The Pyramids
Between Life and Death

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Introduction

The pyramids of Ancient Egypt are some of the most prominent and fascinating topics in worldwide archaeology. They give us many occasions for constant re-evaluation. Scientifically the pyramids have been studied and explored since the expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt at the end of the 18th century AD. The long list of studies, publications and newly added databases is constantly growing.

In May 2012, a group of researchers convened in Uppsala for the Workshop: “The Pyramids: Between Life and Death”. The purpose was to stimulate an exchange between the different research directions dealing with the wide topic of pyramids. The meeting focused on the pyramids of the Old Kingdom.

The idea of setting up a workshop on new pyramid research was brought to attention by Irmgard Hein, during her visiting professorship at Uppsala, in talks with Nils Billing and some other colleagues. Several motifs set the pace for the meeting. The main reason was a request to show the broad spectrum of various application areas dealing with the subject of the pyramids, and at the same time to establish a panel to discuss these issues in a scientific dialogue. On the one hand, there were results recently taken from field research in the pyramid areas, and on the other hand, new interpretations and text studies offered on the pyramid texts. A combination of highly sophisticated results finally led to the development of new insights in understanding the ideological world of the creators of the pyramids.

The meeting was organised in two-day sessions; the first day was devoted to archaeological topics, including the keynote lecture, whereas the second day focused on new interpretations of text programs in the epigraphic pyramids. There were 13 speakers altogether; most of them have contributed their material for this volume.

On the first day of the meeting, Denis Searby gave a presentation on the subject of pyramids during the classical period; he reported views given by Greek and Roman authors on the perception of the pyramids. Text sources from the 5th century BC until Late Antiquity reveal the fascination on the size and construction of the pyramids as understood from the times of antiquity. He also offered negative views, as for example the demonstration of extraordinary opulence of the ancient pharaohs.

The first archaeological contribution came from Peter Jánosi, who analysed various interpretations of the Khafre’s pyramid temple. He compared existing reconstruction models such as those taken from Hölscher, Ricke, or Maragioglio and Rinaldi, and combined the results with the archaeology and the architecture of the building. Interestingly enough, he came to new conclusions, in particular concerning the positioning of the royal statues. Changes in the administrative system from the 4th Dynasty to the 5th Dynasty, based on the finds from Giza and Abusir, was the focus of Miroslav Bártta’s report. He examined the position of the areas chosen for the
monuments and buildings during this period, developing correlations between landscape points taken from large necropolis sites in the expansive area between Giza and Saqqara. Similarly, Jaromír Krejcí discussed the various factors, religious as well as logistic, that made the kings and their officials to choose the area of Abusir, first as the construction site for Userkaf’s sun temple, thereafter to accommodate the principal royal necropolis of the Fifth Dynasty.

Agnese Kukela and Valdis Seglins dealt with pyramid construction. They focussed on a surface analysis of Djoser’s Step Pyramid at Sakkara. A 3D geospatial model was shown, and in so doing, an analysis of the cracks led to a comprehensive interpretation on the stability of the inner structures of the building.

The keynote lecture “The Name and Nature of the Heit el-Ghurab Old Kingdom Site: Workers’ Town, Pyramid Town, and the Port Hypothesis”, given by Mark Lehner, provides an extensive chapter to this book. His study is devoted to the results taken from the fieldwork of the Ancient Egypt Research Associates, AERA project, dealing with the Heit el-Ghurab (Wall of the Crow) settlement in Giza from the 4th Dynasty, and its occupation period. Lehner goes into detail about the layout of the settlement and the divisions of the town, before interpreting the function of the settlement. He suggests that Heit el-Ghurab belonged to a Nile port, which served as an economic and administrative center of its crews. This can be deduced from seal impressions and argued on the base of official titles.

The second day of the workshop was devoted to issues concerning text and location. Through investigating the pyramid texts from different perspectives such as schemes, spatiality, original program(s), and discourse, all authors exemplify the uniqueness of every corpus of the pyramids. Catherine Berger-el Naggar compared the selection of pyramid texts located on the East wall of Behenu’s burial chamber with those on the same wall of the other queen-pyramids: Ankhnespepy II, Neith, Iput II, and Udjebten. Her results testify to the great variety in the scheme and choice of the formulas that make an individual edition of each pyramid indispensable for future research. Correspondingly, Nils Billing pointed out how one single pyramid corpus can expose distinct and recurring patterns of decoration in clear reference to the spatial configuration of the tomb. In the pyramid of Pepy I, he crystallized a ritual and spatial progression, made manifest through the physical presence of the king’s son Horus. The pyramid of Pepy I had originally been provided with a selection of texts which, at a later stage, was partly replaced by new ones. Although this is known to Egyptology since the days of Kurt Sethe, it has only recently attracted any closer investigation. Thus, Roman Gundacker was able to reconstruct parts of the original corpus through a careful study of the traces from earlier texts on the reworked surfaces. His results uncover both differences and consistencies between the two consecutive corpora. The importance in studying the pyramid texts as systems was
further accentuated by Erika Meyer-Dietrich, who detected and sketched the organization of sound-producing acts in reference to the tomb-owner in the pyramid of queen Neith. Finally, Massimiliano Nuzzolo elucidated the Sed festival as one of different factors in the evolution of the Old Kingdom ideology. His point of departure for this ideological development was the constant search for a solution to a crucial issue, namely expressing and actualizing the nature of the king and his relationship with the world of gods (especially the main sun god Ra), in architecture and relief decoration.

Yet another speaker of the meeting was Harold M. Hays, who discussed ways of approaching different genres of discourses in the Old Kingdom society as revealed by the texts produced by different layers in contemporary society. Due to the utterly sad circumstances of his untimely passing in 2013, Harold never had the opportunity to include his contribution in the present volume. We therefore dedicate this volume to his memory and the legacy of his scholarship.

Acknowledgements

Our gratitude for supporting the workshop organization should be addressed to Uppsala University, in particular to the Department of Archaeology, Ancient History, Egyptology and Global Archaeology, in 2012 under the leadership of Gullög Nordquist, and the Department of Theology. Finances have been granted largely from the SALT (Forum for Advanced Studies in Art, Languages and Theology from the disciplinary Domain of Humanities and Social Sciences at Uppsala University), C. E. Gernandt Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundations. Moreover, a meeting can never be prepared without helping hands. Our cordial thanks thus go to Rikke Wulff-Krabbenhöft from the Department for Archaeology, who assisted in the organizational preparations.

For the inclusion of this volume in the BOREAS publication, Uppsala Studies in Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Civilizations der Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, we want to thank the present editor of this series, Gunnel Ekroth, from the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Uppsala. Göran Wallby and his team at the Uppsala University library provided the final print layout of this volume. The printing of the book was sponsored by the funds for Egyptology at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History.
Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the speakers at the workshop involving various scholarly traditions. The stimulating presentations revealing interesting scientific results together with lively discussions during these two days at Uppsala have provided new impulses in developing alternative thought-models about the prevalent ideas and life during the pyramid age.

Irmgard Hein  Nils Billing  Erika Meyer-Dietrich

Uppsala and Vienna, January 2016
I. **Archaeological Studies on the Pyramids**
Greeks and Some Romans on the Pyramids

by

Denis Searby

Abstract

This paper is intended as a straightforward, light-hearted survey of passages in Greek literature dealing with the pyramids from Herodotus to late antiquity; it refers also to various passages in Latin imperial authors. The chief question is: Did the Greeks and Romans view the pyramids differently than we do today? It turns out that fascination for the size and construction of the pyramids is something common to all times, but less so their great antiquity. Scientific interest in the pyramids from mathematicians and engineers is not in evidence among Greek scientific authors, somewhat surprisingly. The pyramids also carried certain negative connotations for Greeks and Romans that are not common today, primarily, connotations of extravagant and useless opulence as well as of tyrannical oppression, though the latter lives on somewhat. The pyramids as a touted tourist attraction remain common to Greek antiquity and our contemporary culture.

I spent last summer in Västmanland in Sweden and had some friends visit me from abroad.1 In the Guide to Västmanland which I happened to have on hand, you could read that the Ironworks in the small town of Engelsberg are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and this, the guide proudly proclaimed, put them on a par with the pyramids of Egypt. We subsequently visited the Ironworks and my friends kept asking, so where are the pyramids?

It is useful to have lists like UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites. It is also good for local tourism. Of course, there was an ancient parallel to the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which was also very good for the local tourism of the time. I refer, of course, to the List of the Seven Wonders of the World. In a papyrus dated to the second century BC, from Abusir el-Melek, we can almost read the heading TA

1 I thank the organizers of the workshop "Pyramids: Between Life and Death", and especially Professor Irmgard Hein, for inviting me both to speak at the workshop and later to submit my paper. I do not know what induced her to invite me, and I am not quite sure what induced me to accept her invitation. I guess I dropped my guard for a few minutes – you could say I dropped my Irmgard guard – and there she was inviting me to talk about a subject of which I have only general knowledge, and there I was accepting. The reader should bear in mind that this lecture was not intended originally for publication but more as a divertissement at the start of the workshop.
EIITA Θ[EAMATA] (the seven wonders) followed by a list in which entries on the pyramids, the Artemision, and the Mausoleum are legible.\(^2\) Exactly which seven wonders were to be included in the list changed slightly over the centuries – the Walls of Babylon came to be exchanged, for instance, for the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, but the Giza Pyramids always had an undisputed place. Thus the list as well as the concept of “seven wonders” dates back to Hellenistic times. A century or two after the papyrus, Diodorus Siculus, author of a “Universal History”, begins his description of the pyramid builders by explicitly impressing on his readers that the pyramids are, of course, numbered among the Seven Wonders of the World. Strabo does this as well later on.

Accordingly the pyramids were a constant point of cultural reference throughout antiquity. If you wanted a really impressive tomb, well, you compared it to the pyramids: this is what the same Diodorus claims was one of the post humus plans of Alexander the Great for his father Philip – a tomb on the scale of the greatest of the pyramids.\(^3\) The Macedonians, however, thought the project would be too expensive, so no funding was allocated. If you wanted to joke about something really big, well, the pyramids might come to mind – as Lycinus asks Adimantus in Lucian’s Navigium: “Well, please remember to bring us back some of those exquisite smoked fish from the Nile, or some myrrh from Canopus, or an ibis from Memphis; – Do you have room for a pyramid on that dreamboat of yours?”\(^4\) Himerius, the late antique sophist, uses the size of the pyramids for rhetorical effect several times, “The meadows of the Hesperides are insignificant in charm, the pyramids are insignificant in size” compared to whatever.\(^5\) Emperor Marcus Aurelius uses the example of the harmoniously fitted stones of the pyramids in speaking about how the events of each person’s life fit harmoniously into that person’s destiny.\(^6\)

So the pyramids were, unsurprisingly, an easy point of reference for the Greeks just as for the writers of my Västmanland guidebook and for all of us. They were big, impressive, well built, and they were among the Seven Wonders of the World! But did the pyramids always carry the same connotations for the Greeks as they do for us? Before I get to the most important Greek author on Egypt and the pyramids, like a

\(^2\) This is in the text Diels called Laterculi Alexandrini (Alexandrine tables) which contains lists of many kinds. See Cohen, 2000, 63–66 on this Hellenistic habit of collecting lists.

\(^3\) Diodorus Siculus 18.4.5. I try to use the Loeb texts and translations throughout this paper as a resource easily available to most people.

\(^4\) Lucian, *Navigium* 15.

\(^5\) Μικροί μὲν εἰς χάριν Ἐσπερίδων λεμόνες, μικραὶ δὲ εἰς μέγεθος πυραμίδες Ἀἴγυπτων, Himerius, Oration 12 line 44 (A protreptic oration to Flavianus). See also oration 19 line 14 where Himerius asks: “What repute would the pyramids have if they were not a spectacle far removed from us?” Translations by Penella.

\(^6\) Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.8.2: οὐδότως γὰρ καὶ συμβαίναντι αὐτὰ ἡμῶν λέγομεν ὡς καὶ τοῖς τετραγώνοις λίθοις ἐν τοῖς τείχεσιν ἢ ἐν ταῖς πυραμίσι συμβαίναν τοῖς τεχνίται λέγοντες, συναρμόζοντας ἄλληλοις.
typical politician, I will spend a relatively large amount of time avoiding the main issues. I will tiptoe through the tulips of Greek literature, plucking references to the pyramids from various genres before I get to the really relevant author, Herodotus.7

You do not need to do a search of all the occurrences of the word “pyramid” in Greek literature from archaic to late antique times in order to guess which textual category claims the most hits. It is, of course, that of mathematics. Archimedes, Euclid, Heron of Alexandria, and others like them, and their commentators, often speak of pyramids though not “the pyramids”, just the geometrical shape. After the mathematical writers comes a related group, the philosophers, especially in the wake of Plato’s description of the geometrically minded demiurge or creator in the Timaeus. In that dialogue, Plato describes the various physical structures necessary for the achievement of the purposes of Intellect, one of which is the pyramid, the “element and seed of fire”.8 Now, the association of the pyramid with fire is something that goes beyond Plato and beyond Greek, so the fact that the Greek word for fire (πῦρ) forms the first part of the word “pyramid” is merely a happy coincidence. The origins of the association of the elements of earth, water, wind, and fire with specific geometrical shapes perhaps lie in Indian philosophy, whence it travelled westward to Greece and eastward to the Chinese and Japanese Buddhists. In Japanese Buddhism, for example, the idea is embodied in the figure of the Japanese stūpa (sotaba) or gorintō.9 The association of the pyramid with fire in the Timaeus reverberates throughout the later history of Platonism.

The passages in mathematical and philosophical writers have, of course, nothing to do with the Egyptian pyramids. My point is bringing them up is to entertain, but also to underline that the pyramid shape itself was vested with a mystical aura due to its mathematical and philosophical implications. It is not only a highly unusual shape for a building; it is a highly significant shape both mathematically and philosophically. In spite of this, none of the neo-Platonic philosophers or theologians or mathematical writers, many of whom lived in Egypt, draw any connections between the symbolic associations and the actual buildings.

The Platonically minded Christian writer Clement of Alexandria, who knew a thing or two about Ancient Egypt, commented on the mathematical aspects of the Ark of the Covenant, noting that “the ark ends in a cubit, narrowing to a cubit from the broad

7 I should perhaps explain that I am not going to discuss Herodotus or other Greek authors within the context of postcolonial theory or still on-going debates about Orientalism. If you want a theoretically informed overview on Herodotus and Egypt, you can do no better than to read Moyer, On the limits of Hellenism. My own approach will be much more modest.
8 Plato, Timaeus 56B.
9 On stupa worship, see Akira. On the four primary elements (mahābhūtas)—earth, water, fire, and air—in Indian religious (primarily Buddhistic) thought, see Skorupski. Harvey discusses the early symbolism of the stupa but does not mention the material elements, unlike the much earlier article by Troup who explains the “elemental stupa” in some detail.
base like a pyramid, the symbol of those who are purified and tested by fire”.10 But Clement never points out a similar symbolism in the pyramids themselves, though he elsewhere remarks: “just as temples are held in reverence, so also are sepulchres, and pyramids, and mausoleums, and labyrinths, which are temples of the dead, as the others are sepulchres of the gods.”11

The pyramid is a symbolically charged shape, but the pyramids themselves did not produce any symbolical interpretation in extant Greek literature. Nor did they evoke much of an imaginative response from Greek poets – mentions of the pyramids occur only in a handful of extant verses over 1500 years of Greek poetry. As far as I know, the earliest listing of the seven wonders – without calling them by that exact name – occurs in a second century BC verse epigram attributed to Antipater in the Greek Anthology: I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the River Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the Colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand’.12 Here the pyramids do not even make it to first place. Antipater wants to emphasize the pre-eminence of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus – “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” as it says in Acts of the Apostles (19.28), which expresses Antipater’s personal preference as well. The one aspect of the pyramids underlined in this epigram is a frequently recurring one: the huge amount of toil it took to build them so big. “These things are so huge. How in the world did they build them?” pretty much sums up a lot the reactions to the pyramids in Greek literature.

The Roman poet Martial also wrote an epigram about the seven wonders of the world along the lines of “Pyramids, Schmyramids. You have just got to see the new Colosseum”. Here is his first epigram in Book I of De Spectaculis: Let not barbaric Memphis tell of the wonder of her pyramids, nor Assyrian toil vaunt its Babylon; let not the soft Ionians be extolled for Trivia’s fane; let the altar wrought of many horns keep hid its Delos; let not Carians exalt to the skies with boundless praise the Mausoleum poised on empty air. All labour yields to Caesar’s Amphitheatre: one work in place of all shall Fame rehearse.13 This is not entirely unlike the strategy of the Guide to Västmanland.

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10 Clement, Stromata 6.11: καὶ εἰς πῆχυν ἄνωθεν συντελεῖται, ἐκ τῆς πλειάδας βάσεως ἀποζυινομένη πυραμίδος τρόπον, ἢ κιβοτός, τῶν δὲ πυρὸς καθαρομένων καὶ δοκιμαζόμενων σύμβολον.
11 Clement, Stromata 4.49.
12 Greek Anthology 9.58.
13 Barbara pyramidum sileat miracula Memphis, Assyrius iactet nec Babylona labor; nec Triviae templo molles laudentur Iones, dissimulet Delon cornibus ara frequens; aere nec vacuo pendentia Mausolea laudibus inmodicis Careis in astra ferant. Omnis Caesareo cedit labor Amphitheatro: unum pro cunctis fama loquentur opus.
By the way, the prose writer Pausanias, the famous second century AD author of a Michelin’s guide to Greece, had a similar reaction. He writes: “The Greeks appear apt to regard with greater wonder foreign sights than sights at home. For whereas distinguished historians have described the Egyptian pyramids with the minutest detail, they have not made even the briefest mention of the treasury of Minyas and the walls of Tiryns, though these are no less marvelous.”14 I mean, see Greece first!

As to the remainder of Greek poetry, there really is very little on the pyramids. The fourth century Church father Gregory of Nazianzus, has an epigram also included in the Greek Anthology (8.177) that similarly brings up the seven wonders of the world only to expand on an eighth wonder. And there are a few other references in other epigrams, the latest of which comes from a medieval Greek writer, George Kedrenos, a historian of the eleventh century, who also has a piece on the Seven Wonders that rates inclusion in the appendix of dedicatory epigrams (no. 352) in the Greek Anthology. It begins: “The so-called seven wonders of the world are these: First the empty insolence (κενόν φρόντισμα) of the pyramids long ago.”

The “empty insolence” of the pyramids is a theme found in different forms in earlier writers. The construction of these enormous monuments to ensure one’s everlasting fame – which was how the Greeks and Romans regarded the aim of building pyramids – this was empty and futile pride. This negative attitude toward the pyramids turns up relatively frequently in authors of the Roman Imperial Age. The essayist Lucian refers offhandedly to “the childish futility of pyramids and mounds and columns, with their short-lived inscriptions” (De luctu 22). In his description of Servius Tullius, an early king of Rome, Dionysius of Halycarnassus says that Servius did “not envy the kings of Egypt for having raised the pyramids at Memphis, or any other prince for whatever monument he might have erected as a display of his riches and of the multitude of workmen at his command. On the contrary, he regarded all these things as trivial and ephemeral and unworthy of serious attention, mere beguilements for the eyes, but no real aids to the conduct of life or to the administration of public affairs ...” (Roman Antiquities, 4.25.3). You see, Romans built for efficiency. Procopius of Caesarea, the last major historian of the ancient world, writing about the buildings of Justinian (2.1.3), declares: “It is not the pyramids which we are about to describe, those celebrated monuments of the rulers of Egypt, on which labour was expended for a useless show, but rather all the fortifications whereby this Emperor preserved the Empire.” Roman Emperors built useful buildings, by gosh! In his work on the Aqueducts (I.17), the first century Latin author Frontinus writes: “With such an array of indispensable structures carrying so many waters, compare, if you will, the idle Pyramids or the useless...!” For Pliny the Elder writing in the same century, “the pyramids rank as a superfluous and foolish

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14 Pausanias, Description of Greece 9.36.
display of wealth on the part of the kings, since it is generally recorded that their motive for building them was to avoid providing funds for their successors or for rivals who wished to plot against them, or else to keep the common folk occupied” (NH 36.75).

The idea of tyrants keeping people busy with building pyramids and other big projects is found already in Aristotle. In his Politics Aristotle writes that “it is a device of tyranny to make the subjects poor, so that a guard may not be kept, and also that the people being busy with their daily affairs may not have leisure to plot against their ruler. Instances of this are the pyramids in Egypt…” Likewise, in a fragment of his work On Crises, Aristotle’s colleague and successor Theophrastus has something very similar to say: “… Dionysius the tyrant … thought he must consume not only the things of other people but also his own, so that no financial resources should be available to conspirators. And the pyramids in Egypt … and all such works seem to have the same or a similar purpose.”

By this time, believe it or not, I have already touched on most of the mentions of the pyramids or at least the kinds of references to them in Greek literature apart from Strabo, Diodorus Siculus and Herodotus. There are some other scattered references, for example, a fragment of the early Stoic philosopher Chrysippus claims that “A single shout inside the Egyptian pyramids gives four or five echoes.” In his dialogue on friendship (Toxaris) Lucian writes “it said that the pyramids in spite of their great height cast no shadow”, reflecting a popular idea. Again, Aristides Aelius has a whole speech about Egypt, but, concerning the pyramids, he only writes that “while we are amazed at the height of the pyramids, we do not know that they have a subterranean counterpart that is quite as large – I repeat what I have heard from the priests.” (My translation). This last formula is exactly the same kind of reference to priestly authority found in Herodotus or Diodorus.

Before I turn to these latter authors, I should, however, mention two other examples from Greek literature. It is a disappointment, to me at least, that none of the great Greek Hellenistic scientists ever wrote a treatise on the pyramids. A possible exception may seem to be the third/second century BC military engineer Philo of Byzantium. A description of the Seven Wonders of the World is attributed to him, but, although the latest translator/editor of the work, Kai Brodersen, claims that this

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15 Theophrastus fragment 128 (from the Suda): ἕοικασί δὲ καὶ αἱ πυραμίδες ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ ὁ τῶν Κυρσελίδων κολοσσῶς καὶ πάντα τὰ τουπά τὴν αὐτήν καὶ παρατέθηκαν ἔχειν διάνους.
16 One late author I have not included here is John the Lydian (Ioannes Lydus). I did not have the time to explore him more but he does have some things to say about the pyramids.
17 My translation of Chrysippus fragment 387 (Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta). The text is anonymously cited in the pseudo-Plutarchan Placita Philosophorum (Moralia 903A).
18 Philo wrote works on engineering similar to Heron. His floruit is around 200 BC.
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attribution is authentic, I have difficulty trusting a Hellenistic date for this rhetorical piece. This is the passage on the pyramids in its entirety:

β’ αι ἐν Μέμφει πυραμίδες
tάς ἐν Μέμφει πυραμίδες κατασκευάσαι μὲν ἀδύνατον, ἱστορήσαι δὲ παράδοξον. ὅρη
gὰρ ὀρεσὶν ἐπιδεδώμητα, καὶ τὰ μεγέθη τῶν τετραπέδων κύβῶν δυσεπινόητον ἔχει
tὴν ἀνάγωγην, ἐκάστου διαποροῦντος τίς βίας τὰ τῆλικαίτα βάρη τῶν ἑργῶν ἐμιχλεύθη. τετραγώνον δὲ τῆς βάσεως ύψοστόσης οἱ μὲν κατώργοις λίθοι τὴν
tθεμελίωσαν ἐχοῦσιν ισομεγέθη τοῖς ὑπεργείοις ὑγεῖς τοῦ κατασκευάσματος ἐκάστου,
καὶ κατ’ ὀλίγον συνάγεται τὸ πᾶν ἑργόν εἰς πυραμίδα καὶ γνώμωνος σχῆμα. καὶ τὸ μὲν
ὕψος ἐστὶν πήχεων τριακοσίων, ἢ δὲ περίμετρος σταδίων ἥξ, σύναρμον δὲ καὶ
kατεξεισμένον τὸ πᾶν ἑργόν, ὡστε δοκεῖν ὅλου τοῦ κατασκευάσματος μίαν εἶναι
πέτρας συμφύασι. ποικίλαι δὲ {καὶ πορφυραὶ} λίθων φύσεις ἀλληλαὶς ἐπιδεδομέναι,
kαὶ τῇ μὲν ἐστὶν ἡ πέτρα λευκή καὶ μαμαρίτης, τῇ δὲ Αἰθιοπικὴ καὶ μέλαινα, καὶ μετὰ
tαύτην ὁ καλούμενος αἰματίτης λίθος, εἴτε ποικίλος καὶ διάχλωρος ἀπὸ τῆς Αραβίας,
ὡς φάσι, κεκοιμισμένος. ἐνίον δ’ υαλιζοῦσιν αἱ χρόαι κυναγηγὴ τὴν φύσιν ἔχουσι,
kαὶ μετὰ τούτους ὡσεὶ μηλοβαρές ἐστίν, ἄλλουν δὲ πορφυρίζει τὸ χρώμα, καὶ τοῖς διὰ
τῶν κογχυλίων θαλασσοβαφούμενοι ἐξομοίονται. πρόσεστι δὲ τῷ μὲν
καταπληκτικῷ τὸ τερτόν, τῷ δὲ θαυμαστῷ τὸ φιλότεχνον, τῷ δὲ πλουσίῳ τὸ
μεγαλεῖον. καὶ τῷ μὲν τῆς ἀναβάσεως μέγεθος ὀδούποριάς ἔχει κόπον, ἢ δ’ ἐπὶ τῆς
κομφρης στάσεις σκοτοῖ τὰς ὅψεις τῶν εἰς τὰ βάθη καταθεωροῦντον. τῆς προσόψεως
tῇ χάριτι τῶν χρωμάτων τὴν πολυτέλειαν τῆς χορηγίας βασιλικὸς πλοῦτος

My translation:

2 The Pyramids in Memphis

The pyramids in Memphis, ah, impossible to build, incredible to describe! They are
mountains built on mountains. From the size of the square stones, it is hard to un-
derstand how they were lifted up. One is perplexed as to what manner of mechanical
force was used to heave up such heavy weights. The pyramid base is quadratical; the
underground stones have a size equal to the aboveground heights of each structure.
The whole building gradually forms a pyramid ending in a point. The height is 300
cubits with a circumference of 6 stades. The whole building is so well fitted together
and smoothly polished that it appears to be made of a single stone. Various {and pur-
ple} kinds of stone are joined together. Here white marble-like stone, there Ethiopian
black. And red haematite, and then variegated and translucent green stone, brought
from Arabia, as they say. The surfaces of some gleam dark-green, and there is quince-
colored and a kind that is purple in tone, quite similar to the purple-dye from shell-
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fish. Add to this the pleasure of amazement and of artistic ingenuity, and the magnificence of riches. The length of the ascent is quite a tiresome walk upwards. If you stand at the top and look down, you get dizzy and cannot see. Royal wealth has added the rich sumptuousness of every expense to the charming colors on display. Let fortune boast in believing it can touch the very stars by extravagant provisions. For, either men ascend to the gods by means of such monuments, or else gods descend to men.

The final minor reference to the pyramids I want to bring up is the story of Thales, who is sometimes called the first Greek philosopher, and of his visit to Egypt which is mentioned several times in Greek literature. For example, Plutarch, in his fictional account of the dinner of the Seven Sages (147A), tells us that the king of Egypt found much to admire in Thales. In particular he was immensely pleased with Thales’ method of measuring the pyramid, because, without asking for any instrument, Thales simply set his walking-stick upright at the edge of the shadow which the pyramid cast, and, two triangles being formed by the intercepting of the sun’s rays, he demonstrated that the height of the pyramid bore the same relation to the length of the stick as the one shadow to the other.

Thales, however, visited Egypt only in legend. In Alan Lloyd’s opinion, stories of Thales visiting Egypt are just like other classical claims of visits to Egypt by early Greek celebrities. These stories are all suspect, he says, and “based on a complex interaction of the post hoc propter hoc fallacy, an exaggerated respect for Egyptian civilization, the Greek taste for a single source from which all things, come and the predilection for simple schematized linear sequences.”

The main Greek descriptions of the pyramids are found in Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily and Strabo. Among other historians writing in Greek, there is, unfortunately, little in the fragments of Manetho’s Aegyptica, and almost nothing in the Roman History of Cassius Dio. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing in Greek, propagated the idea that the Jewish people descending from Joseph and his brothers were compelled by the pharaohs to build the pyramids, among other works, a notion also found in the Greek version of the Jewish Book of Jubilees. By the way, Josephus is our earliest source for quotations of the writings of Manetho. Let’s turn now to Strabo, Diodorus and Herodotus.

Strabo regards the pyramids simply as the tombs of the kings. He does not add much to the descriptions by Herodotus and Diodorus, except for noting a movable stone door at the entrance of the Great Pyramid. He also adds a Cinderella touch to

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19 Lloyd, Intro., 60.
20 Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 2.203. On the Book of Jubilees, see Grintz.
21 Strabo deals with the pyramids in Geographica, 17.1.30–37.
the Greek’s favorite story of the courtesan Rhodopis: when she was bathing an eagle snatched one of her sandals and later dropped it in the lap of the king, who conceived a foot-fetish and sent his men out looking for the woman to whom the sandal belonged. Strabo does claim to have seen the pyramids with his own eyes, and supposed proof of this lies in his reporting a detail not found in the other writers: he was very much struck by the heaps of stone-chips lying in front of the pyramids which he was quite sure were the petrified remains of the food for the workmen who built them.

Diodorus of Sicily is more interesting to us because he appears to have had access to the original works of Hecataeus, one of Herodotus’ own sources. Unlike later writers like Josephus or Plutarch, however, Diodorus did not consult Manetho’s authoritative history of Egypt, and his account of the Pyramids is rather disappointing, strikingly reminiscent of that in Herodotus, although there is some independence. First of all, Diodorus, though he follows Herodotus in his chronology more or less, is aware that there is another tradition. He writes: “The entire construction is of hard stone, which is difficult to work but lasts forever; for though no fewer than a thousand years have elapsed, as they say, to our lifetime, or, as some writers have it, more than three thousand four hundred, the stones remain to this day still preserving their original position and the entire structure undecayed.” Thus, Diodorus prefers to place the pyramid-builders a couple of centuries before Herodotus has them but still 1500 years off. The other tradition that he cites is, however, also way off, a thousand years in the opposite direction. Diodorus also conveys the supernatural impression of the pyramids on the viewer in the following words: “they do not have the appearance of being the handiwork of men but look like a sudden creation, as though they had been made by some god and set down bodily in the surrounding sand.” It’s like, they must have been built by aliens or something.

I have included long quotations from both Strabo and Diodorus in order to highlight the incomparable value of Herodotus. I am not going to say very much about the details, since Herodotus’ account is very familiar to everyone interested in ancient Egypt. Like all the other Greek accounts, Herodotus is so impressed by the buildings themselves that he does not get much beyond the physical description in these passages, despite his great interest in Egyptian customs and culture exhibited elsewhere, and, of course, with his addition of entertaining folklore. We must understand that Herodotus is not only giving us his Greek perspective – this is obvious, we see throughout Book Two how his ethnographical focus is determined by

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22 Diodorus Siculus 1.63. The following quotation is taken from the same chapter.
23 Herodotus deals with the pyramids and their builders in Book Two, primarily chapters 124–135. In my discussion of Book Two, I am much indebted to Alan Lloyd’s own extensive commentary, the most important and thorough commentary on this book in English or perhaps any language, as well as his most recent, briefer commentary in *Asheri et al., 2004.*
Greek interests. At the same time, however, he is also relaying to us contemporary Egyptian information and attitudes. If you are interested in the centuries immediately proceeding the Ptolemaic period, Herodotus is an indispensable source.24

Herodotus’ Egyptian *logos*, though it may originally have been conceived as a separate work, was incorporated into the epic scale of Herodotus’ *Histories* and should be seen against the background of the work as a whole. From the very first words of the Histories – to which we owe the very word “history” – Herodotus has declared his interest in recording the great deeds and works (including physical monuments) of both Greeks and non-Greeks. The question of Greek identity, the very idea of Greece as a single concept and the Greeks as a united people, recurs frequently throughout the *Histories*. Ethnic identity is essential to his reasons for telling the story of the successful Greek resistance to the Persian onslaught. How did the Greek-speaking peoples, not united under a central government but scattered about in independent city-states, how did they do it, alone among all the nations conquered by Persia, including ancient and wealthy nation of Egypt? The *Histories* is also a warning to the Greeks not to let success make them grow insolent or soft, because “most of the nations which were once great are small today and those which used to be small are great”, for “human prosperity never abides in the same place” (I.5). The Egyptian Logos is very disproportionate to the need to describe Egypt in the context of the Persian conquests. Egypt is, however, essential and of vital importance to Herodotus’ quest to define Greek national identity.

Herodotus, in general, has a pretty good grasp of Egyptian chronology. “Basically”, writes Lloyd, “Herodotus’ picture of Egyptian History is in harmony with native Egyptian tradition”.25 The great problem is, naturally, that Herodotus placed the pyramid-builders in the eighth century. There have been many proposed solutions to this problem. Lloyd thinks it can be fairly easily explained as a misunderstanding. He follows here Harmut Erbse’s suggestion that “Herodotus was misled by the Egyptian priests who told him that between Min and Moeris or the king he thought was Moeris, no monarch with the exception of Nitocris had achieved anything of consequence”.26 Since the Pyramids were consequential, Herodotus placed their builders after Moeris and before the Twelve Rulers for whom he had definite dates.

Benjamin Shimron follows Lloyd and Erbse but offers a slightly different take on the subject. Herodotus had to extract his chronology from priests who supplied essentially theological or, rather, mythological information, i.e. from stories that were true from the narrators’ viewpoint. We must also take into account the archaizing

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24 For an up-to-date assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Herodotus’ information, see the fine summary by, again, Alan Lloyd in *Bakker et al.*, 2002, 415–436.
26 See Lloyd *Intro.*, 189.
tendencies in Egyptian art and architecture that had been going on already for three centuries when Herodotus arrived and which held up the monuments of the time of Cheops as a model. Shimron asks: What did Herodotus see? “He saw much more than we can see, much more of what he saw would be complete or restored in an archaistic style, but on the other hand many of the seemingly ancient works of art would be relatively new built, that is, in the three centuries before Herodotus and not two millennia earlier.” Shimron suggests “therefore that Herodotus’ faulty chronology for the Pyramid-builders results from an erroneous interpretation of the visible evidence and from the chronologically indifferent traditions he was told by his authorities; ... some errors of translation are also possible.” The combination of Shimron’s approach, Lloyd’s analysis of Herodotus’ Egyptian sources and Erbse’ proposal offers to my mind a fairly satisfying explanation of the displacement of the pyramid-builders to the eighth century.

I need to finish up my own exposition and am prepared now to answer the question I posed at the beginning: Did the pyramids always carry the same connotations for the Greeks as they do for us? Yes, in many ways they did. The Great Pyramid was the tallest manmade structure in the world up until the European High Middle Ages, and its size is still impressive – the top is 30 meters higher than the spires of Uppsala Cathedral. Fascination with the manner of constructing the pyramids runs continuously from Herodotus down to our own day. Although I have read an article or two by modern mathematicians about the pyramids, I found it surprising that none of the extant texts of the Greek mathematicians or scientists, who were obviously interested in the geometrical shape, ever deal with the Gīza Pyramids in extant accounts. The apparent lack of interest among philosophers, theologians and poets also surprised me. Could this be due to a superficial grasp of Egyptian religion in the Greek historians describing the Pyramids? Another difference between what the Pyramids evoke in us and what they evoked in the authors of the extant texts is a sense of sumptuousness. The Greeks and Romans of Antiquity saw the pyramids with their splendid, sumptuous casings in stones of various colors along with whatever may have been carved or scratched on the surface, as well as other costly furnishings. The impression was not only of grandeur and size, but of munificent display and wealth. Those were the good vibrations, but there were negative ones as well. Useless extravagance which in the end was merely futile, since even the ancients were not sure of the builders’ exact names and histories. A means of oppressing the masses – this is a notion which perhaps still recurs today. But when I think of the pyramids, and I think this goes for nearly everyone, one of the immediate associations I make is that of their very antiquity. The only one of the Seven Ancient Wonders still standing! And even back then the Pyramids were the oldest of the Seven Wonders. Yet this is not normally a characteristic mentioned by Greek authors – the one exception in my quotations was the latest writer quoted, Kedrenos of eleventh century. Of course,
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Herodotus places the Pyramids just three centuries before his own time. Diodorus and other authors follow him more or less in his chronology. There were other known writers offering a different chronology, but the Greek mainstream seems to accept a dating to the eighth or eleventh century, which would make the Pyramids certainly very old but not so very much older than other very old structures known to the Greeks and Romans. The very ancientness of the Pyramids was not as salient a feature for the Greeks as it is for many of us today. In his book about the pyramids, Nils Billing begins his preface with an Arabic proverb: “Everyone fears time but the pyramids – they laugh at it.” There is no corresponding proverb in Greek.

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