

Egyptian Pyramids

You've probably seen pictures of the great pyramids of Egypt before. But have you ever wondered how they were built? Or why?

Around the years 3000-2500 BC, in what is called the "Old Kingdom" of Egypt, Egyptian pharaohs (kings) began to have large tombs built for themselves. The first tombs, called **mastabas**, were smaller than pyramids and less elaborate. Mastabas were square stone buildings large enough for the coffin, mummy, and special objects intended for the pharaoh to use in the afterlife.

Over time, pharaohs began to build mounds on top of the mastabas to make them larger and more impressive. This led to the **step pyramid**, which was so called because of the "steps" up the sides formed by the additional layers of stone. Some researchers believe the steps were meant to symbolize a stairway to the sky, for the dead pharaoh to climb and become a star.

Later, the **true pyramids** were built with smooth sides and a pointed top. Inside the pyramids there are special burial chambers for the pharaoh's body, just like in a mastaba. The burial chambers were hidden deep in the pyramid, often down a secret tunnel, to discourage grave robbers since pharaohs were buried with treasures and riches.

The first of these were built at **Giza**, near present-day Cairo. The largest surviving pyramid of these is the **Great Pyramid** of Khufu, which was built around the year 2560 BC. It covers an area about the size of six city blocks. Until the Eiffel Tower was built in France in 1889, it was the tallest building in the world!

Building such enormous buildings took time and effort. It is believed the Great Pyramid of Khufu took around 20 years to build, using the help of up to 50,000 men! Stones to build the pyramid were cut from rock quarries using chisels, hammers, and mallets. Since the stones were so large and heavy, the quarries were near the building sites so they would not have to be transported long distances. After all, they were built before cars, trains, or even electricity! To make it easier to move the stones to the pyramid they were placed on wooden sleds that were pulled through canals of water leading to the building. No one knows exactly how the large, incredibly heavy blocks were first lifted and then put into place. Some researchers believe cranes or a system of levers were probably used to position the large blocks. It also seems certain that ramps were used to make it easier to move the blocks.

Let's review!

The pyramids of Egypt started out as flat, square buildings called mastabas.

The pyramids were built to protect the bodies of dead pharaohs and contained items the pharaoh might need in the afterlife.

Name _____

Date _____

1. Why did the Egyptians build pyramids for their pharaohs?

2. Explain the tools and methods used by the Egyptians to build the pyramids.

3. Draw a comic strip that shows the development from mastabas to true pyramids.

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4. Pretend you are an Egyptian pharaoh. What special items would you like to have buried with you in your pyramid? Why?

Name _____

Date _____

Answers:

1. Egyptians built pyramids to house and protect the body of the pharaoh.
2. Stone was cut from quarries and brought to the building site on sleds through canals. Cranes and levers were probably used to position the blocks, all work was done by hand, no electricity or powered vehicles.
3. Should show progression from flat, square mastaba, then step pyramid, then true pyramid.
4. Answers will vary.