Name: _____

Date: _____

THE PYRAMIDS

The ancient Egyptian people believed the powerful sun and the mysterious Nile River were gifts from their gods. They considered their pharaoh a person and a god, descended from the same gods that gave their land great wealth. The Egyptians believed their pharaoh had to make a successful journey to the afterlife to continue providing Egypt with the sun and the river. For that to happen, the pharaoh's body had to remain intact and on Egyptian land. They built their pyramids as elaborate tombs to protect the pharaoh on his journey.

The Pharaohs and the Afterlife

The Egyptians buried their pharaohs with food and the ruler's most treasured possessions. They did not believe the pharaoh would use these objects, but that their spiritual essence would comfort the pharaoh as he traveled on a difficult journey through the underworld to reach his destination in the afterlife.

Early Burials

The early pharaohs were buried in the Egyptian sand, but their bodies were easy prey for jackals. Jackals are wolf-like creatures that prowl the desert for decayed flesh. The Egyptians learned to protect the bodies of the pharaohs by surrounding their graves with mud pits. Archaeologists found bodies buried during this period – about 3400 BCE – that were largely intact. The dry sand preserved the bodies even better than the elaborate techniques the Egyptians later used.

Mastabas

The tombs of the early pharaohs were covered with a mud brick slab called a mastaba. A mastaba was a visible marker of the burial place where Egyptians could pay their respects to their departed ruler. The mastaba also protected the pharaoh's body from jackals.

Imhotep Builds a Step Pyramid

Imhotep was a brilliant architect who built an elaborate monument for his pharaoh, Zoser, more than 4,600 years ago. Imhotep placed six mastabas over Zoser's tomb. Each mastaba was smaller than the one below it. He then covered them with polished white limestone. The result was the Step Pyramid of Zoser, which rose to 203 feet.

Egyptian pharaohs ordered the construction of pyramids from the time of Zoser until about 1700 BCE. Most pyramids were built as tombs for the pharaohs, though sometimes a close advisor was honored with a burial in one. Archaeologists have so far identified at least 118 pyramids, though other pyramids may have been destroyed or remain hidden beneath the desert sand.

The Great Pyramid at Giza

The Great Pyramid at Giza is the largest of the Egyptian pyramids, standing almost 500 feet tall, covering an area nearly the size of ten football fields, and built of more than two million stones. The largest stones weigh 160,000 pounds and had to be transported more than 500 miles to Giza. Historians estimate that it took more than 25,000 workers over twenty years to build the Great Pyramid.

The ancient Egyptians did not have large animals to haul the massive stones, and at the time the Great Pyramid was built, they had not yet invented iron tools. The huge blocks were cut from a quarry using copper chisels and dragged across the desert in great sleds. The weight of the stones would have stranded wheeled vehicles in the sand. The workers were probably Egyptian farmers who were idle during the season when their farmland was flooded by the Nile River.

The End of the Pyramid-Building Era

It appears pharaohs stopped ordering significant pyramids after about 1700 BCE. The tombs were difficult to police; often, they were robbed even as they were being built. Later pharaohs chose more remote burial places that they believed were harder for thieves to find. They were wrong. Today, little remains of even the most secretive tombs.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Fill in the Blanks

The ancient Egyptians believed the p__a__a__h was both a ruler and a god who had to continue his role after d__a__h. To prepare him for his j__u__n__y to the a__t__r__i__e, they buried him with food and treasured objects. Early graves were simple and left bodies exposed to scavenging j__c__a__s, so Egyptians began building m__s__a__as to protect the dead. I__h__t__p stacked mastabas to create the first s_____ pyramid. The Egyptians constructed the pyramids without the use of large a__i__a__s or i_____ tools. They dragged some stones more than _____ miles in large s__e__s. The era of the pyramids ended when pharaohs chose more secret burial places to avoid *t__e__v__s.

Answer in complete sentences

*1. If you shared the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, what objects would you take with you to the afterlife? Explain why you chose these items.

2. Answer either question or both. You may use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.
   a. Ask a parent what they would take with them on a journey to the afterlife if they shared the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. Explain to your parent why it was important for the pharaoh to be buried with their most treasured possessions. Your parent is welcome to complete this problem for you.
   b. What would you have taken with you to the Egyptian afterlife when you were five years old?

4. Why did the ancient Egyptians believe it was necessary to bury their pharaohs in elaborate tombs?

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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