



The ancient, paved quarry road leading downslope from the quarries

The basalt quarries, 80 km south-west of Cairo, Egypt, are considered the source of stone used on the mortuary temple floors and walls of 4th and 5th Dynasty (c. 2575-2323 BC) pyramid complexes of the Old Kingdom. The tholeiitic flood basalt consists of several individual lava flows, of early Oligocene age, that cap the Gebel Qatrani escarpment at approximately 300 metres above sea level. Due to the highly fractured nature of the basalt, quarrying was primarily by levering of blocks to about a depth of 10 m into the upper layer of the flow, resulting in a series of shallow swales in the escarpment (foreground, large photo). Natural weathering and waste pushed down the escarpment presents a dramatic landscape of extensive dark scree slopes. Non-local dolerite stone axes and pottery dating to the 4th and 5th Dynasty attest to predominant Old Kingdom quarrying, although exploitation also occurred in the Roman Period. An encampment, comprising 5 basalt stone circles, is the only evidence of dwelling places for a small number of quarrymen. The 11 km quarry road, terminating at a quay on the extinct shores of ancient Lake Moeris at Qasr el-Sagha, is the oldest paved road in the world. Although the basalt appears extremely deteriorated due to weathering, the setting and logistics of the basalt quarrying appear spectacular also today. Modern quarrying has destroyed parts of the ancient quarries, and desert tourism represents a threat to the fragile material culture at the site. (Elizabeth Bloxam and Per Storemyr)



Block storage where the quarry road begins



Stone tools from southern Egypt

The basalt paving as seen in front of the Great Pyramid

