

The Great Pyramid



**The story of
the farmers,
the god-king,
and the most
astounding
structure
ever built.**



The boy bent to lift a basket. The harvest had been good and the whole village had turned out to help thresh the wheat. Oxen moved slowly, trampling the dry stalks and cracking open the hard husks. Villagers tossed the stalks in the air and the hot wind blew them away. The boy's job was to gather the wheat kernels that were left behind. As he swung the basket to his shoulder, he looked out toward the Nile and stopped in surprise.

Strangers were stepping out of a boat. Word passed quickly that they were from the pharaoh. People gathered to hear what they had to say.



The news was exciting. The pharaoh needed workers. Royal messengers had never bothered to come to such a tiny village before, but the boy had heard about them. Farmers from a larger village nearby had gone with the pharaoh's men the summer before and they had brought back many stories. They talked about how hard and dangerous the work was. They complained, but they also boasted. They seemed proud to be doing something so important.



The boy stood with the men of his village. Was he old enough to be chosen? He stood on tiptoe to look taller. One of the pharaoh's messengers beckoned to him. He raced forward and told the scribe his name.

When the harvest was over, the boy joined the other men as they began their journey. They traveled many miles by boat down the Nile. None of them had ever been so far from the village. The boat turned into a narrow canal heading toward the western desert. The canal widened into a harbor, and beyond it a plateau rose like a cliff from the valley floor. On top of the plateau, stretched across the sky, was an immense, unfinished stone structure. The boy could not believe that a building could be so huge. Thousands of workers, looking as small as insects, moved busily around the gigantic construction site. This was the important work to be done. This was the Great Pyramid of the pharaoh Khufu.





And so it might have been for a boy living in ancient Egypt.



4,500 years later we can easily imagine his feelings as he stood before the Great Pyramid. We are just as astonished by it today as he must have been then, and a lot more puzzled.

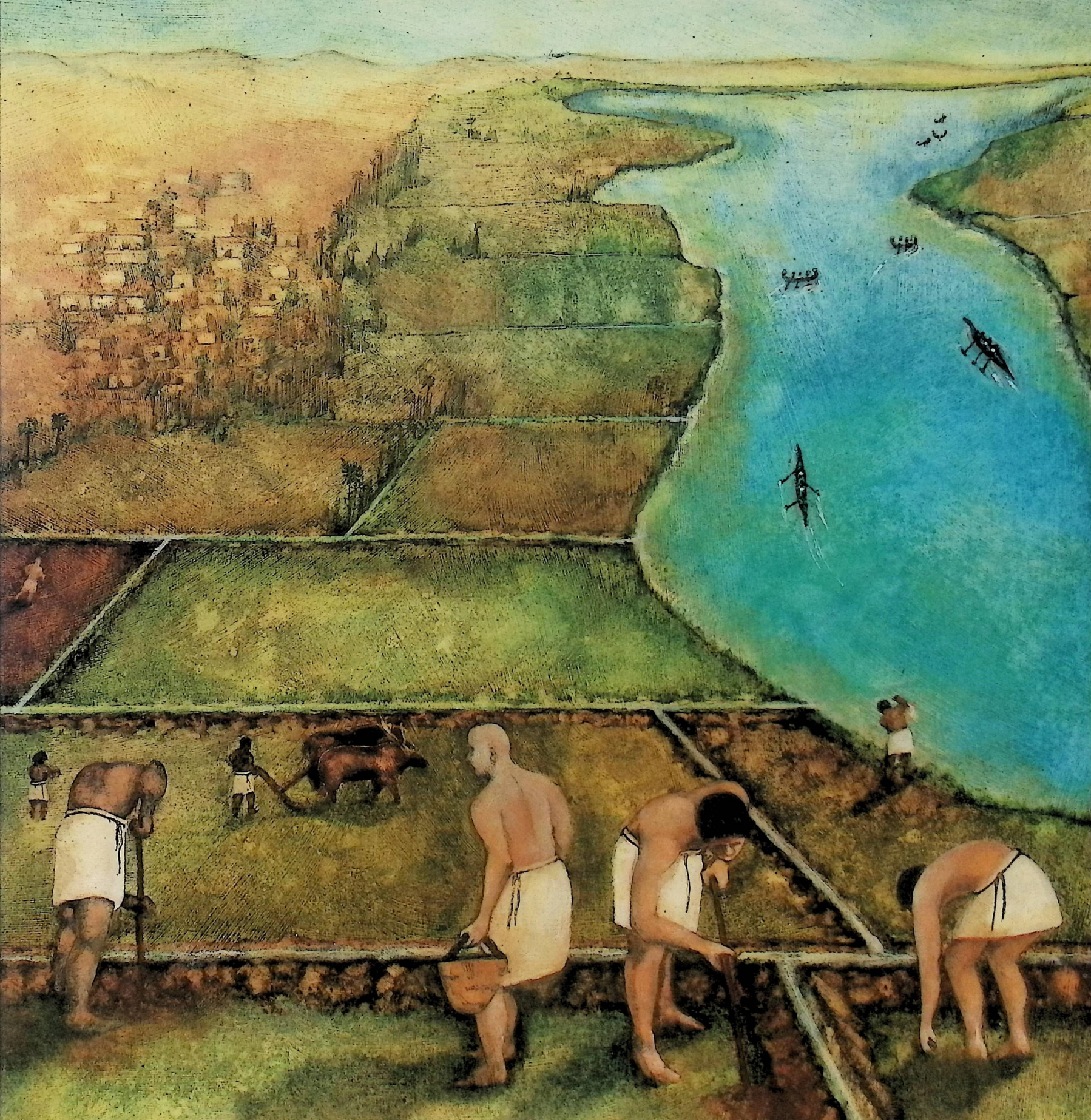
Ancient Egyptians had no iron tools. How did they quarry and shape 2,300,000 stone blocks? They had no vehicles with wheels. How were they able to move and lift blocks weighing several tons? And why was it built? What inspired a nation of primitive farmers to create a building that, for over 40 centuries, was the tallest in the world?

The story of the Great Pyramid begins hundreds of years before the reign of pharaoh Khufu. It begins with the first people to settle along the Nile River.

The Nile is a long ribbon of water that winds for hundreds of miles through a wide desert. Every year, heavy rains at the river's source high in the African mountains make it overflow. For three months, the entire valley is under water. When the land reappears, it is covered with wet, black silt. This fertile soil that the Nile leaves behind is ideal for growing crops.

Long ago, people from wandering tribes left the harsh, dry desert and began farming the rich valley soil. They scattered seeds by hand and carried buckets of water for irrigation. They dried mud bricks in the sun and built homes on high ground above the level of the flood. The crops were successful and the villages prospered.



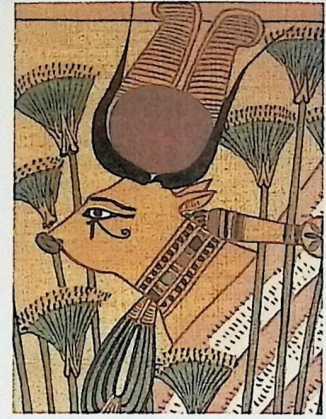




*Horus, the sky god,
was the son of Osiris.
He was also the
falcon god.*



*The all-powerful sun
god, Re, had many
different names and
identities. Here he has a
falcon head, but he was
also shown as a ram, a
beetle, and even a
human.*



*Hathor, goddess of joy
and music and love,
appeared as a cow.*

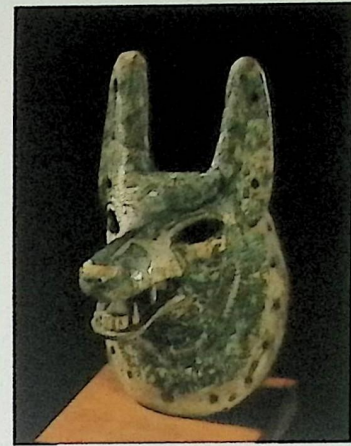
Early Egyptians observed the world around them. They noticed many cycles that seemed to repeat endlessly. The sun went down every night, but it always came up the next morning. Cropland disappeared during every flood, but it always reappeared. People were reassured by the repetition of nature's cycles. If every ending was followed by a new beginning, there was balance and order in the world. Egyptians called this balance *ma'at*. With *ma'at*, life was safe. Without it, there was chaos.



Osiris was the god of the Land of the Dead. He was shown wrapped in white linen like a mummy.





Thoth was the god of writing and wisdom. In this sculpture he is a baboon, but Egyptian artists often showed him as a human with the head of a long-beaked bird.



Jackal-headed Anubis was the god of mummification.

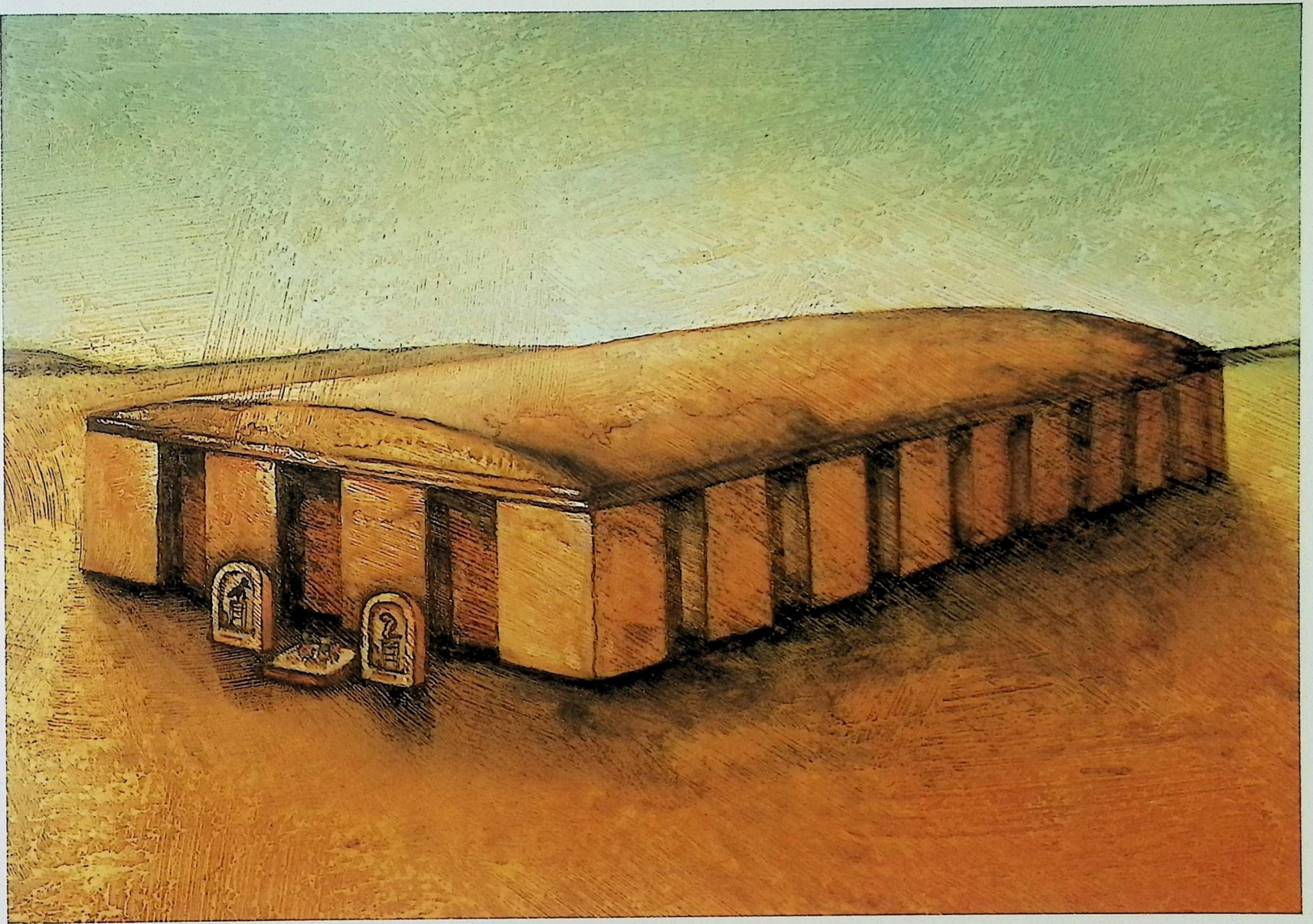
Maintaining *ma'at* was important, and they turned to their gods for help. There were hundreds of them – strange, magical beings, who controlled every aspect of Egyptian life. Some were local village gods. Others were worshipped throughout the country. Above them all was Re, god of the sun.

Long, complicated stories were told about the gods, myths that changed constantly and often contradicted each other. The religion that grew out of these myths may seem peculiar and far-fetched to us, but Egyptians believed in it wholeheartedly. They worshipped their gods without question.



One important belief was simple and unchanging. Egyptians believed in life after death. They thought that a person's spirit, or *ka*, was reborn in the Land of the Dead, where it would live forever. Death, rebirth, and afterlife formed another cycle, as important as the rising and setting of the sun. To preserve it, they made a great effort to insure an afterlife for every *ka*.

The *ka* lived the same life in the Land of the Dead that the person had lived on earth. It used the same tools and pots, wore the same jewelry, ate the same food. Though it lived in the Land of the Dead, the *ka* had to return to the body for nourishment. To make sure that it had a place to come back to, the grave was covered with a rectangular mud brick structure called a *mastaba*. The *mastaba* protected the body and the household items that were buried with it. It was, in a way, a home for the dead person's *ka*.



The tops of mastabas were rounded. According to an early myth, the world was once an endless ocean. A mound of earth appeared in the water, and there all life began. Egyptians imitated the shape of that important first mound when they built their mastabas. A mastaba could be large or small. One like this, for a wealthy person, might have contained 30 rooms. Offerings for the ka were placed outside .



Another important religious belief involved Egypt's rulers. People thought that a pharaoh was the god, Horus, on earth. Horus was directly descended from Re, the sun god. When a pharaoh died, his *ka* would not have an ordinary afterlife in the Land of the Dead. It would join Re, and live forever among the gods.



A living pharaoh, a god on earth, could do much to protect Egypt from chaos. He could keep the nation strong and unified, and defeat all enemies. A dead pharaoh was able to do far more wonderful things for his people. Gliding across the heavens each day with Re in the solar boat, he could even affect the most important of all the natural cycles, the rising and setting of the sun. Egyptians didn't want to lose this special protection, so they worked especially hard for the pharaoh's afterlife.

Egyptians imagined that the sun traveled across the sky in a boat like the ones they used on the Nile.







Pharaohs' tombs were larger and more elaborate than those of ordinary people. They contained priceless jewelry, extraordinary statues, and many household objects for the *ka* to use in the afterlife. Royal *mastabas* were sometimes as large as palaces.

Djoser's brilliant architect, Imhotep, invented the art of building with stone. Stone is stronger than mud brick, and lasts forever, so others were quick to follow his example. Stone was used throughout the country to build tombs and temples, but never houses or palaces. The places where people lived were still made of mud brick. The ancient Egyptians' choice of building materials shows clearly that the afterlife was more important to them than earthly life.

In 2630 B.C., a pharaoh named Djoser built an unusual tomb at Saqqara, near the capital city of Memphis. It began as a *mastaba*, but it was made of stone blocks instead of mud bricks. Its shape changed as more and more layers were added. When it was finished, it looked like a gigantic stairway. The 200-foot tall Step Pyramid was an imposing sight, visible for miles in the empty desert. Pharaohs who came after Djoser were inspired by it, and they, too, built stone pyramids instead of mud brick *mastabas*.

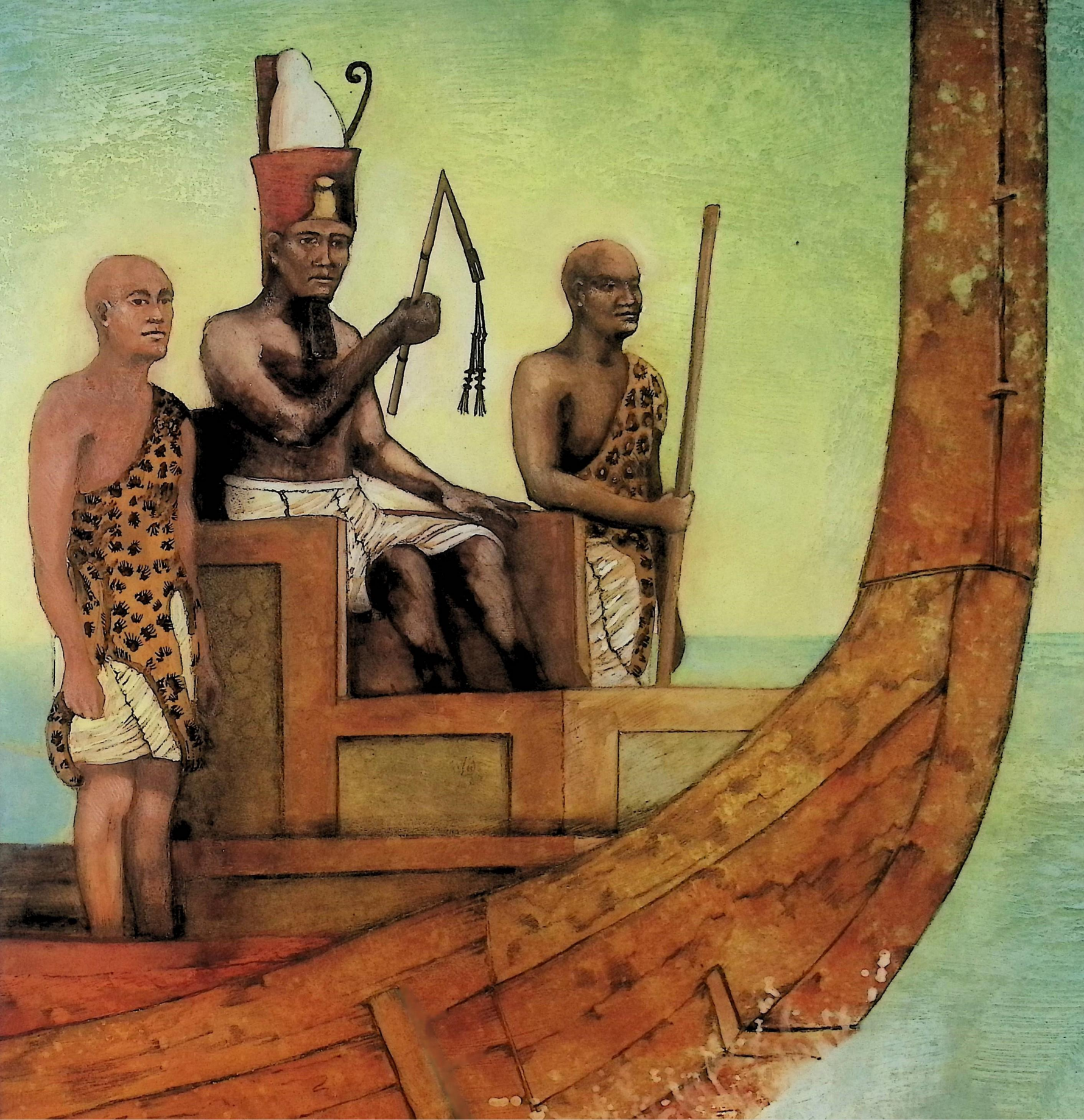


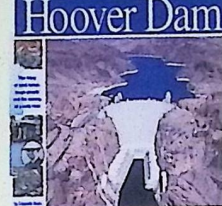
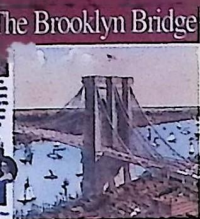


Less than 100 years later, in 2550 B.C., Khufu took the throne. He followed the tradition of the pharaohs who had ruled before him and became the god, Horus, on earth.

Later in his reign, however, Khufu did something that no other pharaoh had done before. He declared that, in addition to being Horus, he was also Re on earth. It was quite extraordinary, even for a king of Khufu's power, to claim such a thing. By taking on the identity of the mighty sun god, Khufu established himself as the mightiest pharaoh ever.

Khufu often traveled on the Nile, visiting temples and performing ceremonies to honor the gods. He was accompanied by priests wearing leopard skins.





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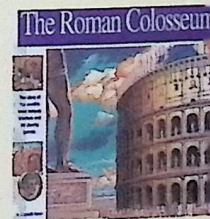
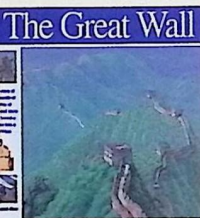
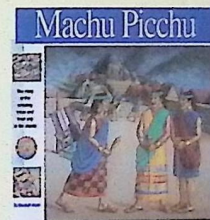
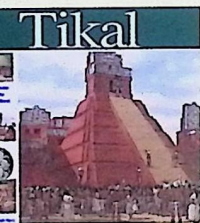
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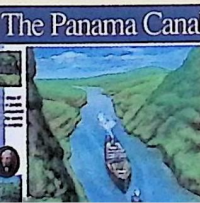
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