

The New Economy in the Old Kingdom

Cooperation and Trade in the Rise of the Egyptian State

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Looking over what we know of the history of the world, we thus see civilization springing up where men are brought into association, and everywhere disappearing as this association is broken up.

Progress and Poverty

With the beginning of exchange or trade among men [the] body economic begins to form, and in its beginning civilization begins.

The Science of Political Economy

It was the pyramid and not the pharaoh that ruled Egypt. Kurt Mendelssohn, *The Riddle of the Pyramids*

The popular image of the building of the Egyptian pyramids, for the most part gleaned from the Technicolor fantasies of Hollywood writers and directors, is that the Ancient Egyptians used a huge labor force of slaves to erect monuments to the vainglory of despotic rulers. However, modern scholars are now in agreement that the Ancient Egyptians had very few slaves, and the few they had were domestic household slaves, and that the pyramids were built by a

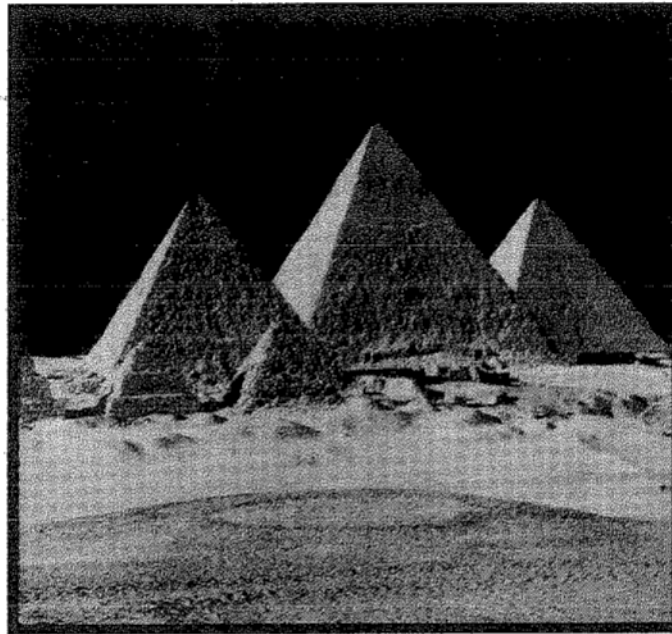
some basic economic principles.

In *Social Problems*, Henry George states that "with the beginnings of society arises the need for social intelligence — for that consensus of individual intelligence which forms a public opinion, a public will, and is manifested in law, institutions and administration." The importance of social cooperation is a theme that runs throughout the works of George. Further on in *Social Problems*, George

cient Egypt.

Before the Pyramid Age, Egypt was an aggregate of different tribes living in relative isolation from each other, ruled by a central authority invested in the Pharaoh, but each

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practicing different customs and holding different religious beliefs. Indeed, much of early Egyptian mythology involved a seemingly compulsive telling and retelling of a mythic unification of the country under one or more "strong men" and the very compulsiveness of the recounting suggests, perhaps, a constant fear that the country could relapse back to a loose grouping of competing or warring factions.

Recent writings by Egyptologists and other scholars, however, offer a much different picture of the unification of Egypt and present the role of the building of the Pyramids as crucial to the unification of the country and the rise of the administered Egyptian State.

One book in particular, *The Riddle of the Pyramids* by Kurt Mendelssohn, a fellow of the British Royal Society, puts forth the thesis that pyramid building was essentially a huge

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Henry George

paid work force comprised of the common citizenry of Egypt. The actual story behind the building of the pyramids and the effect that had on both the early economy and the formation of the Old Kingdom Ancient Egyptian State, is at once fascinating and illustrative of

states "the natural progress of social development is unmistakably toward cooperation... [c]ivilization is the art of living together in closer relations."

The Pyramid Age, in which the major pyramids were built, lasted a relatively short time; from roughly 2700 BC to 2500 BC (the middle of the Old Kingdom) and in that brief period an almost unimaginable construction project took place. This project involved the moving of millions of tons of stone, the gathering of an immense labor force capable of working together cooperatively toward that end and the creation of monuments that were not to be equaled in size and majesty for thousands of years; indeed, not until the 20th century was a civilization capable of constructing buildings rivaling those of An-

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public works project, one that involved a division and administration of labor unparalleled in the ancient world. Mendelssohn's thesis states that "the pyramid project created a type of community which had never existed before," and that for the first time what had been a loose conglomeration of diverse peoples

became, through work and cooperation, a unified people — and Egyptian citizenry.

The building of a large edifice such as a pyramid (ostensibly a tomb for the reigning king) requires, of course, much more than a very large workforce. It involves expanded trade to ensure that that workforce has provisions; it involves the administration of those provisions by bookkeepers and distributors; it involves foremen to oversee work crews which in turn creates new hierarchies of authority and responsibility. Perhaps above all, it requires the creation of a substantial literate administrative class — scribes and accountants — record keepers to keep track of it all on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

It is Mendelssohn's belief that this new and expanded division of labor, coupled with the rapid spread of literacy needed to ensure its administration, and the cooperation among what had once been diverse, competing tribes, created an economic revolution that transformed Ancient Egyptian society, creating a unified people. "Tribal villagers," Mendelssohn writes, "were welded by common work into people with a consciousness of nationhood. It was probably for the first time that they thought of themselves first and foremost as Egyptians."

Eventually, as this new economic life be-

maintain trade, further strengthening the economy and what had now become the Egyptian nation. Mendelssohn also suggests that much of this new trade was beyond the immediate purview of State authority.

"Once a few large pyramids had been built," Mendelssohn continues, "the organization and welding together of a village



Egyptian workers till wheat fields in the Old Kingdom

population into a new, more diversified, pattern had become an established fact. Human labor could now be channeled into a multitude of other activities..." Eventually those forces set into motion by the project of building a pyramid took on a life of their own and sought more natural channels of production and distribution.

Summing up, Mendelssohn says: "The pyramids do not represent an aim in itself but the means to achieve an aim - the creation of a new form of society."



This new and expanded division of labor, created an economic revolution that transformed Ancient Egyptian society ...

came established, as pyramid building 'grew' the economy — for as the Classical economists knew, an increase in the division of labor enhances the productive power of labor — the economy no longer needed to build pyramids to keep itself afloat. Labor and administration had become diversified to such a degree that workers and the new class of civil servants, Mendelssohn says, soon discovered "common interests among themselves" to expand and

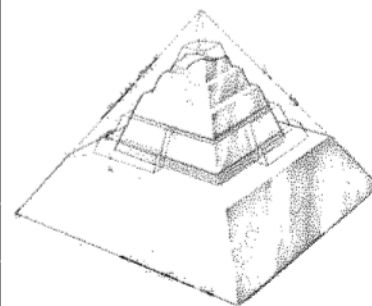
Recently, Dr. Zahi Hawass, Egyptian Undersecretary of State, has written on the social and administrative organization that supported the building of the pyramids.

The complexity and size of the Old Kingdom monuments, allows important insights into the more prosaic details of governmental organisation. The sheer volume of stone moved, especially during the first three reigns, is a powerful indication of the vast agricultural and mineral wealth of the country; administered by a powerful civil service. In the Old Kingdom, pyramid building was the country's foremost national project. The

precision of the engineering and orientation of these colossal stone structures imply a profound knowledge of astronomy and mathematics for which there is as yet no written evidence. The enormous work force required must have been drawn from villages throughout the country and organized into teams, probably based on their home district. Their housing and food supplies were probably administered through the same system of teams. The success of these mammoth building projects indicates that the necessary social organization and the administrative skills were well developed.

A few years ago, a chance discovery in the low desert margin south of the Great Sphinx was made by a rider whose horse stumbled into a hole, revealing a mud brick wall. When I sent a team to investigate, we uncovered a small densely-packed cemetery of mud brick and stone tombs of a variety of shapes and sizes: tiny, flat-topped rectangular tombs, vaulted corridors and all sorts of in-between variations, often constructed with chunks of granite and basalt. Excavation showed that this was the burial ground of workmen and labourers connected with the pyramids.

Building A Pyramid



The pyramid at Meidum's first stage rises to 60m. Over this was built a second stage comprised of 8 tiers, bringing the structure to 80m. In the third building stage, the entire structure was covered with white limestone which smoothed the sides, creating a true pyramid shape.