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Why and how did the ancient Egyptians build pyramids?

Pyramids were built for religious purposes. The Egyptians were one of the first civilizations to believe in an afterlife. Most were built as tombs for the pharaohs and their consorts during the Old and Middle Kingdom periods.

Most accepted construction hypotheses are based on the idea that it was built by moving huge stones from a quarry and dragging and lifting them into place. There are three known chambers inside the Great Pyramid.

All the pyramids were built by Egyptian workers and Imhotep was the architect of the first pyramid and the Saqqara step pyramid. He also built the pyramid of Djoser's successor, Sekhemkhet. He was later deified as the god of medicine throughout Egypt in the Late Period.

It is not known who designed the Great Pyramid, but the man responsible for supervising its complex construction was Hemiunu, Khufu's nephew, a senior civil servant who acted as the pharaoh's vizier.

Despite the mystery surrounding Giza, Hemiunu himself was a flesh-and-blood man, as shown by his decidedly lifelike—and fleshy—statue, found in his tomb in Giza's west cemetery.

Much of the stonework in the Giza Pyramids came from a quarry barely half a mile to the south of the Great Pyramid of Khufu. The white limestone that once formed the outer casing had a longer journey to Giza, moved by boat along the Nile from Tura, eight miles away.

When he was working in Karnak in the 1930s, the scholar Henri Chevrier discovered that a five-ton block can be dragged horizontally along a wet clay track by just six men. As pictures found in tombs have shown, blocks of that size were also sometimes pulled by oxen.

The ramps by which they were raised onto the pyramid structure have also been depicted on the decoration of some tombs, and there is archaeological evidence for such ramps at Giza itself.

The geometry of a pyramid helped overcome the logistical problem of raising massive stones: As much as 40 percent of a pyramid's volume is concentrated in its bottom third.

The raising of stone blocks by means of a ramp beyond the lower third of the structure was, however, a major challenge, and it is still not fully known how the Egyptians solved the problem.

One solution would have been to use the building's inner step structure—visible today, since the outer casing stones have long disappeared—because then the blocks would only have had to be raised a little at a time, in the same way a heavy object can be eased up a staircase.

The rows making up Khufu's pyramid are slightly more than two feet high on average. So it is highly likely that, given sufficient manpower, levers could be used to raise large blocks into position—and so on, until the construction reached completion in the form of the pinnacle...

...known as the pyramidion, which historians believe was put in place in the course of a solemn ceremony.

The pyramidion atop Khufu has long been toppled, but is thought to have been of white Tura stone.

It capped a total of two and a half million stone blocks, making it one of the most massive buildings on the planet, the only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World that is still standing.

Khufu ordered the building of the first pyramid, one which bears his name 4,500 years after he ruled. His name appears on documents and on the few reliefs that remain on the entrance path to his funerary complex.

Yet until a few years ago, there was only one tiny representation of Khufu: an ivory carving just three inches high (above), an artifact considered—in a supremely ironic twist—as the smallest piece of Egyptian royal sculpture ever discovered.

Recently, however, some specialists have suggested that a pair of limestone and granite stone heads from the Old Kingdom might be portraits of Khufu—a theory contested by other historians.

Yet another hypothesis may give Khufu the biggest boost of all: According to Giza expert Rainer Stadelmann, the face of the Great Sphinx at Giza is not Khafre—as some scholars have argued—but Khufu himself, in divine form, protecting his pyramid.

The structure inside the great Pyramid of Giza.

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