

Egyptian Pyramids Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Did slaves build the Great Pyramid at Giza?

Materials:

- Introductory PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-E
- Guiding Questions
- Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

Note: This lesson will likely take multiple class periods. Consider different ways for students to work through these documents. For example, you might jigsaw the reading of the documents here by assigning pairs of students one of the documents and sharing Graphic Organizer information with one another. If you have time you might work through these documents one at a time across consecutive days.

- 1) Introduction.
 - a. Display PowerPoint Slide 1. Have students free-write in response to the prompt, “What do you know about the Egyptian pyramids?”
 - b. Share out responses.

- 2) Use PowerPoint slides to establish or review background information on the Egyptian pyramids.
 - a. Slide 3: The Pyramids
 - i. *There are 138 known Egyptian pyramids.*
 - ii. *They were constructed between approximately 2700 BCE and 600 BCE.*
 - iii. *Most were built as tombs for Pharaohs and their families.*
 - iv. *The most famous pyramids are those at Giza, which include three pyramids and the Great Sphinx. The pyramid of Khufu at Giza is the largest pyramid ever built.*
 - b. Slide 4: How were the pyramids built?
 - i. *For centuries, historians and archaeologists have debated how the pyramids were built.*
 - ii. *Remember, these pyramids were some of the largest structures in the world and were built several thousand years before modern technology.*
 - iii. *Although historians and archaeologists still study the construction of the pyramids, they agree that this process involved tens of thousands of workers working across two to three decades on*

each. Construction involved cutting, moving, and setting large stones with chisels, ropes, oxen, and ramps.

- c. Slide 5: Who built the pyramids?
Another question debated by historians and archaeologists is whether or not slaves built the pyramids. This is the question that we are going to explore today.
 - d. Slide 6: Did slaves build the Great Pyramid at Giza?
- 3) Pass out Documents A and B along with the Organizing and Evaluating the Evidence Graphic Organizer.
- a. Before reading Document A, clarify for students that Cheops was an Egyptian pharaoh who reigned between 2589–2566 BCE and oversaw much of the building of the Giza pyramids.
Note: If students ask about the date of the textbook, hold off on answering until the end of the lesson. We selected a textbook passage from 1959 because contemporary textbooks do not attribute the construction of the pyramids to slaves. Instead, they may explain that today controversy surrounds the question of who built the pyramids in light of the arguments presented in Documents C-E.
 - b. In pairs, have students read the documents and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - c. Share out. Make sure to establish the similarities between these accounts and the wide expanse of time separating them.
 - d. As a class, guide students through filling out the Graphic Organizer.
Note: *The primary evidence here is that Herodotus based his account on stories told to him by the people he met on his travels.*
- 4) Pass out Document C.
- a. In pairs, have students read the documents and fill out the Graphic Organizer.
 - b. Share out.
- 5) Pass out Document D.
- a. In pairs, have students read the documents and fill out the Graphic Organizer.
 - b. Share out.
- 6) Pass out Document E.
- a. In pairs, have students read the documents and fill out the Graphic Organizer.
 - b. Share out.
- 7) Final Claim: Do you think slaves built the Great Pyramid at Giza? Why or why not? Make sure to use evidence from at least two of the documents in this lesson to support your claim.

Citations

Document A

Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by A.D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

Document B

Platt, N. & Drummond, M. *Our World Through the Ages* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1959).

Document C

Katarina Kratovac, "New Discovery Shows Slaves Didn't Build Pyramids, Egypt Says," Associated Press, January 11, 2010. Retrieved from:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/11/new-discovery-shows-slave_n_419326.html

Document D

"Who Built the Pyramids," February 4, 1997 Nova. Retrieved from:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/who-built-the-pyramids.html>

Document E

Comments of Professor Mark Shiffman, First Things, March 3, 2011. Retrieved from:
<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/03/03/maybe-the-egyptian-pyramids-werent-built-by-union-workers-after-all/>

Document A: Herodotus (Modified)

The following is an excerpt from The Histories written by the Greek historian Herodotus in 440 BCE. Herodotus spent much of his life traveling to collect information for his book. He based his history book on the stories that the people in the places he visited reported to him.

The Egyptians told me that Cheops became king over the Egyptians and brought about every kind of evil. He closed all the temples and forced all the Egyptians to work for him. Some were forced to mine stones, and he ordered others to move the stones after they had been carried over the river in boats. They worked in groups of a hundred thousand men at a time, and each group worked for three months continually. This was the making of the [Great] pyramid, which itself took twenty years.

Document B: Textbook

This is an excerpt from a high school history textbook Our World Through the Ages published in 1959.

At Giza stands the Great Pyramid. It has stood there for five thousand years. It covers thirteen acres and stands nearly five hundred feet high. It contains over two million blocks, most of which weigh about two tons. One hundred thousand lash-driven men poured out their sweat and blood for twenty years to complete this resting place which King Khufu considered fit for his royal remains.

Corroboration Questions

- 1) According to both the textbook and Herodotus, who built the Great pyramid?
- 2) How long did it take?
- 3) How many people worked on the Great Pyramid?

Document C: News Article on Zahi Hawass

Dr. Zahi Hawass is an Egyptian archaeologist. He has spent decades excavating and analyzing areas around the pyramids. Below is an excerpt from an article that appeared in many newspapers and magazines around the world reporting some of Hawass's recent findings.

Egypt displayed on Monday newly discovered tombs more than 4,000 years old and said they belonged to people who worked on the Great Pyramids of Giza, putting the discovery forth as more evidence that slaves did not build the ancient monuments.

The series of **modest** nine-foot-deep shafts held a dozen skeletons of pyramid builders, perfectly preserved by dry desert sand along with jars that once contained beer and bread meant for the workers' afterlife.

Egypt's archaeology chief Zahi Hawass said that discovery and the latest finds last week show that the workers were paid laborers, rather than the slaves of popular imagination.

Hawass said the builders came from poor Egyptian families from the north and the south, and were respected for their work – so much so that those who died during construction were bestowed the honor of being buried in the tombs near the sacred pyramids of their pharaohs.

Their proximity to the pyramids and the manner of burial in preparation for the afterlife backs this theory, Hawass said. "No way would they have been buried so honorably if they were slaves," he said.

Source: Katarina Kratovac, "New Discovery Shows Slaves Didn't Build Pyramids, Egypt Says," Associated Press, January 11, 2010.

Vocabulary

modest: limited or small

bestow: to give as a gift or an honor

Document D: Interview with Mark Lehrner (Modified)

Dr. Mark Lehrner is another leading archaeologist and has worked along with Zahi Hawass for several years. Below is an excerpt from an interview Lehrner gave in 1997 to the PBS show NOVA.

Question: You've made reference to inscriptions at Giza that indicate who built the Pyramids. What do the inscriptions say?

Lehrner's answer: One of the most **compelling** pieces of evidence we have [of who built the pyramids] is graffiti on ancient stone monuments in places that they didn't mean to be shown. For example, above the King's chamber in the Great Pyramid, and in many monuments of the Old Kingdom—temples, other pyramids. Well, the graffiti gives us a picture of organization where a gang of workmen was organized into two crews, and the crews were subdivided into five *phyles*. *Phyles* is the Greek word for tribe.

The phyles are subdivided into divisions, and the divisions are identified by single **hieroglyphs** with names that mean things like endurance, perfection, strong. Okay, so how do we know this? You come to a block of stone above the King's chamber. First of all, you see this **cartouche** of a King and then some scrawls all in red paint after it. That's the gang name. And in the Old Kingdom in the time of the Pyramids of Giza, the gangs were named after kings. So, for example, we have a name . . . above the King's chamber in the Great Pyramid, "the Friends of Khufu Gang." This doesn't sound like slavery, does it?

Source: Mark Lehrner, "Who Built the Pyramids?" 1997.

Vocabulary

compelling: convincing

hieroglyphs: a writing system used by ancient Egyptians

cartouche: an oval hieroglyph used for names of Kings and Queens

Document E: Mark Shiffman

Dr. Mark Shiffman is a professor of Classical Studies at Villanova University and teaches courses on the ancient world. The following excerpt is from a comment he wrote online in response to claims that slaves built the pyramids.

In other words, the workers (or at least some of them) were well fed and not worked to death and got respectable tombs. . . .

So a certain proportion (maybe 25%?) of the workers were Egyptians of high status, a large number of Egyptian peasants were ordered to come do the hard labor, and we don't know how many slaves may have been employed in the work. Given the **prevalence** of slavery in the powerful nations of the ancient world, it would be surprising if there were not a significant number, and none of the evidence rules this out. On the other hand, there seems so far to be no direct archaeological evidence for the presence of slaves; but since they are not often honored with tombs, they can be hard to trace.

Two things are worth noting in assessing the “no slaves” claim and the evidence. One is that no one bothers to tell us in the broadcast sources how many tombs specifically belonging to workers have been found and what **proportion** of the workforce they might represent. One would have to ask that direct question of a knowledgeable scholar or **consult** the Egyptology technical literature.

Source: *Comments of Professor Mark Shiffman, posted online on March 3, 2011.*

Vocabulary

prevalence: common presence

proportion: part or portion

consult: ask

Organizing and Evaluating the Evidence

Documents	Did slaves build the pyramids?	What evidence does this source use to support its claim?	Do you find this evidence convincing? Why or why not?
Doc A: Herodotus and Doc B: Textbook			
Doc C: Awass			
Doc D: Lehner			
Doc E: Shiffman			

Final Claim

In the space below write a paragraph that addresses the question:

Did slaves build the Great Pyramid at Giza?

Make sure to discuss evidence from at least two of the documents to support your claim.