

The Realm of the Pharaohs

Essays in Honor of Tohfa Handoussa



Volume I

Edited by
Zahi A. Hawass,
Khaled A. Daoud
and Sawsan Abd El-Fattah

CAHIER N° 37



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Massive golden finger ring
(University Museum, inv.-no. 1929).

SUPPLÉMENT AUX ANNALES DU SERVICE DES
ANTIQUITÉS DE L'ÉGYPTE

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STORIES AND ANECDOTES ABOUT AND AROUND THE PYRAMIDS

Rainer STADELMANN

(طويل)

تَخْلِبُنِي مَا تَحْتَ السَّمَاءِ بَنِيَّةٌ تُمَاجِدُ فِي إِتْقَانِهَا قَرَمَى مِصْرَ
بِنَاهُ يَخَافُ الدَّهْرُ مِنْهُ وَكُلُّ مَا عَلَى طَائِرٍ الدُّنْيَا يَخَافُ مِنَ الدَّعْوَرِ
تَنْزَعُ طَرَفِي فِي بَدِيعِ بَنَائِبَا وَلَمْ يَنْزَعْ فِي الْمَرَانِ يَبَا فِكْرِي



This is what the great jurist / *qadi* and poet Umara El-Yamani who died in 569 / 1175 wrote about the pyramids in the twelfth century AD. Six centuries later an unknown French soldier carved above the entrance of the Great Pyramid a verse of the famous poet Jacques Delille which he had written on the ruins of Rome:

Leur masse indestructible a fatigué le temps.

So this unknown soldier felt and was struck by the greatness of the pyramid in his time in the same way as Umara El-Yamani did hundreds of years before.

The Great Pyramid of Giza is the only still standing 'Wonder of the World'. All the other monuments, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Walls and Hanging Gardens of Semiramis at Babylon, The Pheidias Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Colossus of Helios at Rhodes, the Mausolleion at Halikarnassus, and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus have vanished without leaving any trace. Recently, an agency has put forward to the public, and especially to the Egyptian authorities, the idea of creating a new catalogue of wonders of the world, including the Giza pyramids at the top of this list. This was and is only a mean approach to obtain publicity, and was therefore duly and justly rejected by the scientific world and the authorities protecting world heritage.

The word 'pyramid' was first used by Herodotus in his description of Egypt for the Egyptian royal tombs of the Old Kingdom. He does not mention from where and what root this word comes. On the contrary, he uses it in a way that we have to assume that

this word was already a common designation for this kind of building. No etymology is really acceptable. Some linguists refer to a Greek word *pyramis* for a kind of small bread with a pointed top, but this expression is certainly secondary and derived from the form of the pyramids and not vice versa. The Old Egyptian designation for pyramid  *mr* is already attested at Dahshur on a fragment from the valley temple with the determinative of a pyramid .¹ As it is already clearly written *mr* in the Fourth Dynasty, the word for pyramid cannot be a compound consisting of a *m* prefix and a verb 'r to ascend, meaning the place to ascend. The disappearance of the ' is, however, an unjustifiable objection and could not be philologically deducted. So the word *mr* must remain inexplicable.²

Herodotus assigned a long chapter to the pyramids, their construction and the kings who had built them. His attitude towards the pyramid builders is clearly formed by the way of thinking of an enlightened Greek towards a state and a society ruled by divine kings. In buildings like the pyramids, he could not but behold human arrogance against the gods, in Greek 'hubris'.

The complete chapter about the pyramids is characterized by Herodotus' negative and hostile approach towards the kings and their monuments. The report on how the construction of Khufu's pyramid was financed by forcing his own daughter into prostitution is more than naive, if not even ridiculous; an Egyptian princess, the daughter of a divine king, even the greatest king of the Old Kingdom, the living sun god, could never have become a prostitute. Just as absurd is the story that the same princess herself built a small pyramid by asking her own customers to bring a stone as a reward for her favors. This is not an Egyptian way of thinking or understanding its own history and tradition; Greek merchants, uncultivated people living in Memphis, must have fabricated these fairy tales and passed them on to Herodotus.

The report on how the Great Pyramid was built and how hundreds of thousands of compulsory laborers would have worked on it for over more than thirty years in the construction, pulling stones and lifting them with the help of wooden scaffoldings, the 'machines of Herodotus', from step to step has influenced generations of researchers and construction experts. But one should be aware that these people, a kind of ancient dragoman or tourist guide, who told these stories to Herodotus were completely ignorant; they lived nearly two thousand years after the construction of the pyramids, and they had no reports of the pyramid builders at all. In modern time, architects and engineers and even hobby-archaeologists have proposed a variety of adoption and maladoptions for these 'machines of Herodotus'.³ But all these theses have ended as chimeras.

I have now been excavating and restoring the pyramids of Senefru at Dahshur for more than twenty years, together with experienced architects, technicians of different disciplines, engineers and stone masons; during these years, we have studied and

probed many methods of lifting heavy blocks with wooden scaffoldings. However, none has found acceptance by the experts. Through this experience, I am convinced that there was only one method to construct a pyramid, the traditional technique using ramps. (Figs 1a-c) It is, however, surely not a single ramp, which would demand two to three times the material and the manpower of a great pyramid, but most probably one ramp to one corner leaning against one side of the pyramid. At the beginning, a number of small straight-on or perpendicular ramps could have been used for feeding stone material into the lower layers of the pyramid. From 80 to 130m on, a series of small ramps resting on the stepped faces would feed and could be filled in after the pyramidion and the corners had been delivered.⁴

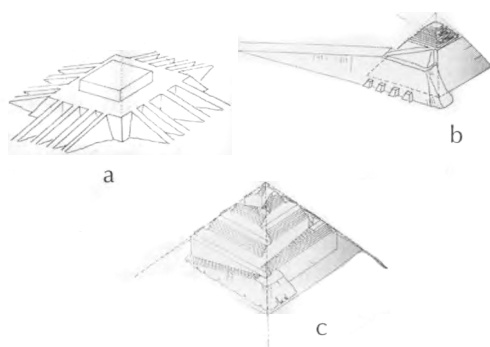


Fig. 1 a. Small ramps at the beginning.
b. A leaning ramp.
c. Small ramps
on the upper part of the pyramid.

Herodotus' report about pyramids and pyramid construction and modern approaches to it

Had Herodotus really visited and seen the pyramids? His description of the pyramids area and the kings who built the pyramids looks indeed so strange and suspect. If he had really surveyed the length of the pyramid base and examined the stones, he should have remarked upon the size and weight of about two tons of these stones, which could have only been transported by professional stonemasons, and not by customers of a prostitute, even if she was a princess, which is in any way absurd! There is another astounding aspect of Herodotus' report about the pyramids. He does not mention the Sphinx at all! Nor do Diodorus and Strabon. We know, however, definitely that the Sphinx and its temenos were at least partly freed from the sand in the Saitic period and the cult of the Sphinx as the god Harmachis was functioning until to the Roman period when Plinius the Older visited Egypt and saw the pyramids and the Sphinx. Perhaps in the time of Herodotus, it might have been dangerous to visit the pyramids area; Herodotus mentions Bedouins living there under their Sheikh Philitis and putting their flocks out to pasture in the fields around the pyramids area.

In the Middle Ages, the names of the kings who had built the pyramids got lost. Strange stories about hidden treasures allured inhabitants of the new capitals of Fustat and al-Kahira, as well as adventurers from all nations and countries into the corridors and chambers of the pyramids. The last remains of sarcophaguses, already several times plundered and restored in the Ramesside period and in the Saitic time by pious rulers, were pulled out and even exposed in front of the palaces.⁵

In the time of Sultan Al-Malik Al Kamil, brother of the famous Sultan Saladin, who had become king of Egypt after the death of his nephew Al-Aziz Uthman, a celebrated event happened at the pyramids. Al Kamil invited his brother Al-Ashraf Musa to the pyramids in the outskirts of al-Kahira. During a sumptuous feast, young courageous men climbed up the steep pyramids, which still had their casing! It is further reported that already during the reign of Al-Aziz Uthman a conceited archer climbed up Khufu's pyramid with his tense bow in his hand. Other archers rivalled in tearing and shooting arrows over the pyramids.

When we were excavating in front of the east side of the Red Pyramid of Senefru at Dahshur searching for the remains of the pyramid temple, we found a layer of mud plaster. This mud plaster was definitely late, not from the time of the pyramid builders. It was laid over the scanty remains of the brick walls and foundations of the pyramid temple, which must have vanished centuries before. (Fig. 2) On and in the mud plaster, we found ceramic potsherds and fragments of a large *sir*, a water pot, which are clearly from the time of the Arab Middle Ages, between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, but before the pillage of the casing stones, as heaps of broken stones from the pillage of the pyramid's casing covered this mud plaster. The pillage of the casing might have happened after the seventeenth or even as late as the eighteenth century. In the center of the mud plaster, remains of brick walls, a circular store or a fireplace and rows of holes can be observed.



Fig. 2. Mud plaster of the Arab Middle Ages over the remains of the brick foundations of the pyramid temple to the east of the pyramid.

These might have been the remains of a construction of light material, a kind of a shelter or a tent. On and around the mud plaster and the same layer of excavation, we found many copper arrowheads, all with blunt points. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Arrowheads with blunt points found on the mud plaster on the east side of the pyramid.

For a long time, we could not find an explanation for this fact. But when I read the story of Sultan Al-Malik's festivities at the pyramids of Giza, I had the inspiration. Not only the Sultan at Giza but also local princes or sheikhs used to hold festivities in the shade of a great pyramid where different arts of the bright, young men of the princes' entourage could exhibit their talents, in climbing on the pyramid or rivalling to shoot with their arrows over the pyramid. Until today the areas around the pyramids were always places of public enjoyment and pleasures, at Giza but also at Dahshur. But it is also a place to work where Tohfa Handoussa is studying the objects of the old excavations of Cairo University. I wish her success and enjoyment with this great work.

Endnotes

- 1 A. Fakhry, *The Monuments of Senefru at Dahshur*, II (Cairo, 1961), No 234.
- 2 I. E. S. Edwards, *The Pyramids of Egypt* (Oxford, 1985), 302. see also J. F. Quack, *Zum Namen der Pyramide*, in *Sokar* 4 (2004), 15. Quack proposes the reading *mhr* for the sign *mr* (Gardiner list U 23), then an metathesis of *m* and *h* and *r* in *pꜣ-hrm* which gives *ahram* and finally *paramis* = *pyramis*!!!
- 3 To mention only a few: D. E. Riedel, *Die Maschinen des Herodot. Der Pyramidenbau und seine Transportprobleme* (Wien, 1985); F. Abitz, 'Der Bau der großen Pyramide mit einem Schrägaufzug', *ZÄS* 119 (1992), 61–82; L. Formicone, 'Das Gerät für die Konstruktion der Pyramiden', *GM* 153 (1996), 33–38; Heinz Kayssner, *Pyramidenbau*. The best information about the different methods of construction of the pyramids is found in the book of D. Arnold, *Building in Egypt* (New York, 1989).
- 4 R. Stadelmann, *Die Ägyptischen Pyramiden. Vom Ziegelbau zum Weltwunder* (Mainz, 1997), chapter on Pyramidenbau. M. Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids* (London, 1997), chapter on Ramps.
- 5 Reports about these 'explorations' can be found in the illustrious Pyramid book of Abu Gafar Al-Idrisi and in Al-Makrizi's 'Hitat'. See, Stadelmann, *Die Großen Pyramiden von Giza*, chapt. 1 Einleitung with an extract of Al-Makrizi's 'Hitat' and early travellers. See also G. Goyon, *Les inscriptions et graffiti des voyageurs sur la Grande Pyramide* (Le Caire, 1944) and J. Ph. Lauer, *Le mystère des Pyramides* (Paris, 1974). see also U. Haarmann, *Das Pyramidenbuch des ABU Ga'far Al-Idrisi, Beirut Texts und Studien* Bd. 38. It is highly regrettable that this great scholar and wonderful colleague and friend passed away so prematurely before he could complete his studies on the traditions about the pyramids in the Arabic literature of the Middle Ages.

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