Ancient egypt essay example

Religion, Bible

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1. Introduction

This essay discusses four “ landmarks” of Ancient Egypt. As described in the Introduction to David Silverman’s Ancient Egypt (1997), “ this land of the past has thousands of familiar visual cues that make it spring to life with a coherent character unequalled by any other civilization of antiquity, yet its full depth and breadth still remain to be discovered.” The time period covered here is from circa 3000 B. C. to 1000 B. C. – a period which included no less than 20 Egyptian Dynasties and saw most of the now famous architectural structures like the pyramids and temples constructed. All this in a land roughly the same size as Texas and New Mexico combined, or about four times larger than the United Kingdom, but comprised mainly of desert. Undoubtedly the most obvious and iconic landmark of Ancient Egypt is the group of pyramids at Giza, near Cairo, but there are other equally fascinating

and important topics to cover, including the first discussed here – the River Nile.

2. The River Nile

Chapter 1 in Silverman's book is entitled The Gift of the Nile. The title suggests how important the river was to the population of Ancient Egypt. At over four thousand miles (6650km) in length, the Nile is " the longest river in the world", rising in the highlands of Eastern Africa and flowing north to the Mediterranean Sea. It has two major sources. The Blue Nile (the shorter one), yet which contributes the majority of the water and the fertile silt carried with it, rises from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, whilst the White Nile rises in the Great Lakes region of Eastern Africa. These two branches meet and combine near Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan. In his book A History of Ancient Egypt (2011), Marc Van De Mieroop (p. 7) says: " The Nile dictates how we can study the ancient Egyptians, and in many other respects the river shapes Egypt." The Nile's importance to the population at the time was immense. Most of the Egyptian population were farmers who depended on the river for water and soil nutrients. Each year for four to five months the monsoon rains in Ethiopia caused the waters to rise and flood the surrounding countryside. Depending on the amount and duration of the consequent inundations, the farmers had good or bad years for their crops. The Nile is actually classified in two distinct topographical parts – the so-called Valley and the Delta. These correspond to the two former divisions of Egypt called Upper and Lower Egypt. The lower or Valley part is around 660 miles (1, 060km) long, and is for the most part an offshoot canyon of the Great Rift Valley of Africa. This part of the Nile has a fertile floodplain of over

4, 000 square miles (11, 000 square km) which varies in width from just over a mile to 11 miles. The Nile is also a natural division between the Eastern and Western Deserts. The Western Desert – which covers about two thirds of Egypt – is a region of rocky plateaux interspersed by green oases. In ancient times the Eastern desert was a rich source of minerals.

3. The Pyramids

For many, the Pyramids are synonymous with Egypt. The Great Pyramid of Giza is the best known and is not only the oldest of the recognized seven wonders of the ancient world but – according to a Penn State online article - is " the only structure that still remains". According to " The Egyptian Pyramid" – an article on the Smithsonian website – that pyramid stood around 480 feet high and its base covered an area in excess of 13 acres, with triangular side faces of some 755 feet maximum length. In total, it is estimated that the Great Pyramid (also known as the Pyramid of Cheops) weighs approximately 7 million tons and comprises over two million individual blocks.

This largest pyramid was constructed over a 23-year period, from 2589 to 2566 BC. However, pyramid building in Egypt – according to the Smithsonian article – began in around 2780 BC and continued for about 1, 000 years.

In a Penn State University article (2008, March 28): How Were The Egyptian Pyramids Built? Donald Redford, a professor at Penn State, believes the shape symbolizes the sun's rays. He says that view is based on the legend that " The Egyptian sun god Ra, considered the father of all pharaohs, was

said to have created himself from a pyramid-shaped mound of earth before creating all other gods”.

The custom of the time was to start construction of a pharaoh’s pyramid as soon as he ascended to the throne. The new pharaoh would appoint and collaborate with an architect, a construction overseer and a chief engineer, and choose the location for his pyramid. This would usually be on the Nile’s west bank, as the departed pharaoh’s soul was supposed to join with the sun as it descended towards the horizon, then continue with the sun for all eternity.

4. Valley of The Kings

In his article “ Valley of the Kings” (n. d.) from the New Book of Knowledge, Bob Brier says “ This dry and desolate place is one of the richest archaeological sites on earth.” The valley is situated on the west bank of the River Nile, across the river from the site of the ancient city of Thebes, now Luxor, a modern Egyptian town. It was the chosen burial place for the Egyptian pharaohs of the 18th to 20th dynasties (approximately 1570-1070 B. C.). There are over 60 tombs in the eastern and western branches of the valley, some in the valley floor, others carved into the sides of the valley. Tombs discovered were assigned numbers (prefixed by “ KV”), each new discovery given the next number in the sequence. The latest one discovered, and probably the most well-known one – that of Tutankhamen – is number KV62, and was discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter. Unlike virtually all the other tombs in the valley, the tomb and its contents were virtually intact. However, it is not the largest tomb there. KV5, constructed to house the sons

of Ramses II has that honour. Another extensive one is KV20, built for Queen Hatshepsut, which includes a corridor that curves for almost a quarter of a mile.

The tombs were prepared for their occupants by decorating them with religious texts provided for the pharaoh's guidance in the afterlife. They were also equipped with all the things the pharaoh might need to be comfortable, including food, furniture, wine, games and jewelry. The latter is the principal reason why many of them were robbed in ancient times. Although Tutankhamen's tomb was the last to be discovered, the search goes on to this day, looking for more of these royal tombs and other artefacts of the time.

5. Nile Barges

Much of the granite used in the great pyramids was extracted from quarries in Aswan, circa 500 miles away upriver, as described in the article " Hard Stone Quarries". Blocks from the quarries were manhandled and/or slid down to the river and onto barges for the journey to Giza. Barges were widely used on the Nile – which was in effect Egypt's main highway. They were used to transport goods and farm produce, and – because the Nile was in many places too wide to build bridges – for cross-river ferries, too.

However, because in this instance we are discussing exceptionally large and heavy loads to be transported downriver (stone blocks for the pyramids), we might ask how was it actually done, without losing the precious and enormously heavy stone cargo into the river, during loading / unloading or during the voyage? Franz Löhner in his article Building the Great Pyramid

describes how he believes that was achieved. The blocks were first hauled from the quarry to the bank of the Nile on sleds, then onto a ramp sloping down onto a raft, rigidly fixed between two barges to provide buoyancy for the three vessels, and to avoid the raft tilting over or capsizing as the block is slid onto it, using rope rolls installed on the raft to pull the block. This Figure from Löhner's article shows such an arrangement:

A = Loading Ramp

B = Loading Track (logs)

C = Barge (x 2)

D = The Raft

E = Rope Rolls

F = The Stone Block

Because the journey north was against the prevailing winds, Löhner surmises that the barges would have had to simply drift downstream on the river current. On arrival at Giza, a similar ramp arrangement to that used in the loading procedure would be used to unload the great block. Then once ashore at Giza, men and/or oxen teams dragged the blocks over slipways lubricated with oil, to reach the pyramid construction site.

6. Conclusions

Having researched and discussed this era of Ancient Egypt, and discovered some of the remarkable achievements of the people of Egypt, one cannot help but marvel at their skills and ingenuity. Those farmers knew how to work with nature, in harnessing the power of the River Nile, for example. Their fertile floodplains were inundated by floodwaters every year, yet they

learned how to use those floods to their advantage, using the water for irrigating their crops and the rich silt it carried to improve the soil. Then there were the designers and builders of the Pyramids at Giza and the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. What design, surveying and engineering skills they showed! And all without the sophisticated tools and equipment we have today and that we tend to take for granted. Finally we come to the ingenious solution for the loading, transportation and unloading of those huge stone blocks on the voyage from quarry to construction site – a distance of some 500 miles by river, with only the river's current for motive power. A remarkable feat without the benefit of modern, heavy duty cranes or high-tech rafts or barges.

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