

Influence of urban culture in the built environment of memphis essay sample



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1. Introduction

Egypt has a very interesting history. The mere mention of its name brought to mind the famous pyramid at Giza, the mysterious Sphinx, the treasures in the tombs, and pharaohs who live a life of splendor. For centuries, people from many lands have visited Egypt to see its marvels. These ancient marvels of Egypt are not found in the modern capital city of Cairo, however. The first capital city that had witnessed the evolution of Egyptian past was none other than Memphis.

Map of Old Egypt showing the location of Memphis

According to historians, Memphis was founded in 3100 B. C. by Menes, the Egyptian ruler who first united both the Upper and Lower kingdoms of Egypt. The city was situated in the west bank of the Nile, fourteen miles south of modern Cairo. However, little is known about the first and second dynasties that

was first established in Memphis so that historians

focused much of their attention to the third dynasty that they classified as the beginning of the history of the Old Kingdom (Pyramid Age) (Owen 1679).

Memphis, as Egypt's earliest capital, was also the greatest ancient cultural center of Egypt. The culture of Memphis, like the rest of Egypt and the ancient Near East, was largely influenced by their religious beliefs. This paper will discuss how the specific cultures of Memphis influenced or dictated the form of the built environment of this city. Period covered in the discussion is the Old Kingdom Period (from the third to sixth dynasties), of <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-urban-culture-in-the-built-environment-of-memphis-essay-sample/>

which most historians have agreed to have started from around 2686 B. C. and lasted to around 2181 B. C. Egyptian culture is characteristically stable and within this period, little has changed (Perry 46).

1. Belief in Pharaoh as a God

Memphis, as Egypt's capital, was the residence of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Unlike nearby Mesopotamia that believed that their rulers were only representatives of God, the Egyptians adhered to the idea that their Pharaoh was one of the gods. Therefore, it was easy for the Memphites to accept the fact that the Pharaoh owned all the lands of Memphis and Egypt. Memphites at this time were mostly serfs or laborers of the Pharaoh. They pay tributes to him in gratitude for letting them use his land or pay taxes as rent. Their tributes signify their gratefulness to him because they believed that the Pharaoh, as divine, controlled the annual flooding of the Nile River (Perry 50). According to Guiseppi (2004) author of an online history of Egypt, the Nile River sustained the life of the ancient Egyptians through the predictability of its flooding. In July, the water in the Nile starts to rise and by September it had successfully overflowed from its banks, bringing with it the rich silt that makes the Nile valley fertile for growing crops. The Egyptians regarded flooding then not as a menace but a blessing.

Moreover, the recognition of the Pharaoh as god was instrumental in making his subjects loyal to him. The people considered it an important task to serve the Pharaoh. In fact, the people's welfare was thought to rest on absolute fidelity to the god-king. One Egyptian writer described the political thought of Egypt at that time this way, " If you want to know what to do in life cling to

the pharaoh and be loyal" (Guisepe, " History of Egypt", 2004). This loyalty had made Memphis a capital city that experienced less disruption during the whole period of the Old Kingdom as compared to Mesopotamian capital cities (Guisepe, " Egypt and Mesopotamia", 2004).

- Belief in Immortality

The Egyptians saw death as a continuation of life. They believed that in the other world, people would do all the things they enjoyed in life. According to one Egyptologists, " the whole life of the Egyptian was spent in the contemplation of death; thus the tomb became the concrete thought" (Guisepe 2004). In other words, the Memphites was so much preoccupied with death and the afterlife that they were motivated to build great tombs and pyramids. They considered the tomb as the " home" of the dead person.

The Egyptians held the belief that immortality is possible only if the body remained intact. As a result, the bodies of people who had died were carefully preserved before their burial. They used chemicals to dry or mummify the body. They then painted the mummy, wrapped it in fine linen and adorned it with jewelry. Egyptian embalmers were so skillful that modern archeologists have found mummies that still have hair, skin and teeth after thousands of years of burial (Perry 52).

Figure2. " True"

Pyramid

Figure1. Step

Pyramid

It was in Saqqara, necropolis of Memphis, that the Egyptians built the first pyramid (see figure) ("Memphis" 1999). The creation of the pyramids was prompted by the popular belief that since the Pharaoh was god, his dead body must be protected at all cost and should be buried in splendor. They used the shape of a pyramid figure because it symbolizes the sacred hill from which, according to their belief, the creator of man, the god Atum-Re, emerges from the chaos. Later on, the notion of creation was linked to this hill (Crofton 245). The first pyramids were "step" pyramids (see Figure 1) in connection with the Egyptian religious views symbolizing a stairway to the stars but later they shifted their focus on the sun or solar theology so that they made "true" pyramids, representing the rays of the sun (see Figure 2).

As proof of their devotion in preserving the dead, archeological finds of the ancient Memphis revealed a very big necropolis or cemetery at the west of the city.

Frederick Owen (1983) wrote, "...in keeping with the Egyptian idea of immortality, is a vast cemetery two miles wide and some sixty miles long... like a gigantic field of death, the place is extremely crowded with the remains of some *forty to fifty millions* of animals, men, women, children and pharaohs"(Owen 1680).

Owen further declared that perhaps the Egyptian cemetery at Memphis is the most extensive cemetery in the world.

1. Treasures in the Tomb

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Not only is Egypt famous for its pyramids but also for the treasures that were buried inside it. The Egyptians, Memphites in particular, put treasures beside the dead body that they felt the departed will need in the afterlife. The wealthy, nobles and pharaoh, therefore, brought with them their precious jewels and golden furniture.

Perry (1988) author of *History of the World* stated that this was the reason why many Memphite artisans, jewelers and weavers spent most of their time in supplying fine objects for the tomb. In fact, it can be said that many of the luxury goods obtained from other lands were destined to be buried in Egyptian tombs. Later, robbers looted most of these treasures (p. 52).

1. Respect for Women

Unlike in other civilizations at that time, specifically in the cities of Mesopotamia, women in Egypt were highly respected (Guissepi, " Egypt and Mesopotamia", 2004). Although the upper-class Egyptian woman was expected to obey her father and her husband, she had a number of rights. She could inherit property and sell it without asking any man's permission. In Memphis, it was normal to see women running a business or testifying in court. As a wife and mother, they were also given great respect. That is why most couples did not seek divorce even if it was permitted. Marriage usually lasted a lifetime for the couple. Sometimes, the wives and mothers of pharaoh became the real power in government though they usually ruled from behind the scenes. The respect for Egyptian women may be attributed to their respect for their goddesses (Perry 50). The proof that Egyptian women were highly valued can be seen in the ancient paintings uncovered in

archeological finds. In the paintings, the wife of a pharaoh and their daughters are shown standing or sitting beside him. In the case of who should succeed the throne, the royal descent from the mother was also recognized (Guisepi 2004).

1. Social Stratification in Memphis

There was clear emphasis on social status in Memphis. At the top of the ladder are of course the Pharaoh and his noble family. As a god ruler, the Pharaoh had successfully put a claimed to an authoritarian and centralized rule. The pharaoh practically controls the whole Egyptian life. He was responsible for keeping the irrigation works in order, directing the army, keeping peace and issuing laws. He also controlled trade and economy. Foreign merchants had to deal with royal officials, not with the merchants of Memphis (Crofton 245). Right below the pharaoh were the other nobles and the priest of the gods of *Ptah* (the creator god), *Osiris* (god of the dead) and many others. The priest served as the advisers of the king and they received tributes from the people (Guisepi 2004). Next to them were the landowners and the merchants. And right at the bottom were the many peasants of Egypt. Peasant life revolved mostly in planting and harvesting crops, and during the four months that the valley was flooded, the men worked to build the pyramids of the Pharaoh. The class stratification, however, was not rigid; people who rendered excellent service to the pharaoh could rise to a higher rank (Perry 46).

1. Conclusion

The religious culture of ancient Memphis shaped the form of the built environment of the city. Their recognition of the Pharaoh as god king made it possible for the monarch to rule in an authoritarian and centralized manner, effectively exacting tributes and loyalty from his subjects. The Memphite belief in immortality led them to employ mummification, the building of the pyramids and the burying of Egyptian treasures. The women of Egypt were respected in keeping with their respect for their goddesses. Memphis also had their own social stratification that was based mostly on religious and economic status.

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