

LEVELED BOOK • V

Pyramids



Written by Kira Freed

Pyramids



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A fanciful illustration of ancient Egypt from an old book

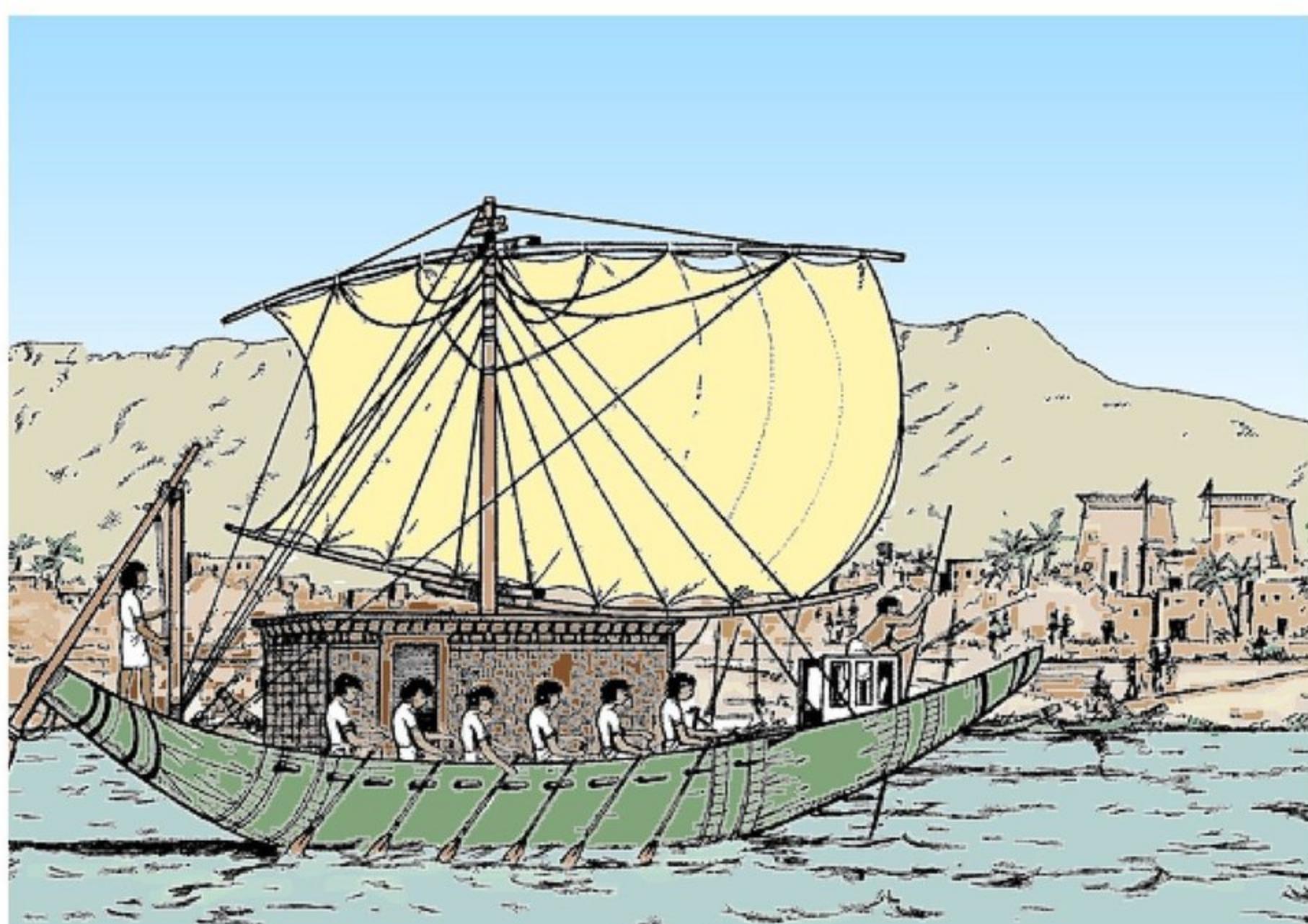
Introduction

The country of Egypt sits at the northeastern corner of the African continent. It was once home to the ancient Egyptian civilization. Ancient Egypt was one of the most fascinating cultures ever to exist. Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians studied and practiced agriculture, irrigation, architecture, engineering, and much more. They built great structures, including the pyramids. Learning about these pyramids can help us learn a great deal about this amazing civilization.

Ancient Egypt

Egyptians began to settle along the banks of the Nile River about seven thousand years ago. At first they lived in villages, but over time the villages formed into larger groups and eventually became tribes. By about 3200 BC, these tribes were united under one king, who was called the **pharaoh**.

The culture of ancient Egypt was dependent on the life-giving Nile River. It provided the Egyptians with fish and birds to eat, as well as water to irrigate their crops. It also served as a waterway for boats, both for travel and to transport goods.



The Nile has been a busy waterway for thousands of years.



Paintings in a tomb show scenes of the next life.

The ancient Egyptians believed in life after death. They believed that their next life would be similar to their present life and that they would need the same kinds of tools and objects in their next life. Therefore, many people were buried with a collection of some of the things they possessed in their current life. Of all the people living in ancient Egypt, no one was given a more lavish burial than a pharaoh.

According to the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, the pharaoh was the son of the Sun god, Re (or Ra). While he was alive on Earth, the pharaoh was known as Horus. After he died, he was united with Re. The new pharaoh, who replaced the dead pharaoh, became the new Horus.

The Egyptians believed that in order for a pharaoh to live forever and continue to bless their lives, his body had to be preserved so that his spirit would stay alive. They built pyramids to honor pharaohs who had died. Each pyramid held a pharaoh's body, as well as riches and treasures meant to accompany him in the next life. The pyramid also protected the pharaoh's tomb and its treasures from theft. In addition, it served as a monument to the pharaoh's greatness.

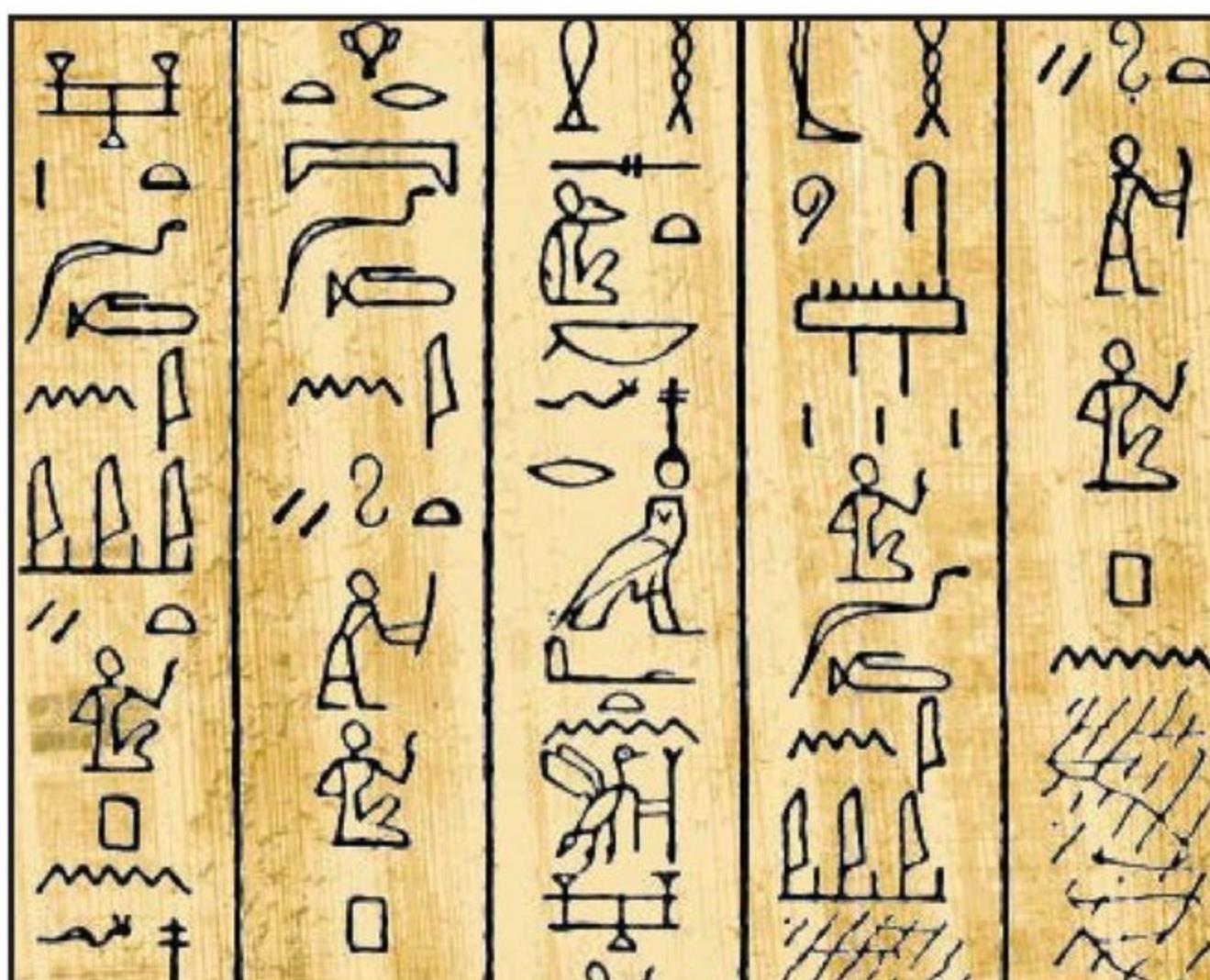


Do You Know?

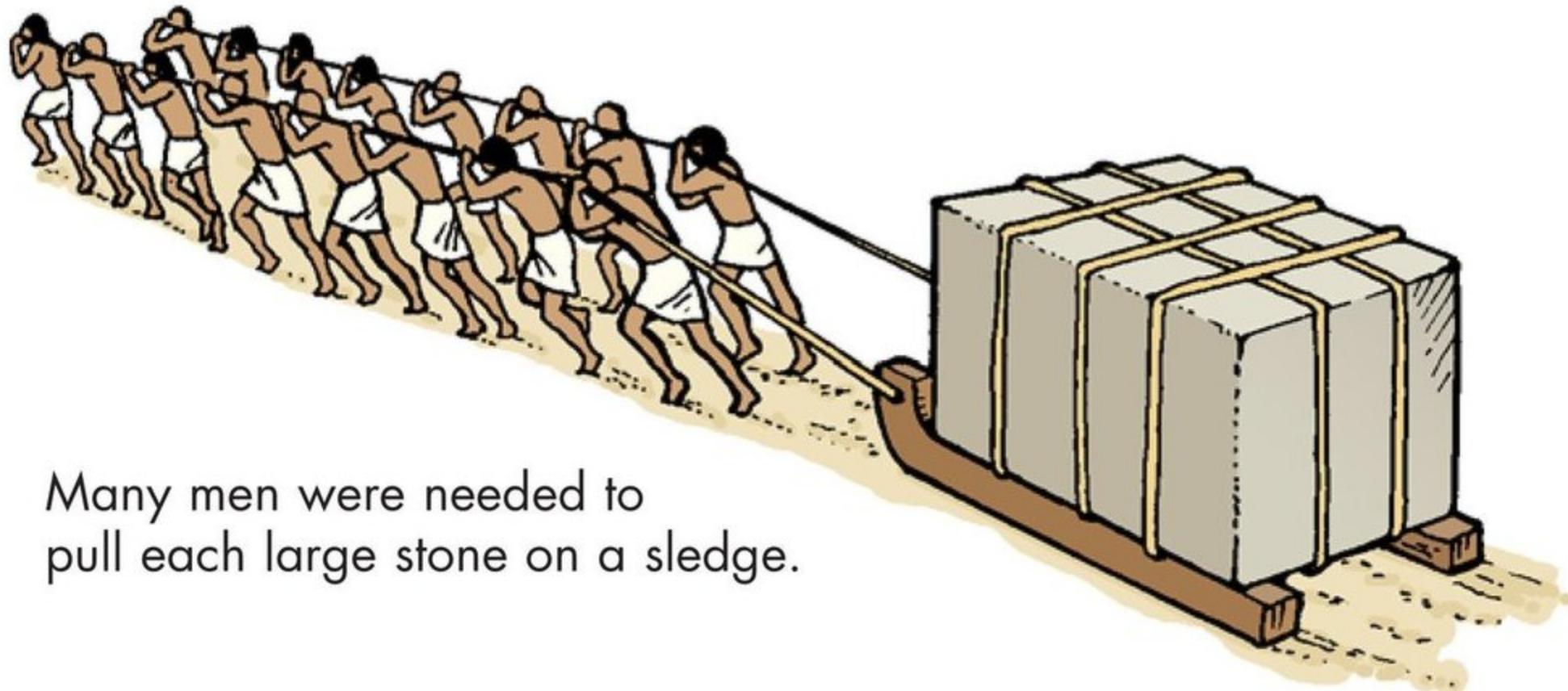
The shape of a pyramid represents the Sun's rays shining on the Earth. Ancient Egyptians believed that a pharaoh who died ascended to heaven on the rays of the Sun.

Building a Pyramid

A pharaoh planned the construction of his pyramid long before he was expected to die, since finishing it would take many years. A large pyramid could take as long as twenty years to complete. Building a pyramid required thousands of people. Some were skilled workers, such as architects who designed the overall structure on orders from the pharaoh. People with special knowledge were also required to properly remove the stone from a **quarry** and to shape the stone. After a pyramid was built, skilled sculptors and painters decorated it. A **scribe** recorded all the materials needed for building the pyramid using the ancient Egyptian writing system, called **hieroglyphics**. Hieroglyphics consist of a series of small pictures that represent ideas.



Samples of
hieroglyphics

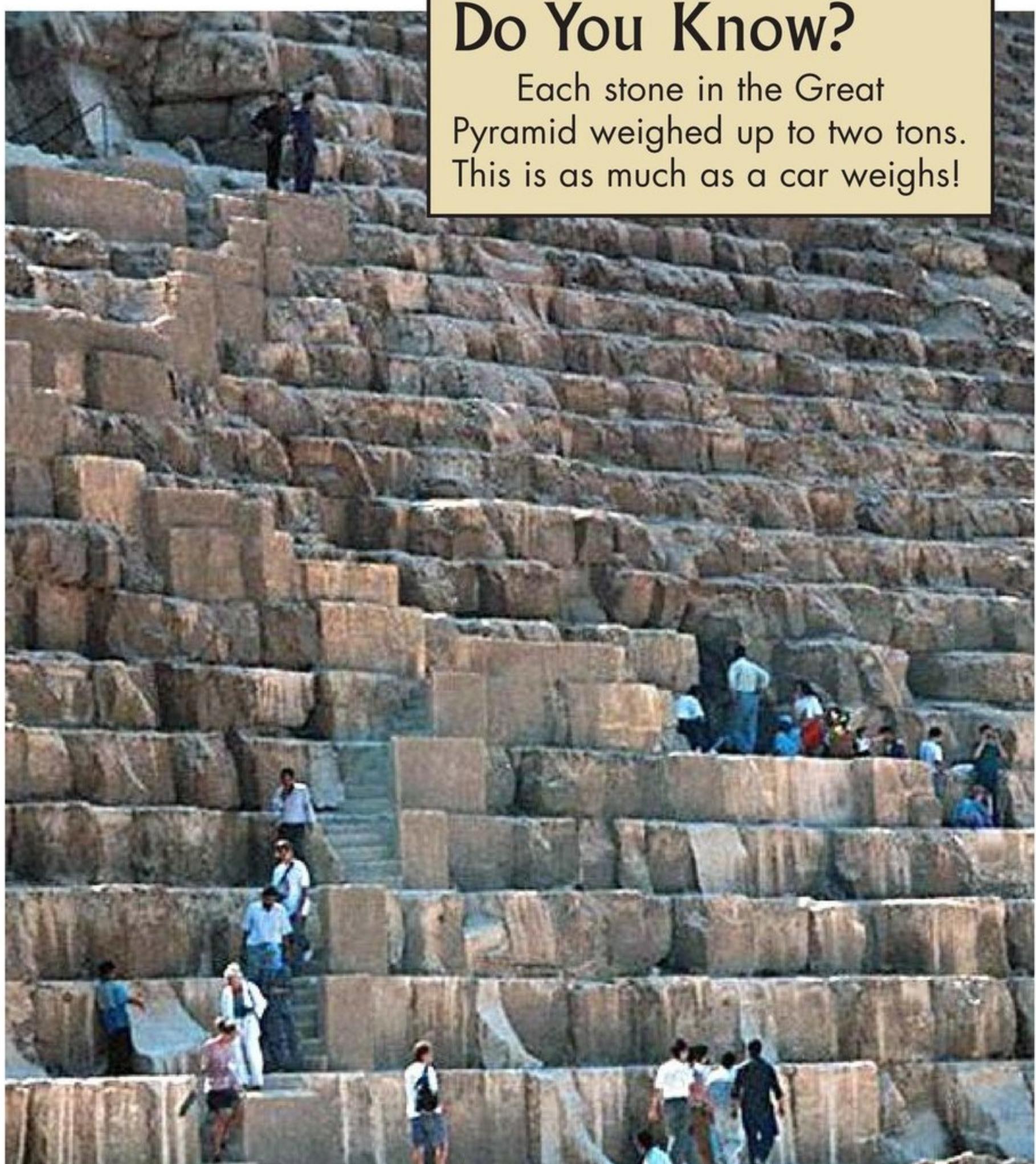


Many men were needed to pull each large stone on a sledge.

In addition to these specialized tasks, other workers were required to move the heavy stones. They moved some stones from the quarry to the building site by boat. Other stones were put on sledges, or large wooden sleds, which were then dragged across the desert sands.

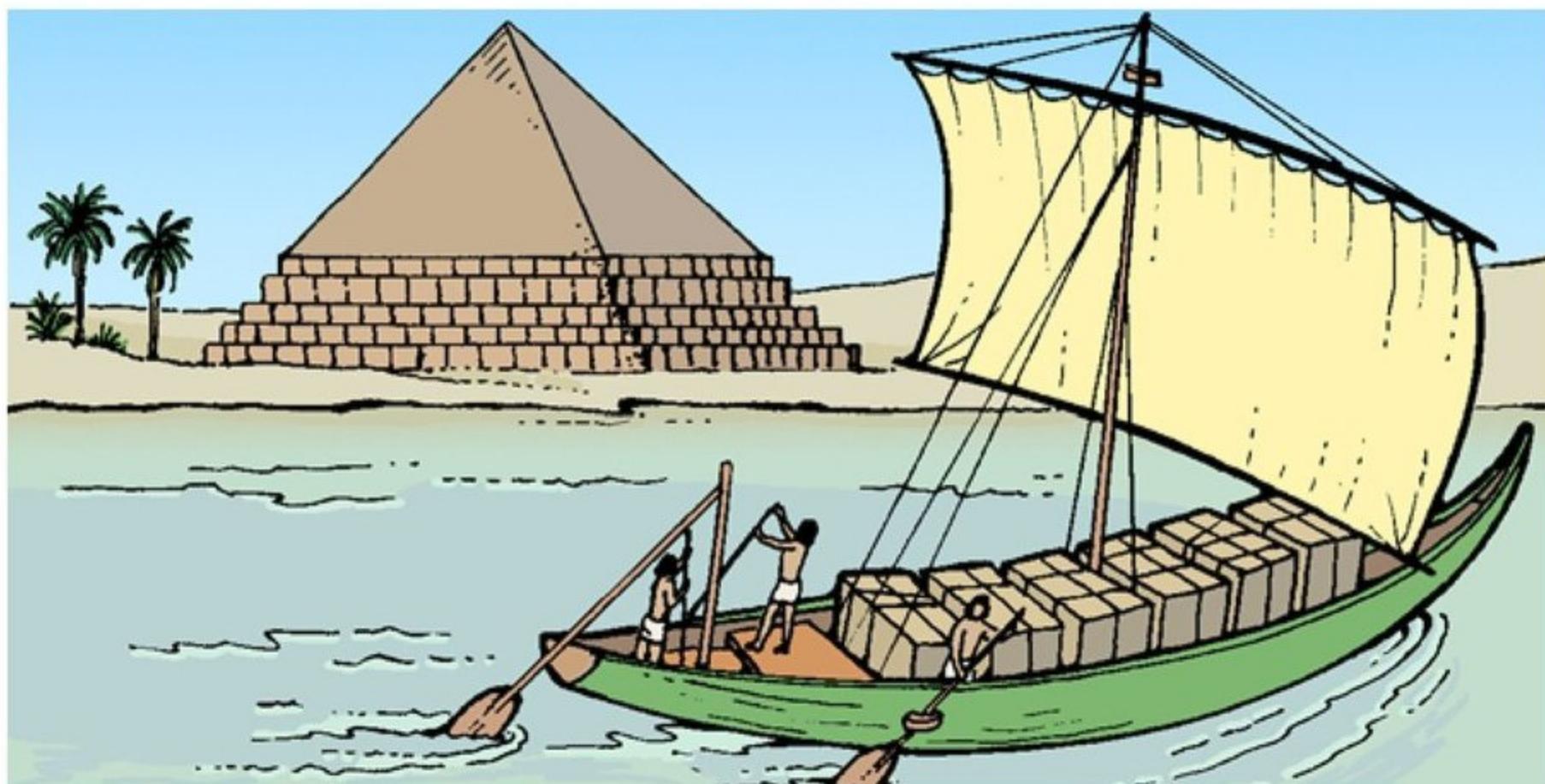
Until recently, historians believed that much of this difficult work was forced on laborers who served as slaves. They included prisoners and people who owed money to the pharaoh. But in 1990, a tourist traveling in Egypt stumbled on the remains of an ancient city where workers who helped build the pyramids of Giza were once believed to have lived. Evidence from the city suggests that the people who built those pyramids were not slaves, but rather skilled craftsmen—about 15,000 of them. Written records suggest that the workers were treated well while they worked on the pyramids.

It is believed that farmers also participated in the building of pyramids, especially during the flood season when they could not farm. Farmers depended on floods to deposit fertile soil for crops. Because the pharaoh was believed to be the son of a god, farmers thought he was able to guarantee good floods. They were glad to serve the pharaoh in exchange for the fertile soil brought by the floods.



Do You Know?

Each stone in the Great Pyramid weighed up to two tons. This is as much as a car weighs!



The Egyptians sailed heavy stones down the Nile River.

The location of a pyramid had to be determined very carefully. The site needed to be on rocky ground to support the immense weight of the finished pyramid. It needed to be near the Nile River so that some of the stones could be transported by water from the quarry to the building site. The site had to be located on the west bank of the Nile because the west was where the Sun set each night and where the dead were believed to exist.

The exact position of the pyramid also needed to be determined carefully, since the sides had to face exact north, south, east, and west. An astronomer-priest was summoned to observe the stars in order to determine true north. During the actual building of a pyramid, many ceremonies were performed to ensure the support of the gods in the **endeavor**.

Several kinds of stone were used in the building of a pyramid. The core of the pyramid was made from local limestone. Other limestone of finer quality, brought from far away, was used to make the outer shell of the pyramid. Granite from even farther away was used for the pharaoh's coffin, called a **sarcophagus**, as well as to decorate the burial chamber.

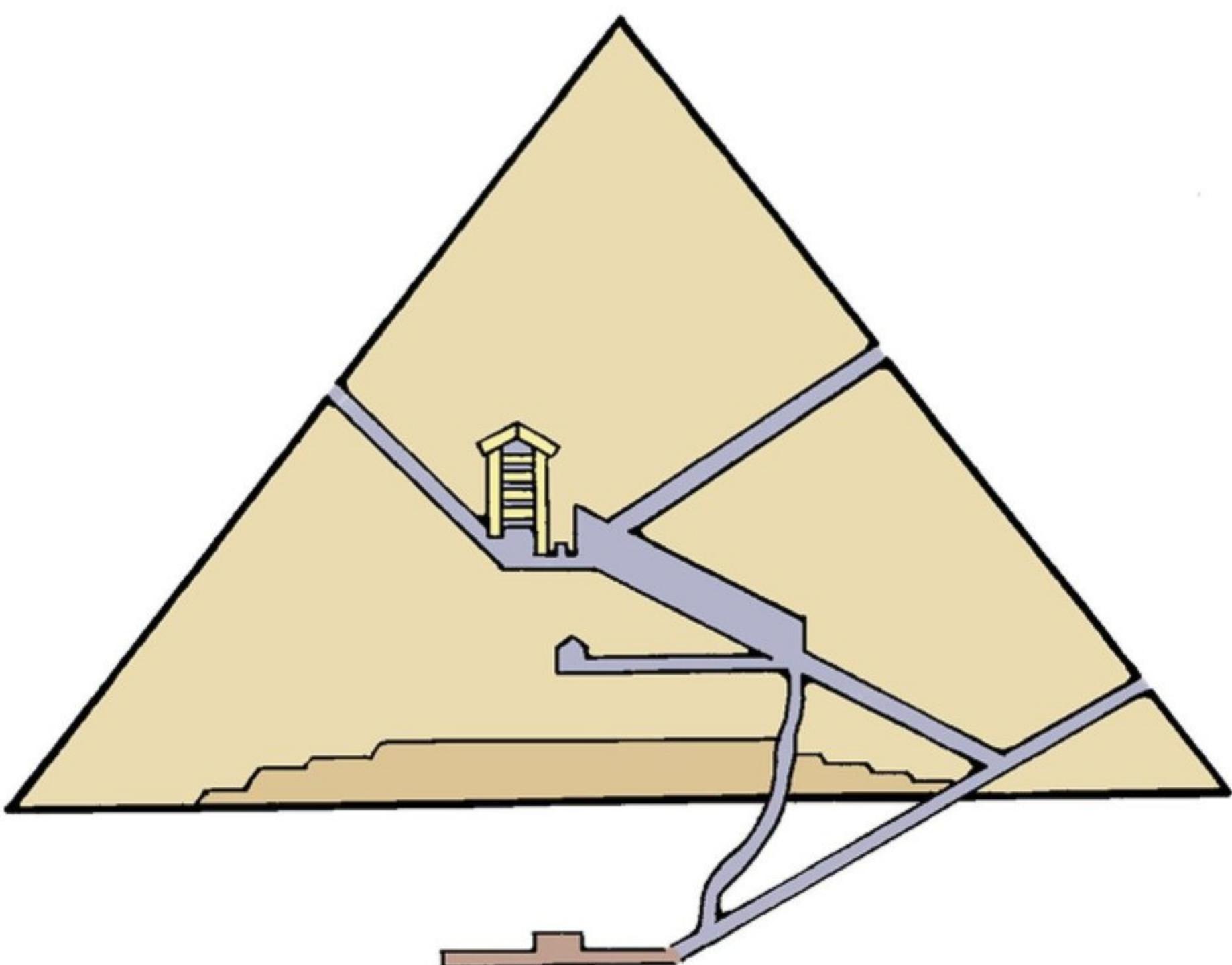
After the location and position of the pyramid were decided on, the surface of the ground was leveled. After leveling the ground, the workers began the actual labor of building the pyramid.



The tomb of King Tutankhamun (King Tut)

The internal structure of a pyramid was designed to outsmart thieves and keep them from the burial chamber and its treasures. If the burial chamber was at or below ground level, it was put in place first, and then the pyramid was built around it in horizontal layers. Ramps were built against the sides of the pyramid, and the huge stones were dragged up the ramps and put in position.

A series of passageways and rooms included dead ends and empty chambers to confuse anyone trying to loot the tomb. Enormous slabs of stone blocked the entrance to the real tomb.



Drawing of the tunnels and passageways in a pyramid

Try This!

Build a Pyramid

Using sugar cubes or cubes fashioned out of clay, build a model pyramid. You can build a pyramid with steps, a flat-sided pyramid, or one of your own design.



Preparing the Body

The ancient Egyptians had a special procedure for preparing the body of an important person for burial. This technique, called **mummification**, preserved the body for thousands of years. The body was taken to an **embalmer**, who removed the insides and preserved them in canopic jars. Each jar had a lid in the shape of a guardian god. The body then was left to dry for forty days. Then it was washed, rubbed with oil and fragrant spices, and packed with preservatives. Afterward, it was wrapped with many layers of linen soaked in resin to hold its shape. A decorative mask was placed on the head, and the entire body was placed in a coffin. Coffins were ornately painted.

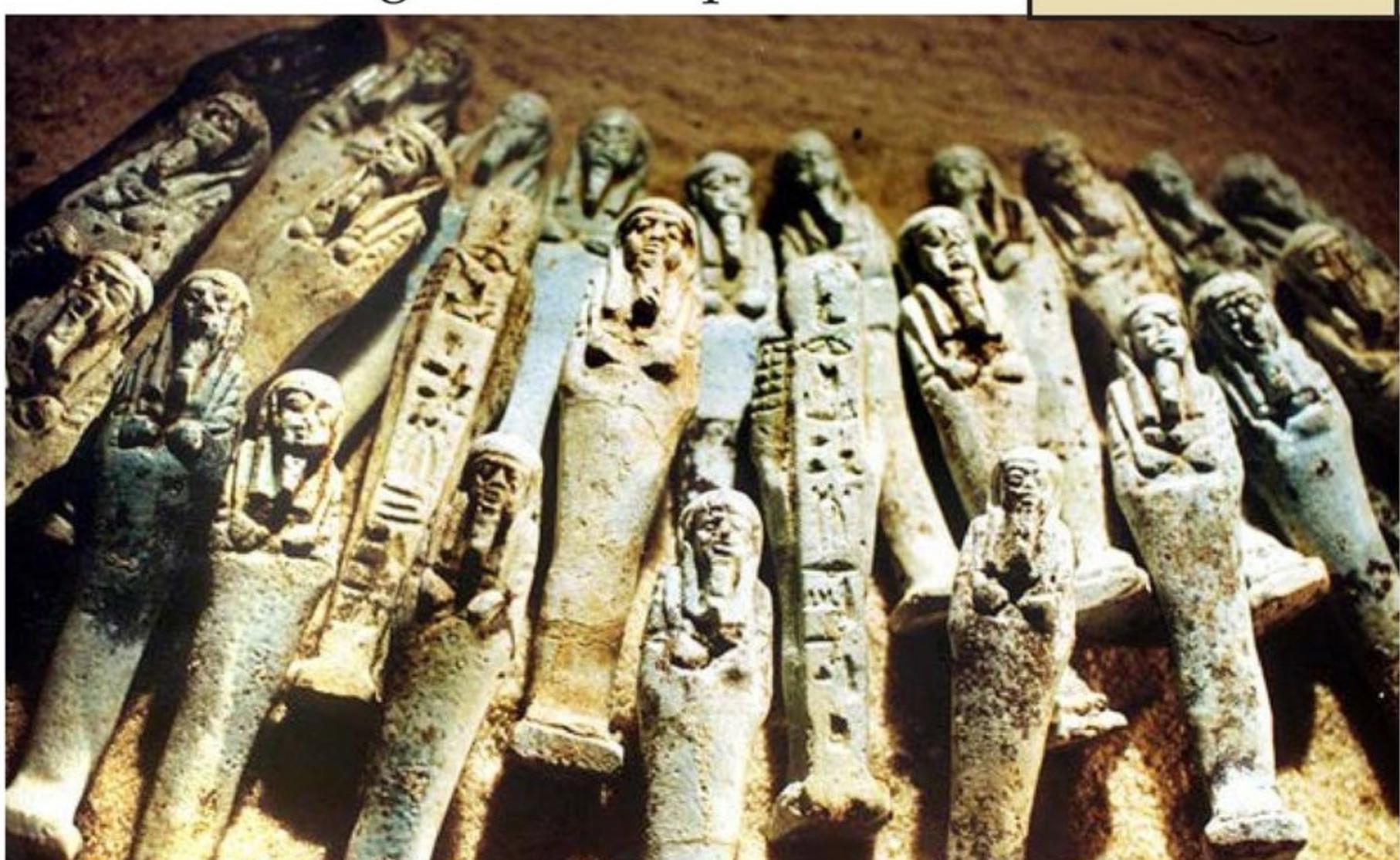


This mummy was damaged by thieves looking for souvenirs.

An elaborate ceremony marked the burial of a pharaoh. The decorated coffin, plus the canopic jars, were carried to the pyramid. A procession of mourners was led by priests and priestesses. Following the mourners were servants who carried all the items meant to accompany the pharaoh into the next life—food, clothes, furniture, and more. Before burying the dead pharaoh, the body's mouth was opened by a priest. This practice was believed to allow the person to breathe, eat, and speak in the next life. Then the coffin was placed in the tomb and sealed inside the pyramid, in a chamber designed to keep it safe.

Do You Know?

Pharaohs were buried with statues of their servants. These statues, called *shabtis*, were believed to come to life in the next world so that the servant could once again serve the pharaoh.



A collection of shabtis

Famous Egyptian Pyramids

The first pyramid, built for King Zoser at Saqqâra, is called a *step pyramid* because it was shaped like giant stairways up the sides. Later pyramids had smaller steps. The design eventually changed into straight-sided pyramids, such as the Great Pyramid at Giza, which was built about 4,500 years ago for King Khufu. The Great Pyramid is 147 meters (482 ft.) tall and contains about 2,300,000 blocks of stone.



The Sphinx watches over the pyramids and other structures at Giza.

The Great Pyramid at Giza is part of a complex of pyramids built by King Khufu, his son Khafre, and grandson Menkaure. Their pyramids are surrounded by other pyramids for their queens, as well as stone **mastabas**—tombs made of mud bricks—for the rest of the royal family and members of the court. The Sphinx, a limestone statue with the face of a king and the body of a lion, guards the entire site. The Sphinx represents the Sun god.

All of the ancient Egyptian pyramids have had their treasures looted. Very few tombs have been left undisturbed. The only intact burial of an Egyptian king ever found is that of King Tutankhamun. His tomb, in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, was built underground, rather than inside a pyramid. Because it was found intact, it has helped archaeologists to learn a great deal about the culture of ancient Egypt.



Archaeologist Howard Carter (left) examines the coffin of King Tutankhamun, which he discovered in 1922.

Pyramids in Other Lands

Pyramids were also built in the Americas. They were first built in Central America and in northwestern South America, but soon the practice of building pyramids spread to North America as well. Several of the New World cultures that built pyramids are mentioned below.

The Mayan people and other cultures in Central America built stepped pyramids. These pyramids had stairways decorated with sculptures and inscriptions that led to temples at the top. Sometimes, but not always, these pyramids contained the tombs of kings. One of the most famous Mayan pyramids is Chichén Itzá. Rebuilt over an earlier pyramid, the current one was built just before AD 1100. The earlier one, built 100 years before,



Locations of pyramids in the New World



Chichén Itzá, the most famous Mayan pyramid

contained a stone sculpture of a jaguar that was painted red and had eyes made of jade. The jaguar, a Mayan symbol of the Earth's fertility, was worshipped as a god.

The Aztecs, another Central American culture, built the Great Pyramid Temple, most likely in the 1300s, in their capital city of Tenochtitlán, on an island in Lake Texcoco in southcentral Mexico. The Aztecs believed that the Sun god needed blood from human hearts to stay strong. Without human blood, the Sun would die and the world would come to an end. Human sacrifices of prisoners taken in war were a regular part of Aztec life, and these sacrifices took place at the Great Pyramid Temple.

Cultures in northwestern South America also built flat-topped, stepped pyramids. The Moche people, who flourished between 100 BC and AD 800, built the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. About 600 to 700 years later, the Inca people built pyramids. The Temple of the Sun was the most sacred shrine in the Incan empire. It contained a huge gold disk that symbolized the Sun god. The Incas believed that their rulers were direct descendants of the Sun.

The pyramid shape has been used in building designs in other cultures around the world. Pyramid designs can be found in parts of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The pyramid shape is used in modern architecture in many countries, including France, England, and the United States. A modern pyramid was built in Egypt to honor President Anwar Sadat, who was assassinated in 1981.



Pyramid Arena,
Memphis,
Tennessee

Conclusion

Efforts are being made to preserve and protect the pyramids of ancient Egypt, as well as pyramids in other parts of the world. Pollution, urban expansion, tourism, and other problems threaten the pyramids at Giza. The Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza is the only one of the famous “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” that still stands.



Camel rides were outlawed at Giza in 1998 so that visitors could view the famous site with fewer distractions.

All of the pyramids and tombs are wonders worthy of preservation. By studying pyramids, we learn about complex and fascinating ancient cultures and the accomplishments of humans who lived during those times. We also learn how ancient cultures honored their leaders and worshipped their gods.

Explore More

- 1** In the address window, type: *www.google.com*

- 2** Then type: *pyramids*. Click on “Google Search.”
 - Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
 - To explore other links, click the “back” arrow on the top left until you get back to the page with the links that Google found.
 - Then try searching using other words from this Leveled Reader, such as: *mummy, Giza, Egypt, Nile River, hieroglyphics, or Great Pyramid Temple*.

Glossary

embalmer (<i>n.</i>)	a person who treats a dead body with chemicals to keep it from decaying rapidly (p. 15)
endeavor (<i>n.</i>)	an earnest attempt or effort (p. 11)
hieroglyphics (<i>n.</i>)	pictures or symbols representing words, syllables, or sounds, used by the ancient Egyptians and others instead of alphabetical letters (p. 8)
lavish (<i>adj.</i>)	extravagant; very generous (p. 6)
mastaba (<i>n.</i>)	an oblong structure with a flat roof and sloping sides, built over the opening of a mummy chamber or burial pit in ancient Egypt and used as a tomb (p. 17)
mummification (<i>n.</i>)	the process of preserving a dead body that was practiced in ancient Egypt (p. 15)
pharaoh (<i>n.</i>)	the title given to kings in ancient Egypt (p. 5)
quarry (<i>n.</i>)	a place where building stone, marble, or slate is excavated (p. 8)
sarcophagus (<i>n.</i>)	a limestone coffin or tomb, often inscribed and elaborately ornamented (p. 12)
scribe (<i>n.</i>)	a professional penman who recorded information (p. 8)

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