



Who built the pyramids?

KS2

KS3

Ages 7-14 ⌚ 4 min read

The Great Pyramid of Giza, built around 2560 BC for the Pharaoh Khufu, stands 138 metres tall (originally 146m — the casing stones are gone), contains an estimated 2.3 million blocks of stone averaging 2.5 tonnes each, and was the tallest man-made structure on Earth for nearly 4,000 years. It was built by ancient Egyptians, and we know quite a lot about how.

Not slaves — workers

The popular image of pyramid-building involves tens of thousands of enslaved people being whipped into labour. Archaeological evidence tells a very different story. In 1990, a complex of workers' tombs was discovered near Giza. The workers were buried with respect — not in mass graves but in individual tombs with offerings, which was a sign of honour in ancient Egypt. Their skeletons show signs of hard physical labour but also of medical care — evidence of healed bone breaks and surgical interventions. These were permanent, organised, fed, and respected workers.

Building the Great Pyramid required an extraordinary logistics operation. An estimated 20,000–30,000 workers needed to be housed, fed, equipped, managed, and coordinated. Archaeological evidence shows large bakeries capable of feeding thousands, breweries (workers were paid partly in beer — a nutritious, safe-to-drink liquid when the water supply was uncertain), and administrative records tracking work gangs. The pyramid is as much a triumph of organisation and supply chain management as it is of engineering.

How did they move the stones?

The limestone blocks came largely from quarries just south of Giza. Heavier granite blocks (used inside the pyramid) came from Aswan, 800km away, transported on the Nile. A 2014 discovery of a workers' diary confirms stone was transported on wooden sledges with water poured in front to reduce friction. Ramps — internal, external, or spiral — were used to raise blocks into position. The exact ramp system is still debated, but the principle is well understood.

Why build pyramids at all?

Egyptian religion held that the pharaoh was a divine being — a god-king whose successful afterlife was essential to the continued order of the universe. The pyramid was both a tomb and a machine for ensuring that afterlife: elaborate burial chambers, magical texts, and enormous resources were devoted to protecting the pharaoh's body and enabling his resurrection. The pyramid shape itself may symbolise the primordial mound of creation in Egyptian cosmology, or the rays of the sun descending to earth.