

Pyramids and the Sphinx in Ancient Egypt

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You never see a U- Haul behind a hearse, Ryder.
 The Egyptians tried it. It doesn't work.
 You can't take the money with you. / Ryder?
 You can't take the money with you

In most religions when a person dies he / she has to make the long journey alone – without family, friends or possessions. Ancient Egyptians were however different and what we witness today are memorials they built for their dear departed, particularly members of their royal family. The first to build entirely in stone was Pharaoh Djoser's architect Imhotep. He lived during the time of the Old Kingdom which started around 2780 BC to 2181 BC. Stone architecture arose from the desire to build 'eternal homes', first for kings, then for high functionaries. Djoser was the first pharaoh to bear the title of *Golden Horus*: the flesh of the pharaohs is golden like that of the deities. For such a king, an eternal home was a necessity to his eternal life.

Pharaohs believed that they became gods in the afterlife, so their tombs had to be very grand. These pyramid tombs represents the mound of earth that rose out of the dark ocean at the beginning of time, from which the creator god *Re* emerged. As far the great size of many of the pyramids in Egypt, we can really only surmise that the Pharaohs were making a statement about their own power and perhaps, about the glory and strength of their country. However, it should also be remembered that many of the latter pyramids were not nearly as large as the Great Pyramids at Giza.

The task of transforming (with stone, a durable material) the palace of the living king into a grand palace for the deceased king fell upon Imhotep, a brilliant architect. He created the first royal tomb in the shape of a pyramid. Imhotep built his greatest opus on the Saqqara plateau at the edge of the desert near Memphis.

The immense funerary complex in white limestone includes: the first Egyptian step pyramid, conceived as a superposition of six mastabas of diminishing dimensions above a set of underground funerary chambers and galleries; a mastab functioning

as a second tomb, with an underground pink granite funerary chamber without a *sarcophagus*; rows of chapels, sanctuaries, and houses around a vast court; a colonnaded entrance; and a wall surrounding the entire complex with fourteen false doors.

The architecture is essentially symbolic. The majority of the buildings in the complex were meant to play a magical role. Artificial decorative elements abound: false doors and windows, false beams simulated fences, stone curtains and mural panels imitating the reed wall paper found in houses and decorated with blue tiles. Inside the chambers, a variety of objects were found: numerous vases in stone, alabaster and rock crystal depicting the king; bas reliefs; stone crockery including cups, bowls, and plates; and the friezes of djed pillars symbolizing the kings' stability.

The architecture of the step pyramid, formed of mastabas piled in an ascending order, reflects the growing importance of the solar theology of Heliopolis, where Imhotep was high priest.

The steps are the symbolic ladder that allows the kings' heavenly ascension. In effect, it was the Kings' privilege to have a solar destiny following his death. The deceased sovereign climbed to heaven to rejoin Re – or according to other formulations, he took flight in the form of a falcon or a scarab-beetle. In the skies, he was received triumphantly by the sun god.

The sarcophagus chamber – the true tomb of the king meant to house his mummy – was cut into the stone under the pyramid. Mummification preserved the body from destruction. At first only the kings and persons of royal blood were embalmed. The embalming technique was very thorough, the body was entirely emptied, cleaned and stuffed with aromatic spices, were put aside in vases called canopic jars. Then the body was plunged into a vat full of natron, where it stayed for seventy days.

Once the desiccation was achieved, the embalmers washed the body with perfumed oils and swathed it with resin-soaked linen strips. All these procedures were accompanied by prayers and litanies recited by priests, who sometimes wore the masks of Anubis the jackal god and guardian of the necropolis. In later times, mummification was extended to everyone. Many different classes of embalming were available, and the costs varied accordingly.

The sarcophagus chamber was surrounded by funerary halls full of offerings. A little room, the serdab, contained the statue of Djoser, the putative incarnation of the pharaohs "ka", a kind of spiritual double or vital force that remained lively after death.

The Egyptians called the deceased "he who has passed into his 'ka' or he who has rejoined his "akh" (the principle of a celestial spirit). The "ka" of the deceased remained inside the tomb, walking about the funerary halls and tasting the gathered offerings. The soul, or "ba", of the deceased left his body in the form of a bird and roamed.

According to Anders Bettum, Egyptologist at the University of Oslo, the Egyptian elite was buried in a coffin placed inside another coffin in ensembles of up to eight coffins. It was intended to transform the deceased from human to deity. Everybody knows the ancient Egyptian practice of mummifying their dead. What is perhaps less known is that they placed the mummies inside layer upon layer of coffins.

The child king Tutankhamun was buried in as many as eight coffins, according to Bettum. "For men and women who were members of the ancient Egyptian elite at that time, three or four coffins were not unusual", he adds.

Linking the dead to the gods.

"They also played a key role in the process that would link the deceased to their ancestors: to Osiris, the god of the afterlife, and to Amun-Ra, the sun and creator god, Bettum says.

The rituals and the myths that were reiterated during the seventy days that a funeral lasted are symbolically rendered on the coffins. The components of each nest, including the mummy cover, the inner and outer coffins reflect the Egyptians view of the world.

The decorations, the forms and the choice of materials signify a unification of the two myths about Osiris and Amun-Ra respectively. On the outer coffin, the deceased is portrayed as Osiris, with a mummified body, a blue striped wig and a pale, solemn face. The coffin is painted yellow and varnished, and must have shone like gold. The very richest Egyptians did in fact use gold leaf on their coffins".

“The choice of colour is not coincidental: it represents the light and its origin in the sun. That, the figure of Osiris being bathed in sunlight can, in my mind, only mean one thing. The decoration invokes a well-known mythical image: when the sun god arrives in the throne hall of Osiris in the 6th hour of the night and the two deities join in mystical union. According to the Egyptians, this union was the source of all regeneration in nature, and it was here, at the centre of this catalyst of life that the deceased wanted to be placed for all eternity”. (*Mumbai Mirror Bureau mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com TWEET @_MumbaiMirror*)

The Giza Pyramids

The three massive pyramids erected on the Giza plateau at the threshold of the western desert (realm of the dead and the setting sun) bear witness to a veritable golden age for Egypt, a time when the country was rich and powerful.

The pyramidions, pointing heavenward and covered in fine gold, symbolized petrified sun rays, a means of communication between earth and heaven which the deceased kings travelled in order to rejoin the sun god Re.

Since Antiquity, various legends have sprouted around the pyramids and the pharaohs who erected them. Herodotus claimed the pharaohs were accursed and that the Egyptians detested them. He let himself be persuaded that Cheops sold his daughter into prostitution so as to obtain the large amounts of money needed to build his pyramid. Cheops and Chephren, it was claimed closed the temples, forbade sacrifices, and oppressed the populace, forcing thousands of people to work relentlessly – and in the worst possible conditions –in order to erect their pyramids.

These edifices are the collective accomplishment of a nation moved by faith, similar to what motivated the builders of cathedrals in the Middle Ages. The people who erected them stone by stone with techniques that seem rudimentary to us, gathered their energies to build a ladder towards heaven.

By contributing to the glorious destiny of their king, the people linked themselves to his solar transformation, hoping that they would be drawn along into a collective celestial afterlife. The pyramids bear witness to an ideal connected with the growth of Heliopolis.

The Egyptian Sphinx

Carved from the bedrock of the Giza plateau, the Sphinx is truly a mysterious marvel from the days of ancient Egypt. Facing the rising sun the Giza Sphinx represents a crouching lion with a human head whose face resembles that of King Chephren. Considered a symbol of the god Harmakhis, the *Horus of the Horizon*, it was meant to guard the royal necropolis. In between the paws of the Sphinx is a stela, now called the “Dream Stela”, a story is inscribed. The 18th Dynasty story tells of the time when Thutmosis IV fell asleep under the Sphinx which was covered to the neck in sand. Thutmosis had a dream that the Sphinx spoke to him and promised that if he would free the Sphinx from the sand, Thutmosis would be destined to become king of Egypt. During the 18th Dynasty, Thutmosis IV probably did clear the Sphinx at that time. But it is more likely that the story about the dream was created for political purposes, an ancient propaganda story to help prove the legitimacy of the king. This type of story could support the validity of a kingship, asserting and assuring the power of the pharaoh as designated by the gods, or in this case, the Sphinx itself. (Guardian’s Sphinx - Text and Photos Copyright © 1995-2005 Andrew Bayuk (<http://www.guardians.net/egypt/sphinx/>))

The Phoenix.

The story of the phoenix begins in ancient Egyptian mythology and was later developed in the Phoenician, Indian and Greek traditions. The phoenix is said to be a sacred firebird with beautiful feathers of gold and red or purple and blue. It is said to live for 500-1,000 years and it then builds itself a nest of myrrh twigs. The nest of myrrh and the phoenix burn fiercely until they are reduced to ashes. Myrrh is a resinous sap that releases heavy, bitter-smelling smoke when ignited. Myrrh was used by the ancient Egyptians to embalm the dead and was also burned as a religious sacrifice. Historically, myrrh has often been worth more than its weight in gold.

The Phoenix as a Symbol of Rebirth

After this purification, a phoenix egg or a young bird appears, renewing the life cycle of the bird and making the phoenix virtually immortal and invincible. The phoenix also has the ability to regenerate itself when wounded. In the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the phoenix is a stork-like bird called the “benu”. In other Egyptian

texts, the phoenix is associated with Heliopolis, the city of the sun, and the Egyptian sun-god Ra.

These are the many myths that one associates with the Egyptians. We know a lot about the ancient Egyptians largely because they buried so many artefacts with them for use in the after life. As a result, their tombs reveal an enormous amount of information from which archaeologists have been able to piece together a detailed picture of their daily life. Moreover, Egypt's hot and dry climate is ideal for preserving these ancient sights and artefacts.

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