The Acropolis of Athens, Athens, Greece

The Acropolis (which means “high city” in Greek) was built on top of what is known as the “Sacred Rock” of Athens, and it was supposed to radiate power and protection for its citizens. It was also known, in ancient times, as Cecropia in honour of the legendary serpent-man, Kekrops or Cecrops, the first Athenian king. A large temple dedicated to Athena Polias (Protectress of the City) was probably built here by the mid-6th century B.C. This Doric limestone building was referred to as the "Bluebeard" temple, named after the three-bodied man-serpent sculpture that was part of it, whose beards were painted dark blue. Whether this temple replaced an older one or simply was built where there had been a sacred altar is not known. Later this century (6th century B.C.), yet another temple was built, usually called the Archaïos Naos (Old Temple).

Much of the original Acropolis, including the Older Parthenon, was destroyed by the invading Persians in 480 B.C. Once the Persian Wars were over, the Athenians fixed the sacred place up, first ceremonially burying objects of worship and art that could not be used any more—this group of articles is the richest archaeological treasure found on the Acropolis, having been protected from further destruction through the ages by the rebuilding of the temples on top of it.

Most of the major temples were rebuilt under the leadership of Pericles during what is called the Golden Age of Athens (460–430 BC). Phidias, a great Athenian sculptor, and two famous architects, Ictinus and Callicrates, were mostly responsible for the reconstruction of the great monument. During the 5th century B.C., the Acropolis gained its final shape. After an interruption caused by the Peloponnesian War, the temple was finished during the time of Nicias’ peace, between 421 and 415 B.C.

The temples of the Acropolis have become some of most famous architectural landmarks of ancient and modern history. Today, the Parthenon in particular is an international symbol of Greek civilization. A graphic illustration of the temple also appears in the UNESCO logo, representing culture and education.

The Acropolis is a great symbol of Civilization & Democracy!
The Great Wall of China

The Great Wall was built to link existing fortifications into a united defence system and keep invading nomadic Mongol tribes out of China. It is the largest man-made monument ever built and is the only one often said (and sometimes disputed!) to be visible from space.

Like a huge dragon, the Great Wall winds across plateaus, deserts, grasslands and mountains, stretching some 6,700 km (4,163 miles) from East to West. Over the more than 2,000 years that the wall has been standing, some areas have fallen apart or even disappeared. Yet, the remarkable architectural grandeur and historical significance still attract hundreds of thousands of tourists to the Great Wall every year.

The Great Wall was built as a defensive fortification by three states: Yan, Zhao and Qin. The Great Wall went through constant extensions and repairs in later dynasties. Construction on the first section began between the 7th and 6th century BC, and the last work on the wall was done between the 14th and 17th centuries. In fact, it began as independent walls for different states when it was first built, and did not become the "Great" wall until the Qin Dynasty. Emperor Qin Shihuang succeeded in his effort to have the walls joined together to fend off invasions from in the north after China’s unification. However, the advantages of the enormous barrier faded with the arrival of gunpowder and other weaponry. In any case, the Great Wall has served as a monument of the Chinese nation throughout history.

The wall was originally built of stone, wood, grass and earth. Later, in the Ming Dynasty, bricks were produced in kilns set up along the wall. The bricks were transported by men carrying them on their backs, donkeys, mules and even by goats with a brick tied to their head being driven up a mountain.

Many legends exist about the Great Wall, such as the famous story of Meng Jiangnu, set during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.). Meng Jiangnu's husband, Fan Qiliang, was sent by federal officials to work on the Great Wall. Having heard nothing from him for months, she went to look for him. By the time she reached the wall, her husband had already died. She began to cry desperately and her howls caused part of the Great Wall to collapse. This story is said in China to show how the Great Wall was built by tens of thousands of Chinese commoners, many of whom died—and were buried in the wall.

The Great Wall of China is incredible proof of Perseverance & Persistence!
The Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

The Church of Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya in Turkish) was built during the reign of Emperor Justinian (532-537), when the Byzantine Empire was at the height of its power and influence. It was the Cathedral of the Patriarchate of Constantinople for more than 1,000 years. Originally known as the Great Church because of its size, it was later called Hagia Sophia—not dedicated to St. Sophia, as is often thought, but to the “Holy Wisdom” of Christ. It was converted to a mosque after Constantinople (now Istanbul) fell to the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Mehmed II (The Conqueror) in 1453. In 1935, Turkish president Kemal Atatürk ordered Hagia Sophia to be turned into the Ayasofya Museum.

Justinian’s architects, Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, a physicist and a mathematician, created a spectacular and revolutionarily domed church—the greatest cathedral ever built up to that time, and the largest one in the world for 1,000 years—until the completion of the cathedral in Seville. Today, it is the fourth-largest cathedral in the world. Old records list 600 persons working in Hagia Sophia: 80 priests, 150 deacons, 40 deaconesses, 70 subdeacons, 160 readers, 25 chanters and 75 door keepers.

Hagia Sophia measures 77 x 72 meters (252 x 236 ft), and the dome, with a diameter of 33 meters (108 ft), soars 62 meters (203 ft) high. The huge dome is the most remarkable part of the building, supported by four massive piers. Four arches swing across, linked by four pendentives—a structural element which had never been used before. The pendentives let the round dome transition gracefully into the square shape of the piers below, for beauty, but also allow the weight of the dome to push downward. This gives the light inside Hagia Sophia its famous, mystical quality, making the dome seem to float above the nave, or main aisle—possible because the dome is shaped like a scalloped shell or the inside of an umbrella, with the ribs or arches extending from the top down to the base. The temple itself was richly decorated.

In the 15th century, since conservative factions of Islam consider pictures of the human form to be blasphemous, Hagia Sophia’s mosaics were covered with plaster. However, thanks to the Foresight and tolerance of the Ottoman Sultans, the plaster was periodically removed, the mosaics maintained, and replastered—so they have survived and many can now be seen in the museum.

Hagia Sophia now stands for Faith & Respect!
Machu Picchu, Peru

Around 1440, it is believed that the Pachacútec Yupanqui, the founder of the Inca Empire, built the city in the clouds known as Machu Picchu ("old mountain") in what is now Peru. This extraordinary settlement lies 2,350 m (7,710 ft) above sea level, deep in the Amazon jungle above the Urubamba River.

Forgotten for centuries by the outside world, Machu Picchu attracted international attention when it was rediscovered by the American archaeologist Hiram Bingham in 1911. There are several different theories as to what Machu Picchu was: some believe it was the luxurious mausoleum (burial site) of Pachacútec, since there are remains of buildings that were covered with gold; others think that it was an Incan "llacta," a settlement built to both control the economy of the conquered regions and to protect the top Incan aristocracy in the case of an attack. Another theory expands on this idea, seeing Machu Picchu as a country retreat for Inca nobility. It may also have been used as an observatory and for astrological ceremonies. A maximum of 750 people probably lived in the “Lost City of the Incas” at once. It is said that the silhouette of the mountain range behind Machu Picchu represents the face of the Inca looking upward towards the sky, with the largest peak, Huayna Picchu (“young mountain”) representing his nose.

Machu Picchu had a large agricultural area—with practical crops, such as corn and coca, and orchids and other decorative plants, as well as what were probably living and religious sections. In the upper urban area, there is the famous intihuatana (“the hitching post of the sun”), a stone column rising from a stone block the size of a grand piano. This solar clock exactly shows the dates of the two equinoxes and other important celestial events. It is thought that, as the winter solstice neared, when the sun seemed to disappear more each day, priests would hold a ceremony to tie the sun to the stone to prevent the sun from disappearing completely.

Everything shows that Machu Picchu was quickly abandoned when the Spanish, fighting the rebellious Incas of Vilcabamba, went into Cuzco lands. But deadly smallpox was faster than the conquistadors, and 50 percent of the population had probably been killed by the disease by 1527. The Inca government began to fail, part of the empire seceded and it fell into civil war. So, by the time Pizarro, the Inca’s conqueror, arrived in Cuzco in 1532, Machu Picchu was probably already a ghost town.

Machu Picchu is a symbol of Community & Dedication!
Petra, Jordan

On the edge of the Arabian Desert, nestled away in the mountains south of the Dead Sea, Petra was the glittering capital of the Nabataean empire of King Aretas IV (9 B.C. to 40 A.D.). Masters of water technology, the Nabataeans built their city with great tunnel constructions and water chambers that carried drinking water into the city and reduced the chance of flash floods. A theatre held an audience of 4,000. Today, the Palace Tombs, with the 42-meter-high (137-ft-high) Hellenistic temple facade on the El-Deir Monastery, are impressive examples of Middle Eastern culture. Petra, which means "stone" in Greek, has survived through the ages because almost all of its "buildings" were carved out of solid rock walls. It is perhaps the most spectacular ancient city remaining in the modern world.

To the north, the remains of a 9,000-year-old city make Petra, like Jericho, one of the earliest known Middle Eastern settlements. First a fortress city, Petra became a rich commercial center. Control of key trade routes brought Petra its fortune and produced monumental temples, tombs and administrative buildings. After the Romans annexed Petra in 106, its position as a commercial hub slowly weakened. The city may have housed 20,000-30,000 people during its heyday under the Romans, but, by the end of the Byzantine Empire (ca. 700), the hydraulic system and once-gracious buildings were almost ruins. For the following centuries, Petra disappeared from most maps and became a legend. In 1812, Swiss traveler Johann Burckhardt snuck into the city disguised as a Muslim and shared his story with the world.

Much of Petra’s fascination comes from its setting on the edge of Wadi Araba, part of the Great Rift Valley. The rugged sandstone hills form a deep canyon easily protected from all directions. The best access to Petra is through the Siq, a winding, often narrow valley which suddenly opens upon the most impressive of Petra’s monuments, al-Khazneh ("the Treasury"). Carved out of the mountain and over 40 meters (131 ft) high, it was a royal tomb—but legend says that pirates hid their treasure there, hence “the Treasury.” The main god of ancient Petra was Dushara, who was worshipped in the form of a black, rectangular stone, along with Allat, the chief goddess of the ancient Arabs. Worshipping sites can be seen at various points in Petra, and there are many open places of sacrifice marked by altars.

Petra is a great symbol of Engineering & Protection!
Angkor is the most important monument of the south-east Asian Khmer Empire and the world’s largest sacred temple complex, famous for its complex ornamentation and striking beauty. The temples at Angkor are spread out over around 64 km (40 miles) around the village of Siem Reap, about 308 km (192 miles) from the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. They were built between the 8th and 13th centuries, and range from simple brick towers to huge stone temple complexes. There are two main sites where the Khmer temples are located. The first, smaller and older place is at Roluos, the first Khmer capital in the Angkor area, south-east of the village of Siem Reap. In the late 9th century, Yasovarman I moved the capital to around Siem Reap. This is a much larger site, where the majority of the Khmer temples are located. It is officially known as the City of Angkor. There are other temples located in the area and Khmer temples can also be found in many other parts of Cambodia, as well as China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

The most famous temple in Angkor is Angkor Wat, a huge pyramid temple built by Suryavarman II between 1113 and 1150, generally seen as the masterpiece of Khmer architecture. It is surrounded by a moat 173 m (570 ft) wide and about 6.4 km (4 miles) long. The bas-relief carving is of the highest quality and the most beautifully executed in Angkor. With its water moats, concentric walls and great temple mountain in the center, Angkor Wat symbolizes the Hindu cosmos, with its oceans at the periphery and the Meru Mountain at the center of its universe. Some of the many other impressive temples include Ta Prohm, a very large temple complex built by Jayavarman VII in the later 12th century, enclosed by a moat—one of the most beautiful of the Khmer temples, as it is still surrounded by jungle; and the Bayon, a massive temple complex built by Jayavarman VII between 1181 and 1220 that features 1,199 m (3,936 ft) of beautiful bas-relief carving and mysterious Buddha faces carved on the third-level towers.

Like many other aspects of their culture, the Cambodians adapted Indian architectural methods and styles. Once the Indian influence on Cambodia weakened, by the 7th to 8th centuries A.D., Khmer architecture began to develop independently. It flourished under ambitious kings who ruled an empire rich in manpower and wealth. The Hindu religion played an important part in the Khmer temples. Jayavarman II (800 to 850 A.D.) introduced the cult of devaraja into Cambodia, which saw the king as a representative of the Hindu god Shiva. From then on, the temples were built to honor both the god and the king. It then became normal for each new king to build his own temple, which became his tomb after his death.

**Angkor is a great symbol of Beauty & Sanctity!**
Colosseum, Rome, Italy

The design concept of this great amphitheatre in the center of Rome is still relevant, having influenced almost every modern sports stadium. Today, through films and history books, we are even more aware of the cruel fights and games that took place in this arena, all for the joy of the spectators.

The Colosseum's name is believed to come from a colossus (a 40-meter or 130-ft statue) of Nero nearby, which was changed by Nero's successors into a statue of Sol or Apollo, the sun god. At some time during the Middle Ages, the statue disappeared.

The Colosseum is 48 meters (157.5 ft) high, 188 meters (617 ft) long, and 156 meters (512 ft) wide. There are 80 arches on each of the first three levels, and the wooden arena floor was covered with sand. Its elliptical shape kept the players from retreating to a corner, and let the spectators be closer to the action than in a circle. More than 100,000 cubic meters (3,531,466.62 cubic ft) of travertine stone was used in its construction. The Colosseum was cleverly designed, and most modern stadiums have important features first seen here. Seating was divided into sections: the podium, or first level, was for the Roman senators, and the emperor's cushioned box was also here. Above the podium was the area for other Roman aristocrats. The third level was divided into three sections: a lower part for wealthy citizens and an upper part for poor ones. A wooden area at the very top of the building was standing room only, for lower-class women. Today, the arena floor no longer exists, though the walls and corridors are visible in the ruins. There are also tunnels, still in existence, made to flood and evacuate water from the Colosseum floor so naval battles could be staged. Another innovative feature of was the cooling system, known as the velarium: a canvas-covered, net-like structure made of ropes, with a hole in the center. This roof covered two-thirds of the arena and sloped down toward the center to catch the wind and provide a breeze for the audience. Sailors on special platforms moved the ropes on command.

The Colosseum was in use until 217, when it was damaged by fire from lightning. Four earthquakes between 442 and 1349 severely hurt the building, which was then converted into a fortress with a Christian church built into one small area.

The Colosseum is now a symbol of Joy & Suffering!
Chichén Itzá, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico

The Mayan name "Chich'en Itza" means "at the mouth of the well of the Itza (people)." This famous temple city was the political and economic center of Mayan civilization. The pyramid of Kukulcan itself was the last, and arguably the greatest, of all Mayan temples.

Since the Yucatán Peninsula has no rivers, the three natural sinkholes (cenotes) at Chichén Itzá made it a good place for a city, providing plenty of water all year. Two of these cenotes still exist—the most famous is the "Cenote of Sacrifice," sacred to the Maya rain god Chaac. Offerings of jade, pottery and incense were thrown into the well, and occasionally, during times of bad drought, a human sacrifice. However, there is no proof to the legend that many beautiful, young women were sacrificed.

About 987, a Toltec king named Quetzalcóatl (there is a wonderful legend about him, who became the Maya plumed serpent god Kukulcan) arrived with an army from central Mexico, and, with local Mayan allies, made Chichén Itzá his capital. The art and architecture from this period are a mix of Maya and Toltec styles, such as the "Temple of the Warriors," which features an altar statue known as a chac mool.

In the center of Chichén Itzá is the Temple of Kukulcan, often called "El Castillo" (the castle). It is a step pyramid, with square terraces and staircases up each of the four sides to the temple on top. Great sculptures of plumed serpents run down the northern staircase and, because of how the shadows fall, seem to move on the spring and fall equinoxes. Inside, visitors can enter an older pyramid and climb up to the high room with King Kukulcan’s stone Jaguar Throne, painted red with jade-green spots.

There is also a large court at Chichén Itzá for playing a game called “pok ta pok,” which we think involved throwing a ball through a ring on the wall seven meters (around 23 ft) above the ground. The captain of the team that first scored was beheaded as a sacrifice to the gods and thought to rise directly to heaven.

In 1221, a revolt and civil war broke out and the wooden roofs of the great market and the Temple of the Warriors were burnt at that time. Chichén Itzá lost power, as rulership over Yucatán shifted to Mayapan.

Chichén Itzá symbolizes Worship & Knowledge!
Stonehenge, Amesbury, United Kingdom

Stonehenge is a Neolithic and Bronze Age megalithic monument in southern England made up of shaped soil around a circular setting of huge standing stones. It is not clear who built the monument, nor why. Today, about half of the original monument remains—some of the stones have fallen down, others carried away for building or repairing farm tracks and, over centuries, visitors have chipped souvenirs off, too.

Stonehenge was built in three phases, with the stones being rearranged many times during the last stage. It is estimated that millions of hours of work were needed to build it—around 243 years of work for one person! The first monument, built around 3100 B.C., was a circular bank and ditch enclosure around 110 meters (360 feet) in diameter. The ditch was dug by hand using animal bones as shovels and deer antlers as pick-axes with 56 holes were around the edge of the bank to hold wooden posts. Around 2500 B.C., Stonehenge was rebuilt—this time using bluestones, a kind of sandstone, from the Preseli Mountains in Wales 380 km (245 miles) away. They were probably dragged to the sea, floated on huge rafts to and up the River Avon and dragged to the site. Each stone weighs about five tons.

The final stage began about 2300 B.C. The bluestones were dug up and rearranged, and even bigger sandstones, or sarsen stones, were integrated—hammered to size with balls of stone known as "mauls." Each pair of stones was heaved upright and linked on the top by a complicated technique using lintels. The images of a dagger and 14 axe-heads are carved on one of the sarsens and other axe-head carvings have been seen on the outer faces of stones, probably dating from the Bronze Age, before 2100 B.C. Monument building at Stonehenge seems to have stopped around 1600 B.C.

There is much mythology surrounding Stonehenge. Since it is aligned north-east/south-west, there is a theory that astronomical rituals involved the solstice and equinox points—for example, on a midsummer's morning, the sun's first rays went directly into the center of the monument between the horseshoe arrangement. Other scholars argue that Stonehenge was the destination of a long, ritualized funerary procession, while old legends said that Merlin the wizard had a giant build Stonehenge for him, or that he had magically transported it from Ireland, while others said the Devil built it. Stonehenge probably comes from Old English: from "stan" meaning "stone", and either "hencg" meaning “hinge” or “hanging,” or "hen(c)en" meaning “gallows.”

Stonehenge represents, even today, Intrigue & Endurance!
The Taj Mahal, Agra, India

The Taj Mahal is regarded as the most perfect jewel of Muslim art in India. This huge mausoleum mosque was built by Shah Jahan, the fifth Muslim Mogul emperor, in memory of his beloved wife, a Persian princess born as Arjuman Bano Begum but known as Mumtaz Mahal. She was a significant influence in his life and in his policies, but died at age thirty-nine while giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631. The ruler went into deep mourning. Her last wish to her husband was "to build a tomb in her memory such as the world had never seen before." So Shah Jahan set about building this fairytale-like marvel of white marble, surrounded by formally laid-out walled gardens, The emperor, later buried in the Taj, was overthrown by his son and imprisoned in the nearby Great Red Fort for eight years, from which, it is said, he could see the Taj Mahal out of his small cell window.

The origin of the name "Taj Mahal" is not clear. Court histories from Shah Jehan's reign only call it the rauza (tomb) of Mumtaz Mahal. It is generally believed that "Taj Mahal" (usually translated as either "Crown Palace" or "Crown of the Palace") is an abbreviated version of her name.

The Taj Mahal was built between 1631 and 1648, with some 20,000 workmen employed on it daily, who lived in a specially built small town next to it called “Mumtazabad” for the dead empress, now known as Taj Ganj. The material was brought in from all over India and central Asia with the help of 1,000 elephants. The central dome is 57 meters, or 187 feet, high in the middle. A total of 28 beautiful stones were used: red sandstone was brought from Fatehpur Sikri, jasper from Punjab, jade and crystal from China, turquoise from Tibet, lapis lazuli and sapphire from Sri Lanka, coal and cornelian from Arabia and diamonds from Panna. The luminescent white marble was brought from far-off Makrana, Rajasthan. Nearly every surface of the entire complex has been decorated, and the exterior decorations are among the finest to be found in Mughal architecture of any period.

Unlike other Mughal tombs, the Taj Mahal gardens are all in front of the tomb and do not play any part in the background. Instead, the background is the sky. Since the tomb is set against a plain across a river, this background of eternal sky works its magic of colors that, through their reflection, subtly reflect on the white marble surface of the Taj Mahal, always changing its color and complexion. The composition of the forms and lines of the Taj Mahal is perfectly symmetrical. The colossal height of the tomb, along with its pyramidal appearance, fill it with grace and make it seem to float or soar.

The Taj Mahal is a great symbol of Love & Passion!