

## The Pyramids

Built circa 2649–1500s B.C.E.  
Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt

Deep inside, in a secret chamber, pyramids entombed Egypt's dead rulers to assure their safe transition to the afterlife. Beside the ruler's mummified body, the pyramid contained food and supplies for their comfort and support in the afterlife. Pyramids developed from an earlier one-layer rectangular tomb, called a *mastaba*. Experts continue to argue about how they were constructed.

The **Great Pyramid of Giza**, built by Khufu in the early 2500s B.C.E., is the largest of the Egyptian pyramids. It contains 2.3 million limestone blocks, with an average weight of 1.8 metric tons (2 tons) per block, mainly from a nearby limestone quarry. There are three burial chambers in the pyramid, with the king's chamber composed of granite.

The **Step Pyramid of Djoser**, built in Saqqara circa 2600 B.C.E. and designed by Imhotep, is considered the first Egyptian pyramid. Imhotep built it up from a simple, one-layer *mastaba* with an underground burial chamber to a six-step pyramid.

The first king of the Fourth Dynasty, Sneferu (father of Khufu), built three pyramids around 2500 B.C.E. The first, the **Meidum Pyramid**, was an attempt at a true (straight-sided) pyramid constructed over a step pyramid. Its limestone casing seems not to have had enough support: part of it fell off. This may be the reason that Sneferu's second pyramid, the **Bent Pyramid**, which was meant to be a true pyramid from the start, has a sudden change of angle. Maybe the builders realized the original angle was too steep. Sneferu's **Red Pyramid**, his third, was the first true pyramid to survive.

# PYRAMIDS AND ZIGGURATS

## COMPARING AND CONTRASTING ANCIENT EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS AND MESOPOTAMIAN ZIGGURATS

Early civilizations in the Middle East, the Americas, and elsewhere built towering structures that held importance in their societies. But their meaning to the people who planned, built, and lived with them was markedly different.

## The Ziggurats

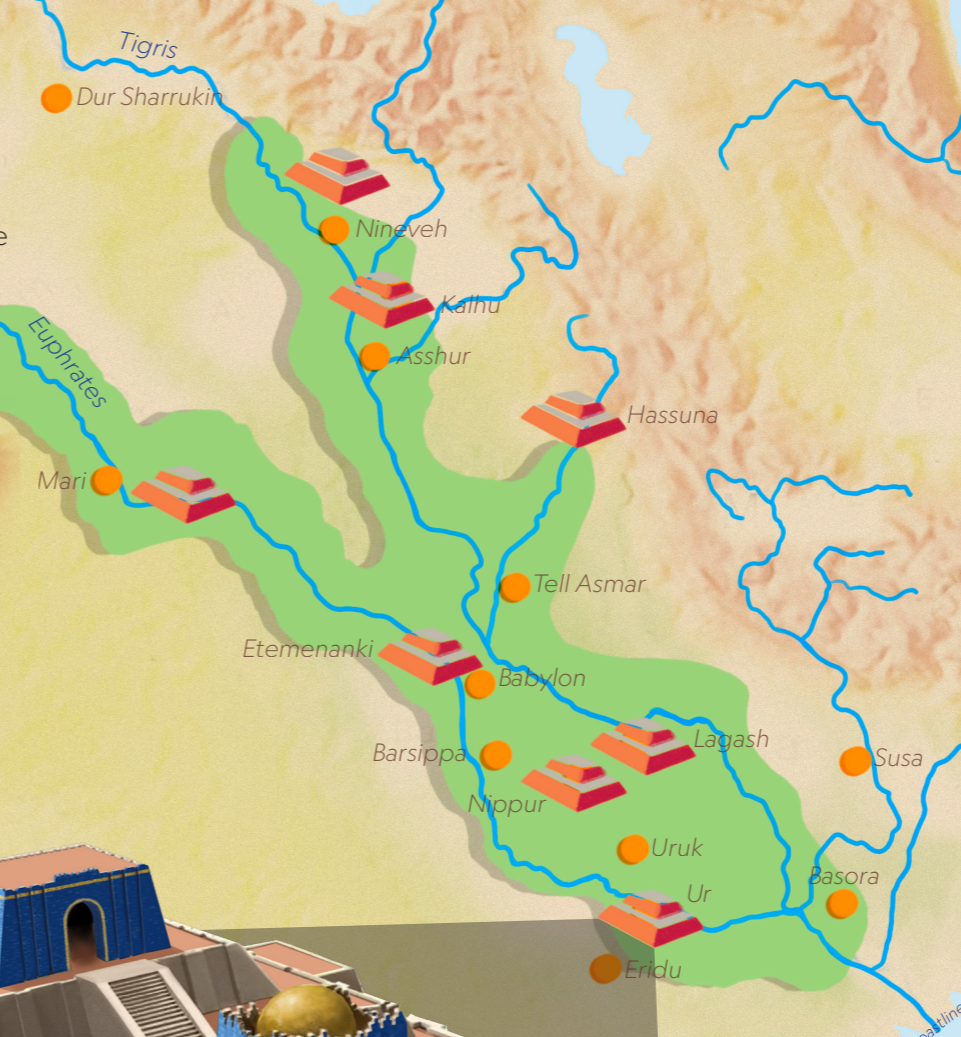
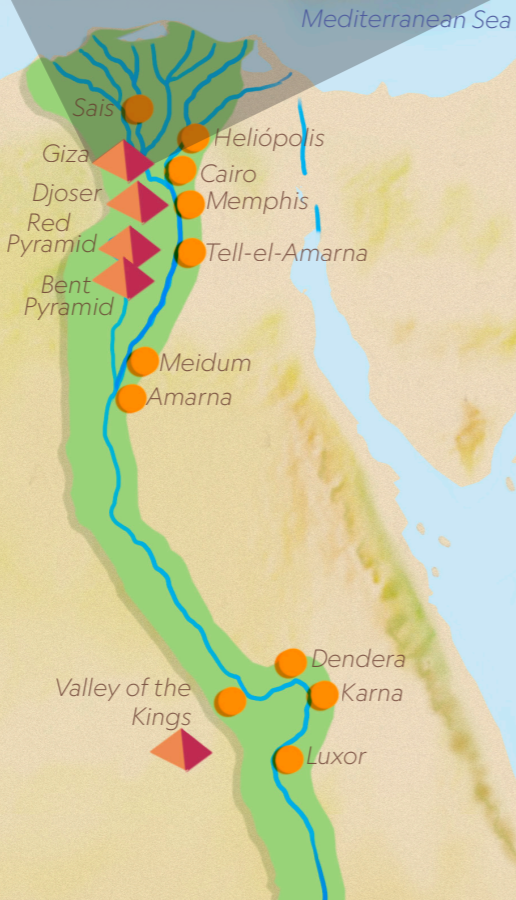
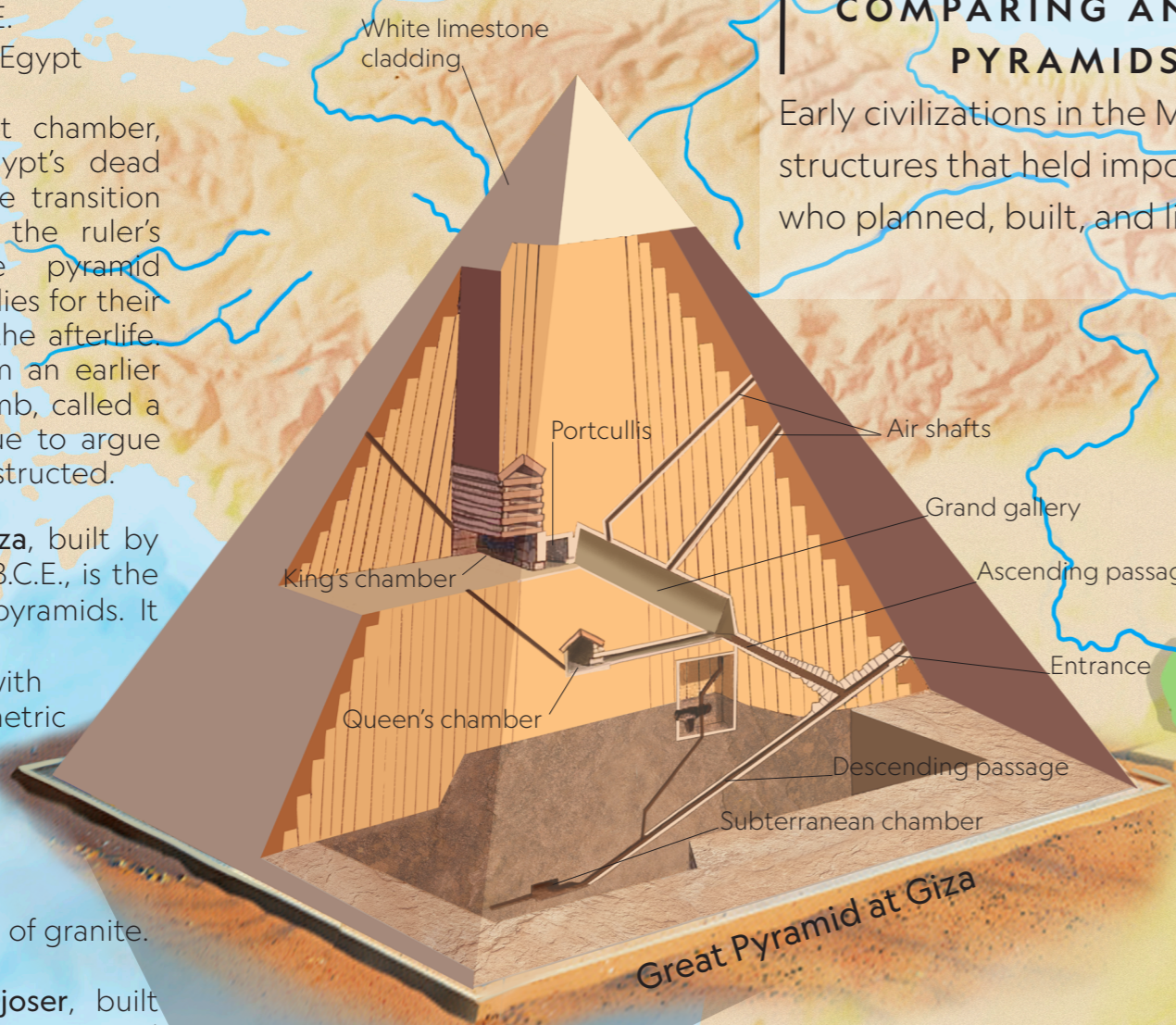
Built circa 2100–500s B.C.E.  
Sumer / Babylonia / Assyria

High atop the ziggurats, scholars believe there was either a shrine to the greatest god of the location or an area designed for astronomical observation. Since there are no complete ziggurats left in the world, we cannot know with certainty. Ziggurats may have developed from earlier shrines that were raised above ground level.

The **Great Ziggurat of Ur** was built by Ur-Nammu in the twenty-first century B.C.E. and was dedicated to the moon god Nanna/Sin. It is a rectangular, three-layer ziggurat, without interior chambers. Entered by three staircases (one in the front, and one on each side), its sides aligned from north to south and from east to west. It was built using sunbaked mud bricks and with a baked brick casing for protection.

**Etemenanki**, also known as the **Temple of Marduk** and thought by some to be the original Tower of Babel, was a seven-layer Babylonian ziggurat, with each layer a different color. The top was probably accessed using ramps.

Assyrian king **Sargon II** built a ziggurat in Dur Sharrukin, now Khorsabad, in the eighth century B.C.E. There are four layers left, originally colored in order from the bottom, white, black, red, and white or blue.



- City location
- ▭ Known ziggurat locations
- ▴ Known pyramid locations