Zahi Hawass

THE TREASURES OF THE PYRAMIDS
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Scene showing the 'Meidum goose,
Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Old Kingdom.

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Why a Pyramid? Pyramid Religion

by James P. Allen

From simple piles of children's blocks to monuments erected by civilizations around the world, the pyramid is one of the most common of all human architectural forms. Structurally, it is also one of the most stable. So it is not surprising that the ancient Egyptians should have chosen to create their most imposing architectural achievements in this shape. But the pyramids of ancient Egypt were more than huge piles of stone. They were also concrete expressions of specific beliefs about life in this world and the next. To understand why the Egyptians built pyramids in the first place, we have to look at the meaning and force of these beliefs.

Ancient Egypt was an agrarian society, and the Egyptians' view of the world was determined in part by agricultural life along the Nile. Each year, spring rains in the Ethiopian highlands fed the source of the Nile and eventually raised the level of the river in Egypt above its banks, flooding the land on either side from June to October. Ancient records from the earliest Egyptian dynasties show that this annual inundation could rise as much as 4.4 m above the river's normal level, turning much of the Egyptian countryside into vast lakes. As the flood receded, leaving behind fertile silt, new plants would spring to life on the highest mounds of earth that were the first to emerge from the waters of these lakes.

From this annual experience, the beginning of life was linked in the Egyptian mind to the vision of a mound of earth emerging from a vast expanse of water. The Egyptians extended this notion to their understanding of how the world itself had come into being. One of the earliest Egyptian creation accounts envisioned the first place in the world as a mound of earth emerging from the waters of a universal ocean and the first life form as a lily growing on the peak of this primeval mound. In Egyptian thought the lily was a god, Nefertum, whose name means 'perfect and complete.' Nefertum was honored as a harbinger of the sun, which rose from the lily's petals to bring life to the newly created world. The mound itself was also worshipped as a god, called Tatjenen, meaning 'the emerging land.'

Early temples sometimes incorporated a mound of earth as an icon of the original site of all life. This could be a hill of earth or sand, but it also took the more permanent shape of a small pyramid carved from a single block of stone. A miniature pyramid of this kind was called a benben ('benben'), a name that derives from the root be, meaning 'swell up' or 'swell forth.' The benben was a concrete image of the first mound of land 'swelling up' from the waters of the pre-creation universe. As such, it was an icon not only of the primeval mound but also of the sun, which first rose from it, the Egyptian word for the rising of the sun is bsw, which comes from the same root as benben.

From the beginning, therefore, the pyramid shape represented the notion of new life, emerging both from a mound of earth and in the light and warmth of the sunrise. To the Egyptians, however, the benben was more than just an image. Like the primeval mound, it somehow incorporated the very power of life itself, the force that made it possible for new life to emerge after a period of dormancy.

With this viewpoint, it is not surprising that the Egyptians should also have associated mounds and pyramids with their funerary monuments. In the ancient Egyptian mind, death was not an end to life but the beginning of a new form of existence. During life, each human being was thought to consist of three basic entities: body, ba, and ka. The body was the physical form, the material shell that a living being inhabited. The ba was somewhat like the modern notion of the soul. From the beginning, therefore, the pyramid shape represented the notion of new life, emerging both from a mound of earth and in the light and warmth of the sunrise. To the Egyptians, however, the benben was more than just an image. Like the primeval mound, it somehow incorporated the very power of life itself, the force that made it possible for new life to emerge after a period of dormancy.

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individual, the person that inhabited the physical body during life. The ka was the energy of life itself, a force transmitted from the creator to each living person; death occurred when this force was separated from the ka and its body. After death, the ka was thought to reunite with its life force, its akh, the deceased were called ‘those who have gone to their ka.’ This union allowed the individual, the akh, to continue living, but in a spiritual rather than physical form. The Egyptians called this new form of life akh, meaning an ‘effective’ mode of existence. Since it no longer had a physical component, it was not subject to aging or death: unlike the temporary form of life on earth, the akh was essentially eternal.

Incorporated within the structure of the tomb, the mound or benben provided the power for this spiritual rebirth to take place. Early Egyptian tombs were mostly surmounted by the rectangular structure of mud brick known as a mastaba, but mounds of earth have also been found within these buildings above the burial chamber. The earliest pyramid tomb, that of the Third Dynasty king Djoser at Saqqara, began as a mastaba but was converted to a pyramid of six steps by the construction of five successively smaller mastabas on top of the original one. The resulting form seems to have been a variant realization of the primeval mound, envisioned as a series of steps rather than a hill with smooth sides; the same form has been found within earlier mastabas at Saqqara. The true pyramids that first appeared in the Fourth Dynasty were derived from this shape by filling in the steps to create four smooth faces, but they are also representations of the more common pyramidal benben on a monumental scale. Some of the newly discovered tombs of officials from the same period, to the south of the three Great Pyramids of Giza, were surmounted by conical mounds, these undoubtedly served the same purpose as the royal pyramids and represent yet another architectural realization of the primeval mound.

Apart from their incorporation of the power of new life, not much is known about the role the earliest pyramids were thought to play in the king’s afterlife. The great pyramids of the Third and Fourth Dynasties show successive changes and innovations in their architecture and plan, which suggests an evolution in Egyptian thinking about their function. In the Fifth Dynasty, however, the layout of the chambers within the royal pyramid became standardized. This new form reflects a vision of the afterlife that characterized Egyptian thought from then on.

The typical interior plan of these later Old Kingdom pyramids consists of three main elements: 1.) an antechamber beneath the apex of the pyramid, connected to the outside by an entrance corridor that opens in the pyramid’s north face; 2.) a burial chamber to the west of the antechamber, and 3.) a stone sarcophagus at the west end of the burial chamber. Some of these features were introduced in the Fourth Dynasty—a stone sarcophagus first in the pyramid of Khufu, and a separate antechamber beneath the pyramid’s apex in that of Menkaure—but the standard layout of all three elements did not appear until the end of the Fourth Dynasty, in the royal tomb built for King Shepseskaf, the successor of Menkaure. This was a mastaba rather than a pyramid, suggesting a break with the funerary traditions that had characterized royal burials since the time of Djoser, 150 years earlier.

Shepseskaf’s tomb may have been designed to reflect the mastabas of Egypt’s first kings at the site of Abydos in Upper Egypt. Abydos was a cult center of Osiris, the god most associated with the afterlife in Egyptian mythology. Like the primeval mound, Osiris represented the force of new life. His power was manifested in the transmission of life from one generation to the next and in the growth of new plants, the mysterious process that produced a living entity from an apparently dormant seed planted in the ground.

Osiris was also integral to the Egyptian understanding of the daily solar cycle. Each night the sun seemed to sink beneath the ground and die, yet in the morning it emerged again into the world, reborn to live once more during the day. To the Egyptians, this was possible only because during the night, the ‘dead’ sun had somehow received the power of new life. Two explanations of that process existed concurrently in Egyptian thought. In one, the sun reentered the womb of Nut, the goddess of the sky, at night, and was born from between her thighs again at dawn. In the other, the sun entered a netherworld, known as the Duat, there, in the middle of the night, it merged with the mummy of Osiris, lying in the depths of the Duat, and received from this union the ability to come to life once more. Together, these two explanations combined the role of mother and father in the production of new life.

Both of these concepts are reflected in the standardized layout of interior chambers...
introduced by Shepseskaf and adopted in the pyramids of his successors during the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. We know this because of the Pyramid Texts, a collection of funerary rituals and spells that were inscribed on the walls of these chambers and the sarcophagi in the pyramids of Unas, last king of the Fifth Dynasty, and his Sixth-Dynasty successors. These texts show that the king's afterlife was thought to parallel the daily solar cycle.

Each night, as the sun entered the body of Nut and the Duat, the king's spirit would come back to the interior of his tomb. The stone sarcophagus in the west end of the burial chamber was an analogue of Nut's womb. Within it, the king's mummy was both a fetus and an analogue of the mummy of Osiris lying in the Duat. The Pyramid Texts refer to the burial chamber itself as the Duat, and the spells inscribed on the walls of this room refer to the king not only by name but also as Osiris. For example, 'Osiris Unas.' As the sun united with Osiris's mummy in the Duat, the king's spirit was thought to join with his own mummy in the Duat of his tomb and, like the sun, receive through this union the power of new life.

The texts inscribed in the burial chamber are those of two rites performed at the funeral. They begin with a ritual of offerings, always inscribed on the north wall of the burial chamber. This may have accompanied the actual presentation of offerings at the funeral, but it was also meant to be repeated each day in the pyramid's mortuary temple, inscribed within the burial chamber, it would continue to provide the king's ka with the necessities of daily life. The offering ritual was followed by a second rite, whose words are always inscribed on the south wall of the burial chamber. This was a resurrection ritual, intended to release the king's ka from its attachment to the body so that it could rejoin its ka and enjoy life again. It begins by assuring the king that "you have not gone away dead: you have gone away alive," encourages him to "go and follow your sun . . . and be beside the god, and leave your house to your son of your begetting," and ends by reassuring him that "you shall not perish, you shall not end: your identity will remain among the people even as it comes to be among the gods."

As the sun left the womb of Nut and the Duat, the king's revitalized spirit proceeded from the pyramid's burial chamber to the antechamber. In Egyptian thought this room corresponded to the Akhet, a liminal zone between the Duat and the day sky (in practical terms, the Akhet was the Egyptian explanation for why the sun's light appears in the morning before the sun itself has risen above the horizon). The name Akhet means 'place of becoming effective' and refers to the process through which the ka—of the sun and the deceased alike—took on an 'effective' form of new life, as an akh: the Pyramid Texts tell the sun that he and the dead king "shall rise (wbn) from the Akhet, from the place in which the two of you have become akh."

The texts on the walls of the burial chamber represent rituals performed by the living on behalf of the deceased king, but those inscribed in the antechamber were mostly intended to be recited by the king himself. They gave him the proper words and instructions he needed to overcome the hazards of his journey between the Duat and the world of the living: spells to surmount physical obstacles, to control and vanquish inimical forces, to persuade the celestial ferryman to accept him as a passenger, and to encourage the gods to accept him in their company. At this point the king was no longer identified with Osiris, and the texts of the antechamber refer to him only by his royal name.

Finally, as Nut gave birth to the morning sun, the king's akh left his tomb. In the earliest pyramids it was apparently thought to do so through the long corridor connecting the antechamber to the outside on the north of the pyramid, an analogue of the birth canal. From the Fourth Dynasty onward, however, the pyramid complex included a mortuary temple on the east of the pyramid, with a false door through which the akh could also emerge more appropriately in the direction of the rising sun. In either case, the reborn king was then free to enjoy life during the day, journeying across the sky with the sun and visiting the world of the living.

At least from the time of Shepseskaf onward, therefore, the afterlife was envisioned as a daily cycle of spiritual rebirth. Since Shepseskaf himself was buried beneath a mastaba rather than a pyramid, the function of the tomb's interior chambers—as Duat and Akhet—was apparently more important to this cycle than the shape of its superstructure. The kings of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, however, reverted to
the pyramid form while retaining Shepseskaf's layout of the interior chambers. In doing so, they combined Osiris's subterranean power of new life with the life-giving force of the primeval hill above the earth. The result was an evocative metaphor of rebirth beneath the pyramid, the king's mummy lay like a seed planted in a mound of earth, waiting each night to transmit Osiris's power of new life to his spirit. Pyramids were not merely monumental tombs erected to perpetuate the memory of Egypt's kings; they were also—and more fundamentally—resurrection machines, designed to produce and ensure eternal life.

We have less information about the way in which the king's subjects envisioned their own afterlives in the Old Kingdom, but there is no reason to believe that it was any different. During this period, non-royal tombs were not inscribed with Pyramid Texts, but they do contain lists of the same offerings presented in the royal offering ritual. Some of them were also decorated with scenes of funerary rites corresponding to the king's resurrection ritual, and their owners claim to be a 'capable āḫḥ' and to know spells and 'everything by which an āḫḥ becomes āḫḥ.' Though these tombs were usually mastabas with a single burial chamber, they also contained sarcophagi, and the newly discovered mounds above some of them at Giza clearly served the same purpose as the royal pyramids.

All of these features point to a common vision of the afterlife for kings and commoners alike. After the Old Kingdom, non-royal tombs, sarcophagi, and coffins were also inscribed with Pyramid Texts—in some cases, direct copies of the corpus first inscribed in the pyramid of Unas—and with new spells of the same kind, known as the Coffin Texts. These eventually became the Book of the Dead and other funerary texts used in both royal and non-royal burials from the New Kingdom onward. Some non-royal tombs in the New Kingdom were also surmounted by small pyramids. Like the great pyramids themselves, these monuments and their texts bear witness to the hope for eternal life that all Egyptians shared.
THE PYRAMIDS

Text by Zahi Hawass

The pyramids are ancient Egyptian structures that served as tombs for pharaohs and other high-ranking officials. They were built as part of ancient Egyptian funerary practices, and their construction was a reflection of the wealth and power of the period. The pyramids were once considered to be the tallest structures in the world, and they were built using a combination of stone, brick, and mud. The largest pyramid, the Great Pyramid of Giza, was built for pharaoh Khufu and is the only remaining of the original Seven Wonders of the World.

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