

Imhotep: A Great and Ancient Builder

by Thomas D. Worrel

The oldest known architect in the history of the Western world whose handiwork is still standing is a man known in ancient Egypt as Imhotep. He lived in the Third Dynasty of ancient Egypt during the reign of the pharaoh Djoser (Zoser or Joser) who was the king of a united Upper and Lower Egypt centered in the ancient capital of Memphis. As pharaoh, Djoser was known as Horus Netjerykhet or Horus-in-the-flesh. Horus was a very powerful sun god in Egypt. Djoser was the first king of what is now specified as the Old Kingdom and his reign was for approximately 19 years from 2654-2635 B.C.E. (over 4600 years ago). It was this pharaoh who ushered in the era of the pyramids. West of Memphis, upon the plain of Saqqara, the first pyramid was built, the magnificent Step Pyramid of King Djoser under the direction of the architect Imhotep.

Prior to the building of the Step Pyramid, structures were built of mud brick. This pyramid, about thirty minutes south of the Great Pyramids, is in the center of an enormous enclosure (885 by 1,470 feet) that surrounds a complex of buildings, temple chambers and open courtyards that are all built of hewn stone. The whole complex exhibits new and interesting architectural developments not seen before. Many innovations were used and new building techniques and materials introduced. The pyramid itself is of six steps rising over 200 feet with a base 358 by 411 feet. It was made of blocks of limestone with the facing of very high-grade limestone that was almost marble.

The pyramid form was very important to the Egyptian civilization. It is interesting that the hieroglyphic sign for the first land that emerged from the waters (in Egyptian mythology), the primeval hill, resembles a step pyramid. And also probably related, the earliest funerary literature portrays the king's ascent to heaven upon a stairway formed by the rays of the sun. Still, later the pyramids progressed to the smooth sides that we think of today.

Imhotep (whose name means: “he who cometh in peace”) was a commoner who became the Vizier and physician of King Djoser as well as a chief priest and architect. His various titles indicate that he was in the highest religious and secular offices. Not only was he the architect of the first colossal stone edifice built but he was the architect of other large projects including a sanctuary to the sun god at Heliopolis, the City of the Sun.

Imhotep’s fame and reputation grew as enormous as his architectural accomplishments. His healing skills were such that he eventually became deified as a god of medicine and the son of Ptah. (Ptah was the tutelary deity of Memphis and creator god who gave life to the other gods.) Ptah was known as the Supreme Artificer. We find a vigorous cult centered on Imhotep as late as the 6th century B.C.E., 2000 years after his death. People were celebrating his feast day even as late as 46 B.C.E. His role as the supreme physician influenced the Greeks to identify him with Asklepios (the Greek god of healing whose symbol was the staff entwined by the serpent). Because of his skills in writing, magic and medicine, Imhotep was also given the title of: “the Image and Likeness of Thoth the Wise”. (Thoth was a major god associated with writing, wisdom and learning. He was a patron of the temple scribes. He is also depicted as recording the judgment of the dead in the afterlife.) It should not be a surprise that he was associated with other gods and heroic figures through history. The advisor of kings, the great builder Imhotep surely deserves a prominent place in the Masonic Hall of Heroes.

For further reading on Imhotep see: *Imhotep: The Vizier and Physician of King Zoser* by Jamieson B. Hurry (Oxford University Press 1926).