

The Great Pyramid of Giza

At first it seems to be a ragged thing, a shimmering tent hovering over Cairo's western suburbs. Then as you approach, you realize that the Great Pyramid is the foremost of a row of three, lined up behind each other on the Giza Plateau, along the desert's edge. Built for the Pharaoh Khafre, the second pyramid in the line seems to be equal to the first, but it is blurred by sand and stone decay, the third imperial jewel made for the Pharaoh Menkaure the son of Khafre, is but half the others' size. The Great pyramid then, the foremost holds the eye. Built within century or so of the invention of the stone block architecture, it is the largest and most accurate stone building in the world, made with such exactitude and aligned with such precision to the movements of the star that only modern optical surveying equipment has detected any errors in its ancient stones. This pyramid has shimmered in the world's imagination since the days of its creation. To Europe and the West it was an archetypal symbol of forgotten wisdoms standing at the edge of the known world, a thing so ancient and so perfect that it seemed, like God himself, to measure out both time and space. A travelling Oxford professor said 'is no more arbitrary or fictitious than the notion of a cube or tetrahedron or any other of the regular bodies in Geometry.' So when his friend Isaac Newton attempted to find a numerical model of the universe it was quite natural that he should have first compared the 'dimensions of the Greatest Pyramid'.

Only the Arab dictum that 'Everything fears time, but time fears the pyramids' betrays something akin to the awe more easily expressed from a distance in the West. Thanks to this pious reticence even the Bible never mentioned pyramids, the Great Pyramid and most of Giza's other ancient monuments still stand up straight and sharp and true, despite the superficial depredations of the medieval stone robbers. For millennia, however, the only written history of the mysterious structure was to be found in the writings of the ancient Greek and Roman tourists, and the remnants of the alchemical and hermetic literatures of ancient Alexandria.

At sunrise sometimes, the old iron survey post upon its summit casts its thin shadow high into the mist; it seems as if it was hitched to heaven by a spinning thread. Later in the day, rippling inside a mirage of warm air, it trembles as if it was alive, as if its 5 million tons of stone were floating just above the ground. On moonless nights, when the floodlights have been dulled, all that remains is barely a perceptible warmth upon the cheek coming from the daytime heat that is held within its stones and a great black triangle that blots out half the stars within the sky. This strange old building was made four and a half millennia ago in the reign of Khufu, the king of Egypt, called Cheops by the Greeks, long sealed chambers deep inside the pyramid still hold the scribbling of some of the royal work gangs, and they name Khufu as their king. Standard tests on fragments of Reed and Charcoal extracted from the mortar set between the Pyramid's stones have dated their origins to the middle of the third millennia BC. When Khufu ruled, while yet more recent work has shown that the Great Pyramid was orientated so accurately to the stars that it holds its birthday in its stones, a stellar alignment having pinned down the setting of its baselines to around 2478 BC.

Q. Write the meanings of the following words in the spaces provided.

a. archetypal _____

b. fictitious _____

c. reticence _____

d. depredation _____

e. perceptible _____

f. hermetic _____

Q. Answer the following questions based on the text 'The Great Pyramids of Giza'.

a. How does the writer describe the pyramids of Giza?

b. What is said about the precision of the pyramids?

c. Is there much written about the pyramids of Giza? When did it first appear in literature?

d. Explain why Isaac Newton thought it would be best to compare the measurement of the pyramids for a numerical model of the universe?

e. How does the writer describe the view at sunrise and on moonless nights?

f. What do the standard tests tell us about the pyramids?

g. What in your opinion is the most intriguing quality of the pyramids of Giza?
