

PLANNING A PYRAMID

CHARACTERS

Narrator King Zoser Vizier Khnum Imhotep Builders 1–2

Scene 1: In the Egyptian capital city of Memphis, c. 2700 BC

NARRATOR: In ancient Egypt, pharaohs had absolute power. A pharaoh was considered to be a god on earth, who had control over all Egyptians and their land—including the mighty Nile River. On this day, however, the pharaoh Zoser was feeling more like an ordinary man than a god.

ZOSER: When will it rain? The Nile must rise soon. My people are starving. Their crops are withering. The sun has baked the land until it is too hard to plow. Khnum, mighty god of the Nile, why do you resist my prayers?

VIZIER: Riots have broken out in the city. Neighbors are stealing food from each other. The people are calling for you to do something to end this drought.

ZOSER: Do you think I'm deaf and blind? Do you think that I don't see and hear their suffering, hear their babies crying through the night from hunger?

VIZIER: But what shall we do?

ZOSER: Restore order in the city.

VIZIER: But—

ZOSER: Go! Do it NOW!

(The Vizier bows and leaves. Zoser paces.)

ZOSER: The Nile sleeps in two caves deep below the temple just beyond our borders to the south. Khnum, you control the floodgates. Why do you withhold precious water from Egypt? Why do you withhold the rich layers of soil the river leaves behind? Why do you make us suffer through this "low Nile"? *(Yawning)* I'm so tired.

NARRATOR: As Zoser slept, he dreamed that the god Khnum spoke to him.

KHNUM: I have heard your pleas, Zoser, and those of your people. I *am* the god of the Nile. I know all its secrets. When the river covers the fields, it brings life to them and crops grow. I will release the Nile soon. It will pour over the land. The years of starvation and death will end. Tell your people, Zoser.

ZOSER: (*Waking with a start*) Khnum!

NARRATOR: According to legend, the “high Nile” returned and the years of hunger ended. Every year the Egyptians remembered the life-giving gifts the river brought them, and they gave thanks to the god Khnum.

Scene 2: In the desert, outside Memphis, c. 2700 BC

NARRATOR: The ancient Egyptians believed their souls lived on in the afterlife. A proper burial was important to achieve entrance to the afterlife. Zoser thought carefully about how he would be buried. One day the pharaoh called the architect Imhotep to him.

IMHOTEP: How may I serve you, Zoser?

ZOSER: I have in mind a tomb, something grander than anything that has ever been built before. Not an underground chamber that no one will ever see, but a mighty structure that will last for thousands and thousands of years—a stone structure.

IMHOTEP: Such a structure would take thousands of workers and many years.

ZOSER: Then you’d better get started right away.

NARRATOR: Imhotep designed a structure that the world had never before seen. He turned the traditional burial tomb of the pharaohs inside out and created a step pyramid more than 200 feet tall. Here, he consults with two builders.

IMHOTEP: The actual burial chamber will be 80 feet underground. A mile-long wall will surround the tomb.

BUILDER 1: A mile long? That’s a lot of wall for one tomb . . . but the king will probably like that. And what about these tunnels? What’s going on there?

IMHOTEP: The burial chamber will have 14 doors, but only one will really open. An underground maze of tunnels will lead to the chamber. The king’s body, and his offerings to the gods, must be protected at all costs.

BUILDER 2: (*Aside to Builder 1*) Like anybody’s going to miss Zoser when he dies.

BUILDER 1: Yeah, let him stay in there a while.

NARRATOR: Zoser’s dream and Imhotep’s design began the Pyramid Age, one of Egypt’s most creative periods, but not without a heavy price tag in human labor.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The Greek historian Herodotus coined the phrase "gift of the Nile" in reference to Egypt. What geographic factors contributed to the growth and prosperity of early Egypt?
- If you were in King Zoser's position, what kinds of pressures might you feel? What responsibilities would you have to handle? How do these kinds of responsibilities compare to those of a United States president?

ACTIVITIES

VOICES BEHIND THE STONES

Invite students to locate graphic, textual, and Internet sources to study both a Mesopotamian ziggurat and an Egyptian pyramid (e.g., the ziggurat at Ur, c. 2100, and the Great Pyramid near Giza, c. 2600 BC). Students may want to build or draw models, with captions, as they learn how these buildings were constructed. Have students write a brief description of their day as a laborer working on one of these structures. Encourage them to include specifics about the material and technology used and their feelings about their jobs and treatment.

WRAPPING UP HISTORY

Once students have become familiar with the ancient Egyptian mummification process and burial rites, provide them with an opportunity to reenact their own burial. In small groups, instruct students to pretend that one of them is an Egyptian pharaoh or king. The group members should decide what kind of structure this leader will be buried in and design the pyramid on paper, using ancient models, such as Tutankhamen's tomb, as guides. They should list the items to be buried in the tomb and create a model sarcophagus from cardboard. Finally, invite the group to "mummify" the "king" in toilet paper and perform a mock burial, complete with a student-written chant over the mummy.

JUST YOUR AVERAGE FEAST

In Egyptian documents, experts have located references to more than 50 different types of bread! This suggests quite a bit about the Egyptians' culinary repertoire and the agriculture that supported it. Have students study Egyptian wall paintings describing harvests and feasts and use recipe resources to write a menu for a feast given by a noble. The class or some student volunteers may be able to cook a dish for the class to enjoy.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

- Ancient Egypt (See Through History)* by Judith Crosher (Viking, 1993)
Ancient Egyptian Art (Art in History) by Susie Hodge (Heinemann Library, 1998)
Pyramid by David McCaulay (Houghton Mifflin, 1982)
Unwrap the Mummy! by Ian Dicks and David Hancock (Random House, 1995)

WEBSITE

- [Ancient Aromas](http://www.journalnow.com/living/food/worldflavors/egypt142.htm) (www.journalnow.com/living/food/worldflavors/egypt142.htm)
Online article by Candide Jones from *Journal Now* (January 14, 1998) includes recipes and information on ancient Egyptian culinary arts.