

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hazel Mary Martell. *The Great Pyramid*. Austin, Texas: Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 1998. 48 pp. Grades 4-6, ages 9-12. \$25.69 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8172-4918-2.

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Published on H-AfrTeach (January, 1999)

The Great Pyramid of Giza is the only one of the famous "Seven Wonders of the World" still standing. It was built in the middle of the third millennium BC to house the mortal remains of the second king of the fourth Dynasty, Khufu. The tomb of this king (better known as Cheops, the Hellenised version of his name), along with the other two large Giza pyramids, represents the acme of this architectural design. The Egyptians built the first pyramid, the Step Pyramid of Djoser, at Saqqara about a hundred years earlier and continued to build them as tombs for Egyptian kings into the Middle Kingdom, around 1700 BC. The rulers of Meroe in the Sudan (from the eighth century BC to around the fourth century AD) also built pyramid-tombs for themselves.

Martell's book uses the Great Pyramid at Giza as a vehicle for introducing ancient Egyptian burial practises and funerary beliefs to children rather than concentrating on the development and religious function of the pyramid itself. Although the text is adequate as a survey of Egyptian funerary practises written for children, most of the material used in the book to illustrate this aspect of Egyptian culture is taken from much later periods and relies heavily on the erroneous assumption that the customs of some 1,500 years later and from a different region of the country (the South) would be the same as they were in Lower Egypt in the Old Kingdom.

Cheops reigned from about 2551-2528 BC during which time his tomb was built.[1] Modern explorers found the pyramid empty of contents with only the stone sarcophagus in the burial chamber of the pyramid as evidence of its intended purpose. The Giza pyramids are part of the huge Old Kingdom necropolis of Memphis which was the country's capital at that time.

The book is divided into the following chapters: Introduction: Cheop's Funeral, 1). Ancient Egypt, 2). The First Pyramids, 3). The Plan for the Pyramid, 4). Building the Pyramid, 5). Death of the Pharaoh, 6). Treasures of the Pharaohs, and 7). The Great Pyramid Today, followed by a time-line, glossary, book list and index. Most

of the book's illustrations are taken from New Kingdom and later sources (after about 1500 BC rather than around 2600 BC, the date of Cheops).[2] Herein lies the major problems with the book, the use of an Old Kingdom royal tomb as the focus of an introduction to Egyptian funerary practises and the mistake of using much later material from Southern Egypt to illustrate what may have happened in the course of Cheops' burial. By the time the Egyptians were burying pharaohs in the famous Valley of the Kings and the builders of those royal graves were decorating their own tombs (the sources of several of the illustrations in this book[3]), the Giza pyramids were a thousand years old and objects of antiquarian interest for the Egyptians themselves. We have little if any knowledge at all of the burial procedure of Cheops and his fellow fourth dynasty kings and, though comparison with the later material is of use, it hardly provides conclusive evidence for the earlier practises.

A major error arising from the assumption that the New Kingdom material explains the older remains is present on page 27, where we are told that "the burial chamber (of Cheops' pyramid) was decorated with wall paintings and filled with furniture." Though it may be reasonable to assume that Cheops was buried with many and splendid goods, not one of the Giza pyramids has any decoration on the walls inside and we have no way of knowing if that's because they were intended to be that way or because they were not finished. Either way, the walls of the Giza pyramids are blank.

There are a few more glaring errors. On page 12, Imhotep is described as "builder of the Step Pyramid" and "a skilled scribe, doctor, priest, and astronomer." It may be reasonable to call Imhotep the architect of the Step Pyramid (initially known from Manetho and corroborated by an stone pedestal of Djoser inscribed with Imhotep's name found in the 1920s), but the ascription of powers of healing and wisdom come from Hellenistic times (around 300 BC to 300 AD) when the cult of the deified Imhotep became popular. On page 14, the Meidum

Pyramid of Snofru is said to have been built for Huni (last king of the Third Dynasty, c. 2580 BC). This is uncertain and in fact the one royal name found on objects from the site is that of Snofru.

Two objects made of faience are illustrated on page 17, though the heading describes them as being made of turquoise which is again mentioned in the glossary on page 46. The objects on page 17 are not made of this semi-precious stone but of faience, a “fake-turquoise” made of a kind of coloured glass and used to make vessels and inlays (as illustrated) in addition to other objects. Also illustrated on this page is the cartouche of Cheops (Khufu) which should have been transliterated to demonstrate what the pharaoh’s name was in his own language. The inclusion of the cartouche has been used as an opportunity to say a little about hieroglyphs, but the king’s name is not mentioned even though Khufu’s name is particularly straightforward to transliterate into the Roman alphabet and could have served as useful example for explaining how Egyptian was written.

The tomb painting illustrating page 31 has an incorrect description. This is not an Old Kingdom tomb painting; in fact it comes from the tomb of Sennedjem who was one of the tomb workmen who lived at Deir el-Medina (illustrated on page 21) and whose tomb dates to the Nineteenth Dynasty, some 1500 years later than the caption would have it.[4]

I fail to see the need for including absolute dates for the Old Kingdom. Not only are dates before the seventh century BC uncertain, but what use is knowing that Cheops died in 2566 BC to an 8 year-old (page 30)?[5] I have a similar quibble with the inclusion of dimensions of ancient structures. On page 12, the author writes that the mastabas were up to 215 ft (65 m) long and 120 ft (37 m) wide, and on the next page the dimensions of the Step Pyramid are given. It would be more useful to give some comparative sizing with well known modern monuments—an example can be found in *The Atlas of Ancient Egypt* on p. 140 (see note 5 below). Here the authors of the *Atlas* have five pyramids outlined next to well known modern structures such as the Saturn launch vehicle, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and the Statue of Liberty. Comparisons of area could also be made using, for example, the number of football fields that would fit into the ground plan of a structure.

This book is part of a series entitled “Great Buildings.” I feel the author has made a mistake in focusing so much on funerary practises and beliefs which, as she apparently discovered, lacks evidence in these early periods of Egyptian history. It would have been more use-

ful (and successful) to instead say more about the development and religious purpose of the pyramid design itself as an aspect of royal religion (the shift from third to fourth dynasty in the orientation of the ground plan (stellar to solar) and the simplification of the design over that time).[6] Nothing is said of Egyptian pyramids built after those of Giza and no mention is made of the royal tombs of Meroe. Not only were freestanding pyramids used in tomb architecture, but pyramids as an element of tomb design were also important in later royal tombs (possibly that of Mentuhotep at Thebes) and private tombs (the tomb chapels at Deir el-Medina) precisely because of the design’s religious significance.

Books to add to the book list:

Mark Lehner. *The Complete Pyramids*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997.

I. E. S. Edwards. *The Pyramids of Egypt*. Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1992.

John Baines and Jaromir Malek. *The Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Facts on File, 1983.

(Although some of these may be too lengthy for children, they are excellent references for teachers).

To those of you reading this review who don’t know the field of Egyptology, my complaints may sound picky but I beg to differ. The example of *The Egyptian News* which I reviewed earlier <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=30870903454825>> for H-AfrTeach shows that it is possible to write an accurate and interesting children’s book on ancient Egypt. I would recommend some of the books listed on p. 47 of this book, all of which are much better value:

Geraldine Harris. *Ancient Egypt: A Cultural Atlas for Young People*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.

David Macaulay. *Pyramid*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982 (a more recent version than that referred to in the book list)

James Putnam. *Pyramid*. Eyewitness. New York: Knopf Books for Children, 1994.

Notes:

[1]. Dates taken from Baines and Malek, p. 36 (see note 5 below).

[2]. Sixteen of the 48 pages include such anachronistic illustrations while only ten pages include illustrations of Old Kingdom material.

[3]. For example pp. 27, 30 and 31.

[4]. This tomb scene is published in Shedid, Abdel Ghaffar, *Das Grab des Sennedjem*. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1994. p. 99.

[5]. See in Baines, John and Malek, Jaromir, *The Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Facts on File, 1993. p. 36

[6]. Although the orientation of the pyramid is mentioned on page 19, the explanation is left at “for religious reasons.” Why not discuss the religious beliefs involved? The use of the pyramid shape itself is discussed briefly

on page 15 but it would have been useful to go into the belief in a little more depth.

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**Citation:** Alexandra O’Brien. Review of Martell, Hazel Mary, *The Great Pyramid*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2673>

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