

Discovery of workers' tombs 'shows pyramids were not built by slaves'

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The long-held image of slaves toiling in the Egyptian desert to build the Great Pyramids of Giza was challenged this week by the discovery of new tombs along the pyramids.

Egypt's chief archaeologist, Zahi Hawass, said that the tombs supported the view that the pyramids were built by free, paid workers — not slaves.

"These tombs were built beside the king's pyramid, which indicates that these people were not by any means slaves," said Mr Hawass. "If they were slaves, they would not have been able to build their tombs beside their king's."

The 4,150-year-old tombs belonged to workers who toiled on the pyramids of Khufu and Khafre, he said. Graffiti on the walls of the tombs calls them "friends of Khufu". Experts say that workers' tombs from the 4th Dynasty were cone-shaped constructions of mud bricks covered in white plaster — probably meant to mimic the nearby pyramids of the kings.

The discovery sheds new light on the labourers of that time, said Hawass, showing that the makers of the pyramids ate and toiled. The men who took part in building the pyramids ate well — consuming meat regularly. Hawass said that the ten thousand labourers working on the pyramids ate 21 cattle and 23 sheep sent to them daily from farms in northern and southern Egypt. The work was done in three-month shifts, after which labourers were given the honour of building their mud tombs within the shadow of the pyramids.

The first discovery of workers' tombs came on April 14, 1990. In his account, Mr Hawass said that an American tourist was thrown from her horse when the animal stumbled on a previously unseen wall outside a burial chamber. The wall was excavated, and discovered to be part of a tomb for a family and for workers in the area.

Before then, theories about the laborers who constructed the pyramids were based on ancient writings and folklore. The Greek historian, Herodotus, visited Egypt several thousand years after Khufu's pyramid was built, he wrote that Khufu forced his people to "labour as slaves for his own advantage" thus prompting the first accounts that the pyramids were built by slaves.

The myth that Jewish slaves built the pyramids began towards the end of the first century AD, when the Jewish historian Josephus listed pyramid building among the hardships that ancient Hebrews had to endure during their years in Egypt. His idea has persisted, though modern-day historians have concluded that the Great Pyramids were built thousands of years before the Hebrews would have arrived in Egypt.

