

# Archaeology day at History Center brings pyramids to life

By Rebecca Herren  
For Cannon Beach Gazette

The Egyptian pyramids are some of the most majestic man-made structures in history. Their massive scale reflects the role a pharaoh or king played in ancient Egyptian society. The pyramids began being built in the Old Kingdom and more than 4,000 years later, they continue to retain much of their majesty while providing a glimpse into Egypt's past.

Dr. Sarah Sterling of Portland State University made a return trip to Cannon Beach on Oct. 24 for a presentation on "Why Build the Pyramids?" as part of a joined partnership with the Cannon Beach History Center and Museum and International Archaeology Day.

From the Dynastic Era to the Great Pyramids of Giza, many years were spent perfecting the structure and much of it depended on the skill set of the workers. Early tombs were carved into the rock and covered with flat-roofed structures. The earliest known pyramid can be contributed to third dynasty King Djoser and the step pyramid. These pyramids were made of stone, and later with granite, as opposed to the precursor of mud-brick material. All materials, according to Sterling, were locally and abundantly sourced and did not need to be imported from a great distance.

The earliest smooth-sided tomb constructed was the Red Pyramid at Dahshur, one of three burial structures built for King Sneferu. King Khufu, Sneferu's successor, built the first pyramid in Giza.

The Great Pyramid of Giza took nearly 20 years to build. At the time, it was more than 481 feet tall, and remains today, as the tallest man-made structure of the ancient, seven wonders of the world. "It was made with more than two million cubic meters of stone," Sterling said.

As pyramids grew in size, they became a complex of courtyards, chapels, causeways



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The second pyramid in Giza, which included the Sphinx.

and shrines. Multiple chambers were built inside the structure. Drawings on interior walls signified activities the dead would do in the afterlife — similar to real life activities such as fishing and hunting.

Pyramids were built as part of the belief system for the afterlife, Sterling said. King Khufu believed the Great Pyramid was his stairway to heavens. "Egyptians didn't feel that death was the end, but that the afterlife was the beginning." However, not just kings, pharaohs and the wealthy received afterlife burials, "anyone could have an afterlife burial, they just had to pay for it," she said, adding, "some burials were quick and dirty, while others were more elaborate."

Sterling explained the process of the afterlife. First, the soul must make a journey. Some organs such as the lungs, liver, intestines and stomach must be removed and put into hollow canopic jars before the journey could begin. "The soul of the living body — the life force — can only travel without the putrefying elements, and that's why they are removed," Sterling said. The journey must also be done at night, and if not successful, "the dead would remain dead."

Bodies are wrapped in linen bandages as part of the mummification process. Early mummification was just the skeleton wrapped in linen, not

like the later mummification techniques, Sterling explained.

Charms and amulets were added as protection. The opening of the mouth ceremony allowed the soul to speak and breath during its journey. Death masks allowed the soul to see as it made its journey at night. All this, according to Sterling, was about packaging so the bodies could be reassembled later. "Like IKEA kits for the afterlife," she mused.

A king's tomb was a statement of their wealth. Some kings were buried with their royal household, boats and other luxuries to accompany them to the afterlife. King Aha had three lions slaughtered and King Djer had his royal harem buried with him. The practice of human sacrifice ceased by the third dynasty.

When asked about the fate of the structures, Sterling said there is a concern since pyramids are in danger of deteriorating due to climate change, as well as the threat of theft and destruction by terrorists groups, and the selling of antiquities on the black market.

Sterling has overseen excavations around the world and spent between five to six years at digs in Egypt. She is an assistant professor in the anthropology department at Portland State University. She lectures and publishes on topics related to Old Kingdom pyramids, economics and ceramics.

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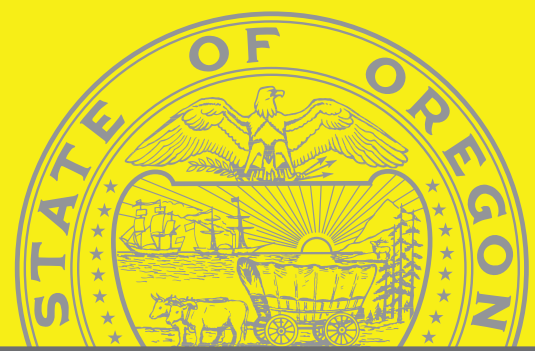
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Proceeds from the weekend main events go to support the Cannon Beach Library

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