

GIZA PLATEAU MAPPING PROJECT

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Between September and December 2020 we carried out fieldwork for our Great Pyramid Temple Project (GPTP), while postponing our usual January through April excavation season until 2022. The GPTP is the subject of the report that follows.

The Great Pyramid of Khufu is the largest pyramid ever built and one of the most popular tourist sites in the world. But few of its visitors ever knew that a grand temple once rose on the eastern side of the pyramid. Nor did they realize, as they walked or rode horses and camels across the area, that they were helping erase the scant remains of the temple, the central focus of the Great Pyramid Complex—a complex that included, a causeway, valley temple, queen’s pyramids, and boat pits (fig. 1).

After 1995, when the Ministry of Antiquities removed an asphalt road that covered much of the temple remains, the temple still endured an onslaught of foot traffic every day—visitors, souvenir sellers, camels, horses, as well as horse-drawn buggies—and it became a parking lot for camels and horses.

Something had to be done to save what remained of the temple. Accordingly, Zahi Hawass and I launched the GPTP to conserve the temple and present it to visitors.

Supported by the Antiquities Endowment Fund (AEF) of the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE), we began work in September 2020. Our first task was to document the remains comprehensively, thus completing work that a team and I had nearly finished in 1995. We assigned a number to every physical feature left by an archaeological process or event, such as a hole cut into the bedrock. Some features reflect the initial layout and construction of the building. Others predate the temple, and others date much later, such as blocks displaced when it was dismantled. With all the visible archaeological features recorded, we could work out how Khufu’s builders conceived and constructed the temple and gain some idea of its use and destruction. Figure 2 shows our reconstruction of the temple’s plan as it may have looked in its heyday.

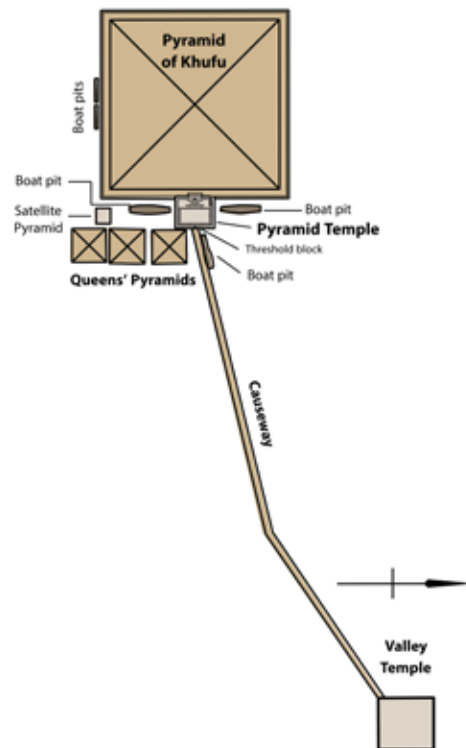


Figure 1. Schematic plan of the Great Pyramid Complex by Rebekah Miracle, AERA GIS.

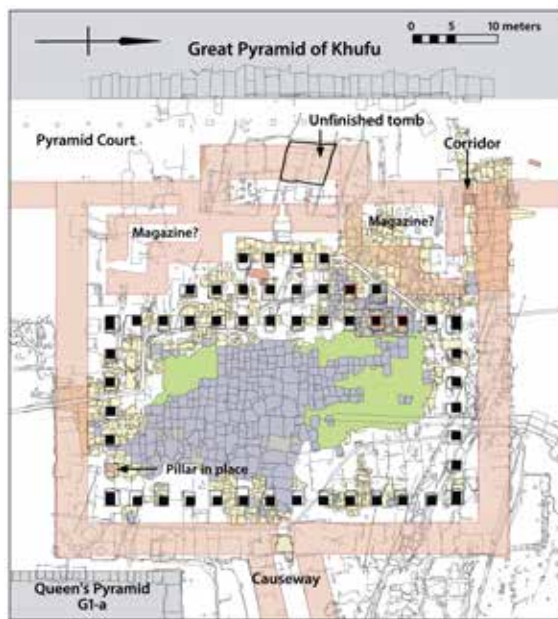


Figure 2. The Great Pyramid Temple site showing all the features recorded and our proposed reconstruction (pink) of the temple walls. Three pillar sockets are highlighted in red to indicate where we excavated fill and discovered wall fragments bearing scenes of Khufu's thirty-year jubilee. Figure 4 shows one of the fragments. Map by Rebekah Miracle from AERA GIS.

of the bay gazing out to the east through the spaces between the pillars, illuminated only by light from the court or from slits at the tops of the walls. The statues would have been seen as emerging in the liminal zone between dark and light, from the Netherworld.

In the inner sanctuary, where little remains today, other statues might have stood in niches, and a *false door* may have allowed the dead king to emerge from his tomb to receive offerings. But the only remaining trace of the sanctuary is a sunken foundation, which was partially destroyed by an unfinished tomb shaft excavated into bedrock 16 m deep, probably two thousand years or more after Khufu's time.

How was this temple built? Khufu's workers first prepared a level surface for the temple wall by pounding out a foundation in the limestone bedrock. Next, they cut sockets into the bedrock for the fifty pillars and thresholds of the temple doorways. Builders cut the sockets to different depths to accommodate pillars of varying lengths, so that they would stand at the same height to support the roof. To achieve a level surface for the basalt floor of the court, they prepared an underlayer of limestone pieces arranged and cut to conform to the angular bottoms of the basalt slabs (fig. 3). Because basalt is



Figure 3. Basalt pavement slabs set over underlayer of limestone cut to conform to the bottoms of the slabs. Photo by Dan Jones.

A long causeway ran from Khufu's valley temple, which lay down near the floodplain 850 m to the east-northeast, up to the black basalt threshold at the pyramid temple entrance. Here a double door would swing open to an open court with sunlight blazing down on a burnished floor of black basalt slabs and reflecting off the polished white casing of the pyramid. If the causeway had been roofed and poorly lit, perhaps with a narrow slit, the effect on entering the open court would have been startling and blinding—a gigantic special effect wrought in stone.

Fifty huge, red granite pillars lined the sides of the court. Each one measured 1.5 m (2 ancient Egyptian cubits) square, except for the four slightly larger corner blocks. In the north-western corner a narrow corridor ran along the north wall and opened into the court around the pyramid.

On the western side of the temple the walls receded into a stepped bay populated with two rows of the pillars flanking a narrow passageway down into the inner sanctuary. Statues of the king might have stood against the back wall



TOP: Figure 4. A fragment of painted, carved relief discovered in a pillar socket of the Great Pyramid Temple. The person depicted is a "Controller of the Palace," indicated by the sash and emblem of the goddess Bat, a female face with cow's ears and inward-curving horns. Photo by Mark Lehner.

BOTTOM: Figure 5. View to the northwest of the completed Great Pyramid Temple walkway. In the foreground the walkway runs along the western side of the unfinished tomb shaft. Photo by Dan Jones.

extremely hard, they chose to work the soft limestone rather than the irregular basalt slabs. They joined the basalt slabs like a jigsaw puzzle rather than cut them into standard shapes. Once the floor was installed, the builders moved on to the outer walls and roofed areas of the temple.

After the temple was excavated from the debris of the ages in 1939, the basalt pavement was crudely "restored" with gray cement and pieces of displaced basalt. We received permission to remove the blocks over three of the pillar sockets. When we excavated the fill, we found limestone pieces with remains of relief-carved decoration showing scenes of Khufu's *sed* festival, his thirty-year jubilee. One fragment shows the torso and arm of a man wearing a sash hung with an emblem of the goddess Bat, indicating that he is a *Kherep Ah*, "Controller of the Palace," an attendant to the king's *sed* jubilee (fig. 4). The relief scenes must have decorated the inner walls of the temple, thereby magically ensuring perpetual jubilees in the Afterlife.

We completed the fall 2020 work at the temple by installing a wooden walkway around the outer wall line of the temple (fig. 5). The walkway is open to the temple; no fencing is needed to keep visitors out, since they generally



choose to stay on the walkway rather than try to make their way across the irregular surface of the temple remains. To complement the walkway and improve visitors' experience, we plan to install three large information panels around the temple. One will explain the layout of Khufu's pyramid complex, the second will give information about the temple itself, and the third will inform about the sanctuary and unfinished tomb shaft. With support from another ARCE AEF grant, we will resume work on the GPTP in winter 2021–22.

Acknowledgements

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