting was not for the common man. He could only hope to play his part in the cycle of life and death by building a tribute to his king and in doing so add to the grandeur of Egypt.



64 Edwin Smith Papyrus, 17th-century BCE copy of original estimated to have been written 30th century BCE