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**Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Temples and Tombs**

Maissa Cholkamy

We all have studied Egypt’s ancient civilization at school, therefore, I am not going to introduce my country to you. Here in Korea, when I tell people that I come from Egypt, they spontaneously say: Pyramids and Sphinx !

One has to admit that these are the most famous monuments in the world since the pyramids are considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world .

When, why ,how and for whom were they built? This is what I am going to explain without bothering you with too many details as this topic is really wide.

I will also talk about the other types of tombs and the various kinds of temples and my lecture will be accompanied by some explanatory slides to help you imagine, if you have not been to Egypt, how beautiful these monuments are and maybe you will be encouraged to go and see them yourself.

First let tell you very briefly something about Egypt’s ancient history.

Our History begins around the year 3200 B.C. with the unification of Egypt during the reign of a king called Mina who unified the north and the south under one crown, the double crown.

It has been divided by modern historians into three main Kingdoms:

1. The Old Kingdom which started in the year 2700 B.C.

2. The Middle Kingdom which started in 2000 B.C.

3. The New Kingdom which started in 1500 B.C.

Between these three kingdoms there were two intermediate periods also called the Dark Periods, during which trouble and revolutions prevailed in the country.

Note: The following paper appears in the Transactions, because the RAS had the opportunity to hear a lecture on Egypt in which members were interested and which was given by a highly competent and interesting speaker. We wish to share that lecture with our members who were not at the lecture.

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The New Kingdom was followed by what we call the Late Epoch during which Egypt was occupied by many foreign peoples like the Assyrians, the Nubians, and the Persians.

In 332 B.C. came Alexander the Great who founded the city of Alexandria and then left Egypt to the Ptolemes, the ancestors of Cleopatra. In 30 B.C. came the Romans who ruled Egypt until the arrival of the Arabs in 640 A.D.

All the kings or pharaohs of ancient Egypt have been grouped by a historian called Manetho, who lived during the Greek Period, into thirty dynasties. The Old Kingdom lasted from the 3rd to the 6th century the Middle Kingdom the 11th and the 12th, and the New Kingdom from the 18th to the 20th dynas- ties. All the other dynasties were during the Intermediate or Dark Periods.

The word pharaoh I have used, is derived from an ancient Egyptian word FER meaning the great house. It was used to designate the King.

These Pharaohs left us tremendous quantities of antiquitities which are still admired by the modern world. I will concentrate only on their tombs and the magnificent temples they left us.

As a general rule all the tombs were built on the western bank of the Nile because when the ancient Egyptians saw the sun setting behind the western mountains, they thought that the other world was there and when someone died they used to say, “He went to the west.”

During the Predynastic Period, the deceased was wrapped in a reed mat and buried with some of his personal belongings in a rectangular pit dug in the sand, and he was laid on his side in a contracted position like an embryo.

Because the wind blew the sand which covered the pit, the body was of course exposed and destroyed. As a solution, the Mastaba was introduced at the beginning of the Old Kingdom.

Mastaba is an Arabic word which means “bench.” It was called so by the modern Egyptians who noticed that these tombs resembled the benches located in front of the houses of Egyptian peasants. The first mastabas were made of mud bricks and covered the funerary chamber which was usually located at the bottom of a very deep pit.

As time passed, the brick construction developed into an imitation of the deceased’s house with various rooms and corridors, all decorated with reliefs representing scenes from the deceased’s daily life.

All that the deceased loved to do during his life was represented on the walls of his mastaba. The mastaba could contain as much as 32 rooms like the one built for Mereruka, the son-in-law and Vizir of King Teti of the 6th Dynasty. You can see him in his bedroom with his wife playing the harp or among his goldsmiths watching them make his jewelry or supervising the [page 47] peasants while they cultivated his land.

In the year 2700 B.C. King Zozer the first king of the Old Kingdom, ordered his architect, Imhotep, to build him a very impressive tomb which would impress his people and the generations to come. Imhotep started by building a huge mastaba which he surrounded with a 10 meter high wall. Noticing that the wall was higher than the tomb, he decided to elevate it by covering it with a limestone casing. At the last moment, the King asked him to include a few galleries where the members of his family would be buried after their deaths.

Finding the tomb too small, Imhotep decided to enlarge it and added another casing. It was only then that was born in his imagination the idea of building a huge staircase which would facilitate the ascension of his King’s soul to its father the sun god RA. He therefore enlarged it another time and added five steps to the original mastaba.

The importance of this pyramid does not come only from the fact that it is the first pyramid in the history of Egypt, but also from the fact that it is the first stone construction in our history. Before Imhotep, the Egyptians used either bricks or wood but never stones.

Next came the Pyramid of Medium, the steps of which were, for an unknown reason, filled with stones to create a true pyramid with a smooth facing. It became a fashion, which was followed by all the Kings of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, and until now we have discovered ninety six pyramids, and we are sure some are still undiscovered.

The pyramid built by King Cheops of the 4th Dynasty around 2600 B.C. is by far the most famous one. It is even considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was built in twenty years by 100,000 workers who worked only. during summer when the Nile flooded and covered the valley with its waters. The peasants were then recruited to build the King’s tomb.

It was built with two and half million blocks of limestone cut on the spot and weighing between 2.5 and 15 tons each. The pyramid was then covered with a smooth facing cut in the quarries of Turah on the eastern bank of the Nile. Two pits were discovered near this pyramid. They contained two dismantled wooden boats which the King would ride during his eternal trip with the Sun god

How were the Pyramids built? This is still an enigma! As the Egyptians never revealed this secret, every now and then someone comes up with a new theory.

Logically two different methods could have been used: [page 48]

1. A long ramp, slightly sloped, made of rubble held together with Nile mud, might have been built from the ground to the desired level to allow the workers to pull the blocks to the specified height. This method might have been used for small pyramids.

2. The second method used four ramps starting at each corner of the pyramid and rising gradually along the side of the unfinished steps. At the end of each level the ramps were extended by workers whose only job was to build and maintain them.

When they reached the desired height, the ramps were removed and the steps were finished with the smooth casing.

It was King Tuthmosis I of the 18th Dynasty New Kingdom around 1500 B.C., who decided to change the tradition of being buried in a pyramid. When he noticed that the tombs of his predecessors were all plundered, he chose a natural pyramid in the Western Mountains of Thebes where he and his successors would be buried. The royal tomb and its burial chamber system of the New Kingdom was dramatically changed from those of the pyramids of the earlier kingdoms. New theological concepts had complicated the fate of the king. New religious texts were composed and drawn upon the walls of the tombs. The simple rows of blue hieroglyphs which decorated the pyramids were replaced by elaborately detailed wall-texts and scenes of great beauty.

These tombs of the valley are covered with scenes representing the journey of the bark and the daily revival of the king each morning without ending, the eternal rhythm of the sun! These scenes were all extracted from the Book of the Dead which is considered a guide book which told the deceased king about the dangers he would encounter during his trip to the other world and showed him how he could avoid them.

The ancient Egyptians used for their paintings vegetable and mineral colors. Carbon made of burnt bone was used for black, ochre for red, very pure chalk for white. The colors were finely ground and mixed with either water, beeswax, eggwhite, or animal glue.

All the tombs of the Valley of the Kings had been visited by tomb robbers except the tomb of Tut Ankh Amon, discovered in 1922 by the British archeologist Howard Carter

This is what he wrote of that day, “It was the day of days, the most wonderful that I have ever lived through.”Then he says after having made a hole in the corner of the door, “At first I could see nothing, but presently as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues and gold! Everywhere the glint of gold! For the moment, I was struck dumb with amazement and when Lord [page 49] Carnarvon inquired anxiously “Can you see anything?” It was all I could do, to get out the words, “Yes wonderful things!”

If the kings were buried in such magnificent tombs, what about the common people? These were buried in a pit with some of their belongings or, if they were very poor, in a common grave.

As for the workers who were employed in the construction of the royal tombs, they lived in a settlement close to the tombs and during their day off, they decorated their own tombs. At Deir El Medina in Luxor we have beautiful examples of such tombs.

The nobles also had their valley close to the king’s but their tombs were decorated like the mastabas of the Old Kingdom, which means with scenes of everyday life and some religious themes.

During the New Kingdom, the Queens and Princes were buried in a separated valley called Set Neferu which means ‘the beautiful place.’

When Imhotep built the Step Pyramid for his King, he enclosed within its walls the funerary temple in which the King was mummified. Later on, his successors built the same kind of temple very close to the Nile and called it the Valley Temple. Then they added a second temple where prayers were said for the King’s soul before and after the burial in the pyramid.

This kind of funerary temple did not suit the taste of the kings of the New Kingdom who ordered the construction of gigantic temples on the West Bank of the Nile, very close to their tombs in the Valley, where the priests could live and perform the funerary rites for the king’s soul. As an example of this we have the Ramesseum built by Ramses II, medinet Habu by Ramses III and the Valley Temple of Queen Hatchepsut.

If we leave the King and his soul and turn to the gods, we find that the ancient Egyptians built a temple for each of their deities.

In the City of On, the actual Heliopolis, and in Abu Sir near Giza we find temples dedicated to the sun god RA. In Denderah and Edfu we find the beautiful, almost identical, temples of the couple Horus and Hathor; in Philae, the temple of the goddess Isis, the wife of Osiris; in Kom Ombo, the temple of Sobek the crocodile; in Abydos the temple of Osiris, god of the dead. The most magnificent temples were, however, those built for the god Amon. the god of gods. The best examples are Karnak, Luxor and Abu Simbel.

None of the temples was used as a place of worshiping. In fact worshippers were not allowed in the temple, which was considered the earthly or terrestrial residence of the god where he lived and where his servants, the [page 50] priests, served him.

Only the Great or First Prophet had access to the Sanctuary, but who was

he and how was he nominated? According to the ancient Egyptians, the king was the son of the god and his representative on earth, so he had to be present during the performance of the daily rituals. As he could not be present in all the temples at the same time, he nominated someone to replace him and this person was called the First Prophet. Every morning he opened the habits, the sanctuary which contained the statue of the god, washed, perfumed, incensed and dressed it then fed it, symbolically of course.

The high priests of Amon attained a very high position due to the fact that the temple they governed was by far the largest and richest in Egypt.

All the priests were called Wab which means pure. There were three types of clergy:

1. the Upper Clergy which took care of the god, his clothes, the offerings,

2. the Inferior Clergy who took care of the Temple as a whole,

3. and the specialists who were the scribes, the physicians, the musicians, and the astrologists.

It is said that during the reign of King Ramses III, the Temple of Karnak had 82,000 people at its service. These included of course the peasants who cultivated the land donated to the temple by the king.

As an example of the royal gifts donated by this same king during the thirty one years of his reign to Amon:

1. 86,000 slaves.

2. 420,000 heads of cattle.

3. 900,000 plots of land.

4. 433 vineyards.

5. 9 foreign knows.

For a lively and joyful people like the Egyptians, any occasion was good to celebrate, and where could it be better than at the temple? In the case of Karnak and Luxor, once a year, during the 2nd and 3rd months of the inundation season, a long religious festival was held, during which the statue of Amon, escorted by a long procession of priests, musicians, dancers, drum and flag bearers, was taken by boat to Luxor Temple where it stayed two weeks. Then it was returned to Karnak with another procession, but this time through the Sphinx Alley which linked the two temples (3 Km).

During the Feast of the Nice Encounter, goddess Hathor left her sanctu- [page 51] ary at Denderah and came to visit her husband Horus at Edfu. At Abydos, the resurrection of the god Osiris was celebrated annually. Beside these feasts, the birthday of the ruling king was celebrated in all the temples of Egypt. For such occasions, the nobles were allowed in the temple but only as far as the Hypostile Hall. The common people could watch from outside and were given a lot of food and drink.

If, however, they were not allowed to enter the temple, where did the common people worship? They worshiped at home and sometimes made the furthermost room of their house into a little chapel where they placed a little image of the god.

As for the architecture of the temple, a typical Egyptian temple is composed of a Sphinxes Alley which led to the Pylon or monumental gate to an open courtyard, a hypostile hall, a gigantic hall supported by pillars, and of course a shrine inside which was a richly adorned bark containing the figure of the god which was perhaps two feet high. It was this bark which was carried round in procession on great festivals, but why a bark? Because the Egyptian idea of travelling was always by Nile boat; the god would, therefore, according to them, require a Nile boat to go from place to place.

The pylons were painted and there were two obelisks and high flag- staves intended to impress the visitor with the sanctity of the place he was about to enter. The decoration of the temple was purely religious. The walls and pillars were covered from top to bottom with representations of the gods.