[Lesson 528]

[1040L]

[636 words]

Feats of Wonder

Photography and video clips of distant places put our entire world within reach. With a few simple strokes of a keypad on a Web search engine, we can glimpse breathtaking landscapes, architectural masterpieces, or marvelous sculptures. If we are curious to understand their history, we have libraries, museums and, of course, the Internet (among other resources) to enlighten us. It is possible that we might even have an opportunity to visit one of these locales**.** What compels us to connect with and be amazed by these destinations? Are certain attributes, such as an object's height or length, what make it so interesting? Or is a site's cultural significance—what it tells us about the people who made it and how it was used—the determining factor?

These questions might be challenging to answer, but they are not new; civilization has grappled with them since antiquity! Like us, human beings in ancient times were fascinated by human-made wonders; however, they did not have the luxury of photography or video—not to mention computers—to view and admire such structures. So, adventurous ancient Greek and Roman travel writers began visiting distant places and documenting their impressions of remarkable sites. In the process, they compiled a list of the most amazing structures. This list of seven sites earned each one a place in history, as the seven ancient wonders continue to inspire us today.

Spanning Greece, northern Africa, and Anatolia (present-day Turkey), the seven wonders were built between 2800 B.C. through 280 B.C. They included burial sites, such as the Great Pyramid of Giza. It covers 13 acres, and, for more than 4,000 years, it was the tallest building in the world. The Great Pyramid was built with huge stone blocks. Each one averaged 2.5 tons; somehow, over 2 million blocks were moved into position to form the Great Pyramid! The approximately 135-foot-high, white marble Mausoleum of Halicarnassus was a massive tomb for King Mausolus; the top third of the building was actually a pyramid!

There were also statues, like the 100-foot-high Colossus of Rhodes, which was built in honor of the sun god, Helios. The Colossus of Rhodes was built of bronze plates over stone columns and iron beams; imagine how its bronze exterior might have reflected the sun and waters of the Mediterranean. The gold-and-ivory adorned Statue of Zeus, located inside the temple of Olympia, commemorated the god of the ancient Olympic games. It sat atop a 7-foot base, its 39-foot head nearly grazing the top of the temple.

The Temple of Artemis, the largest of a series of lavishly decorated temples and altars, honored Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunting. Further south, the Lighthouse of Alexandria served as a beacon for ships sailing the Nile River. By day, mirrors reflected sunlight for miles out to sea; a fire burning at the top of the 184-foot building guided night travelers. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were actually a series of steps—the tallest were 75 feet—filled with cascading flowers. Of the seven, only the Hanging Gardens might be a legend; no written accounts of it have ever been discovered. As a result, many experts believe it could not have existed.

Of the seven, only the Great Pyramid still stands. Sadly, the forces of nature, greed, or war sealed the fate of the rest. The Colossus of Rhodes stood for merely 60 years, when an earthquake broke the statue at the knee. The Temple at Artemis was actually rebuilt three times—each time, people destroyed it for fame or in spite. Landslides, floods, and earthquakes all damaged the Statue of Zeus. A fire in the 6th century finally destroyed it entirely. An earthquake ruined much of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, and what remained was used to build a castle. After standing almost 1,000 years, a series of earthquakes finally took the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

locales *n.* areas

What other locales do you consider to be wonders of the world?

compels *v.* forces or drives one to do something

A sense of community often compels us to volunteer our time to help others.

cascading *v.* flowing downward in great quantities

The cascading hair of the horse's mane glistened in the hot sun.

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