Reviews


Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

When Professor Tallet visited Melbourne some years ago he spoke about his discovery on the Egyptian Red Sea coast of papyri that were written by workers associated with the construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza. His lecture was given on a sleepy winter Sunday afternoon to a sparse audience in a theatre at the deserted Monash University campus. Surely, I thought, this significant discovery deserved to be more widely publicised, although the absence of aliens may have dampened the enthusiasm of some local media. This profusely illustrated and comprehensive book, which was obtained from a Melbourne bookshop, goes a long way to rectifying the situation.

Pierre Tallet is Professor of Egyptology at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, President of the French Society of Egyptology, and director of the CNRS research unit *Orient et Méditerranée*. He directed the archaeological team that discovered the papyri at Wadi el-Jarf. Mark Lehner is President of the Ancient Egypt Research Associates and an Associate at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. He is arguably the current leading world authority on Egyptian pyramids. They give the book a distinctive imprimatur of authority.

The circumstances of the discovery of the papyri are described in the Prologue and Introduction. Between 2011 and 2013, Tallet’s team found underground galleries at the ancient Red Sea port of Wadi el-Jarf, which contained disassembled boats and an archive of papyrus documents. The galleries were sealed with limestone blocks bearing the cartouche of King Khufu (2633–2605 BC). The documents were dated to the 26th year of Khufu’s reign and included a daily log of the sailors who were responsible for transporting limestone blocks and supplies for the construction of the Great Pyramid. For many years Mark Lehner had been conducting excavations at Giza. The results from these two excavations are the subject of the book, which tells how this ‘parallel research has totally transformed what we know about one of the greatest construction projects ever undertaken, and how that project shaped the creation of the ancient Egyptian state’ (p. 12).

The book is written in six parts: On the trail of the pyramid builders; Why the Red Sea and the pyramids are linked; The world’s oldest written documents; The story of Inspector Merer; How they built the Great Pyramid; and Legacy. Most books about the pyramids describe the evolution of their design, their religious significance, and funerary functions. This book uses data from the excavations at Giza, the Red Sea coast and Sinai, and the information contained in the papyri, to describe the logistics that bought together the stone and metal resources and the processes used to build the Great Pyramid.

The first chapter, *Riches in Egypt’s Remote Deserts*, describes Tallet’s exploration in the Western Desert where he located Middle Kingdom inscriptions at the Bahariya Oasis, and in an Old Kingdom mining area of Sinai, where he discovered inscriptions and rock carved images, many of which were of boats. The modern urban mind may find this beginning of a book about Egyptian pyramids rather strange, but Tallet is demonstrating that complex societies, such as Old Kingdom Egypt, were dependent on the discovery, procurement and utilisation of resources in far-flung places.

The following chapter examines the logistics associated with the transportation of the resources to the Nile valley. The southern most port on the Red Sea was Mersa Gawasis. It was discovered in 1976 and was found to have operated during the Middle Kingdom. In the north, Ayn Sukhna was excavated in 2001 revealing it to have been active from the Old Kingdom until the Coptic period. Wadi el-Jarf, the Old Kingdom port and place where the papyri were discovered, is 100km south of Ayn Sukhna. All sites had underground galleries for storage, especially of disassembled boats. Their presence in the galleries indicates that the ports were used for campaigns to Sinai and Africa and were probably not operated perennially.

The link between the Red Sea ports and the pyramids arose because of the need for copper sourced from Sinai.
to fashion tools used in the preparation of stone blocks. Chapter three discusses the copper production (Tallet) and its use in pyramid construction (Lehner). Tallet’s team estimated there to be at least 3,000 smelting units at Seh Nasb in southern Sinai, but it was not possible to date them. The images of them are reminiscent of the smelters at New Kingdom Timna, and the suggested reconstructions are not convincing (p. 76). Rather than importing wood to fuel the smelters, as the book suggests, it was more likely that charcoal was used. There is no mention of artifacts such as those from Serabit el-Khadim published by Beit-Arieh in _Levant_ 1985. Sadly, the political situation prevents any further exploration of the area. Lehner implies that many thousands of tonnes of copper were required to build the pyramids and to fabricate funerary equipment and much of it came from Sinai.

The design and construction of Khufu’s Great Pyramid complex, and those before it, are discussed in a chapter that conveys Lehner’s current thinking. In his view, the Meidum pyramid was Sneferu’s first pyramid project, it had its construction restarted in the latter years of Sneferu’s reign and was left unfinished when he died. This leads to the proposition in the following chapter that the port of Wadi el-Jarf began during Sneferu’s reign because of its convenient location to Meidum. It continued to be used during the time of Khufu but was abandoned when Ayn Sukhna became the preferred port during the reign of Khafre.

The finds from the galleries of Wadi el-Jarf are described in chapter six. There were many well-preserved organic artifacts associated with seafaring including rope, wood and textiles. Pottery was produced at the site and markings on it led to the conclusion that the port was used for about 70 years. Inscriptions written on pottery sherds and limestone blocks yielded information about the identity of work-gangs active at the site, but it was the bundles of papyri discovered in Galleries 1 and 2 that provide the primary impetus for the book.

The papyri date to about 2607 BC, near the end of the reign of Khufu and comprise accounts describing the delivery of food and equipment to the work-gang (aper), and most importantly, the remains of many logbooks reporting on the daily activities of the gang. There are over a thousand fragments from what were originally at least thirty scrolls, they are written in the hieratic script and are the oldest explicitly dated Egyptian documents.

Chapter seven lists comparative collections of Old Kingdom papyri, describes the conservation techniques applied and the reconstitution of the fragments into a series of incomplete documents. Using tables, images and drawings of the papyri, Tallet explains the organisation of the documents and provides translations of Papyri A and B. He concedes that the repetitive nature of the documents may not be fascinating reading, but they do ‘provide a clear insight into the topography of the area of the construction site at Giza during this period, especially the network of canals and artificial ponds that had been developed to facilitate the delivery of massive amounts of material brought by boat’ (p. 175). The writer of the papyri, Merer, saw the Great Pyramid being built.

Part four of the book is devoted to the working life of Merer and his crew as it can be deduced from the papyri and other evidence. While the documents do not describe how the work was undertaken, they do provide logistical data that imply the numbers of boats and men operating. In addition to carrying limestone blocks from Tura to Giza, the team did labouring tasks, such as constructing port facilities, work programs in the Nile delta, voyages across the Red Sea and they participated in the king’s cultic program. The papyri were written over a one-year period and reveal the mobility and versatility of the work-gang. It is possible that the documents were left at Wadi el-Jarf on the death of King Khufu.

The penultimate part of the book discusses the construction of the Great Pyramid. Using information from recent excavations by Lehner, it begins with a discussion about the workers’ accommodation at Giza, where Merer’s work-gang occasionally resided. Also discussed are the formation of canals, docks and ramps, the quarrying, movement and dressing of stone blocks, and the construction of temples, causeways and boat-pits.

The contribution that the pyramid construction project made to the formation of the Old Kingdom State of Egypt is the subject of the final part. The project consolidated ‘the Two Lands into a unified, territorial state’ (p. 288). Workmen who were members of households and villages were welded into work groups with titles to serve the state. This fostered a bureaucratic mindset that tracked products and people, and it broke down clan and regional allegiances. The pyramids and the processes employed to create them became part of the Egyptian identity.

The book has an index, bibliography for further reading and an Egyptian chronology. The text is admirably supported with photographs, tables, maps and diagrams. It is both a resource and a good read.

So much ancient history has no tangible presence in the modern world, but the pyramids of Giza remain some of the most extraordinary ancient monuments ever known. This book systematically and professionally uses the most recent discoveries and research to describe how the Great Pyramid was built and how the workmen involved lived. It demonstrates how to interpret ancient administrative documents, archaeological excavation findings, geological data, geography, and climate to envisage a credible construction program that achieved the incredible. This book is essential reading for anyone studying Old Kingdom Egypt, state formation, ancient engineering and complex society.