

Topic Page: [Pyramids](#)

Definition: **pyramid** from *The Chambers Dictionary*

(*pl* **pyr'amids**, also (*obs*) **pyramides** /pir-am'i-dēz/ and (*poetic*) **pyram'ids** and **pyram'ides** (3 syllables)) a solid figure on a triangular, square, or polygonal base, with triangular sides meeting in a point; any object or structure of that or a similar form, *esp* a huge ancient Egyptian monument; a crystal form of three or more faces each cutting three axes (*crystallog*); (*in pl*) a game played on a billiard table in which the balls are arranged in pyramid shape.

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(chiefly *US*) to increase one's holdings, profits, etc during a boom period by using paper profits for further purchases. [*Gr pyramis, -idos*]

■ **pyram'idal, pyramid'ic or pyramid'ical**

adj

having the form of a pyramid.

■ **pyram'idally or pyramid'ically**

adv.

■ **pyramid'ion**

n

the small pyramidal apex of an obelisk.

■ **pyram'idist or pyramidol'ogist**

n

someone who studies the Egyptian pyramids.

■ **pyramidol'ogy**

n.

■ **pyram'idon**

n

an organ stop with pipes like inverted pyramids.

■ **pyr'amis**

n

(*pl* **pyram'ides** /-i-dēz/ or **pyr'amises**) (*Shakesp*, etc) a pyramid.

pyramid of numbers

n

the relative decrease in numbers at each stage of a food chain, characteristic of animal communities.

pyramid selling

n

a method of distributing goods by selling batches to agents who then sell batches at increased prices to sub-agents, and so on.



Image from: [Egypt, Cairo, Ancient Memphis, Pyramids at Giza. Pyramid of Khafre \(greek: Chephren\) and Pyramid of Menkaure \(greek: Mykerinus\) in the background, sunset in Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

Summary Article: **Pyramid**
from *The Classical Tradition*

Architectural form consisting of a square or trapezoidal base with four triangular sides meeting at a central point or apex. The pyramid achieved its characteristic form in pharaonic Egypt, where edifices of this type were employed as sepulchral monuments. The largest and most celebrated examples were constructed ca. 2500 bce from great masses of stone masonry and were the focal points of enormous funerary complexes constructed for the burials of Egyptian kings. In the classical tradition, pyramids have been constructed primarily as tombs, often in conscious emulation of Egyptian precedent. The pyramidal temples of Mesoamerica represent a separate tradition whose nomenclature is a product of European interpretation.

The word derives from the Greek *pyramis*, meaning "wheat cake," although some commentators in antiquity associated the form with the *pyr*, or "flame," that consumed the body and transformed it into spirit, according to later Graeco-Roman thinking. The Egyptian word for pyramid was *mer*, represented by a hieroglyph in the shape of its sides, Δ . Like its cousin the obelisk, the pyramid seems to have derived its shape from the *benben*, a sacred stone that symbolized the mound of creation, where the rays of the life-giving sun first touched the earth. Inscriptions in the burial chambers of some later pyramids suggest that the pyramids were conceived as monumental stairways to heaven which the spirit of the king could ascend to take his place among the stars. The Egyptian name of Khufu's pyramid, "Khufu belongs to Horizon," neatly invokes the solar and celestial aspect of the pyramids' meaning.

As enduring symbols of pharaonic power and the afterlife, pyramids were sometimes imitated by tomb builders in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Among the Greeks the most notable case was the stepped pyramid on the upper part of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (ca. 350s bce). In Rome several pyramid tombs were erected during the imperial era. The best-preserved of these is the tomb of the Augustan official Gaius Cestius in Rome (built after ca. 12 bce). During the Middle Ages a new explanation of the Giza pyramids, as being the granaries built by Joseph that are mentioned in Genesis, emerged in the European pilgrim literature, but writers in Arabic continued to recognize them as tombs and associated their conception with the mystical doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus.

During the Renaissance the Roman pyramids were recognized as imitations of those in Egypt, and travelers to Egypt like Cyriacus of Ancona (d. ca. 1455) explored the Giza monuments with the explanations of ancient writers like Herodotus and Pliny the Elder as their guides. The classical authors did not really approve of the Egyptian pyramids, which they saw as impressive but ultimately useless monuments to vainglorious luxury and tyranny. But this did not prevent later and modern artists from designing, and patrons from ordering, versions of pyramids. The gold- and jewel-encrusted pyramids of Osiris in Pinturicchio's frescoes in the Borgia Apartment (Vatican Palace, 1492-1494) were inspired by the remains of the so-called Meta Romuli Pyramid in the Vatican. In contrast, the huge, imaginary pyramid temple that appears in Francesco Colonna's 1499 romance, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, seems to draw from both classical and contemporary accounts of Egyptian pyramids. Some years later

the pyramid was transformed from a freestanding to a wall-mounted monument in the tombs of the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome (designed ca. 1518-1519 by Raphael).

During the 17th and 18th centuries printed descriptions and travel accounts helped to sustain and renew European interest in the pyramids. In the 18th century architects like Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Étienne-Louis Boullée, and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux produced designs for, and in some cases actually built, pyramidal monuments for gardens, mausolea, and even industrial structures. In 1782 the Masonic image of a pyramid topped by the all-seeing Eye of Providence was adopted for the obverse side of the Great Seal of the United States, and it is in that context that it appears today on the back of the dollar bill.

The publications released in the wake of the Napoleonic Egyptian campaign of 1798-1801 continued to fuel the taste for pyramids and for Egyptianizing designs in general, and variants of the form became familiar elements in cemeteries. The taste for pyramids has erupted periodically ever since, most recently and visibly with I. M. Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre in Paris (1989) and the glamorized splendor of the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas (1992).

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