

## Building the Pyramids

We have very little in the way of on-the-spot narratives describing the incredible human effort expended in building Egypt's mammoth pyramids. But we do have the report of Herodotus, a Greek historian. He visited Egypt in about 460 B.C.E. From information he gathered during that visit, Herodotus described the building of the Great Pyramid of Cheops (Khufu) 2,000 years earlier.

Cheops closed the temples, and forbid the Egyptians to offer sacrifice, forcing them instead to labor, one and all, in his service. Some were required to drag blocks of stone down to the Nile from the quarries in the Arabian range of hills. Others received the blocks after they had been ferried in boats across the river, and dragged them to the Libyan range of hills. A hundred thousand men labored constantly, and were relieved every three months by a fresh lot.

It took ten years' oppression of the people to make the causeway for the conveyance of the stones, a work not much less than building the pyramid itself. This causeway is 3,000 feet long and 60 feet wide and 50 feet in height at the highest part. It is built of polished stone and is covered with carvings of animals. To make it took ten years, as I said—or rather to make the causeway, the works on the mound where the pyramid stands, and the underground chambers. Cheops intended the chambers as vaults for his own use: these last were built on a sort of island, surrounded by water introduced from the Nile by a canal.

The pyramid itself was twenty years in building. It is a square, eight hundred feet each way, and the height the same, built entirely of polished stone, fitted together with the utmost care. The stones of which it is composed are none of them less than thirty feet in length.

The pyramid was built in steps. . . . After laying the stones for the base, the workmen raised the remaining stones to their places with levers formed of short wooden planks. The first lever raised the block from the ground to the top of the first step. On this step was another lever, which received the block and carried it to the second step [and so on]. . . .

There is an inscription in Egyptian characters on the pyramid which records the quantity of radishes, onions, and garlic that the workmen ate.

An inscription in an Egyptian king's tomb describes the difficulties of transporting huge blocks of stone for the Egyptian kings' statues and pyramids.

### **Tomb of Thuthotep, c. 1850 B.C.E.**

A statue of 13 cubits [about 20 feet tall] [was brought]. The roadway, upon which it came, was very difficult, beyond anything. The dragging of the great statue upon it was hard for the heart of the people, because of the difficult, hard stone on the ground.

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## Building the Pyramids *(continued)*

What kept the men at work? A tomb picture shows an overseer watching his crew of workers. The inscription includes this comment:

### Temple of Amon, c. 1460 B.C.E.

The workmen say, "The taskmaster gives us bread, beer, and every good thing; he leads us, with a loving heart for the king, Thutmose III, who builds the temple of the gods." The taskmaster says to the builders: "The rod is in my hand; be not idle."

Ineni was superintendent of building projects for pharaoh Thutmose I. He described a boat built to transport two huge stone obelisks. (An obelisk is a tapering, four-sided stone shaft.)

### Hall of Karnak, c. 1460 B.C.E.

I oversaw the erection of two obelisks. I watched over the building of a splendid boat, 120 cubits long [about 200 feet], 40 cubits wide [about 65 feet], to transport these obelisks. They arrived safely in good condition at Karnak.

**Directions:** Imagine you are one of the people called into forced labor to help build a pyramid. Write a series of journal entries about your experience, based on these inscriptions and what you know about ancient Egyptian life. Or, role-play a conversation among workers after a long day's work. Do you work willingly, or are you resentful? Do you worry about your family back home? Are you fed well and treated well?



Temple of Karnak

