

The Architecture of the Middle Ages

Fascinating Facts

- The model on which the Dome of the Rock was based is called the Dome of the Chain. It still stands in the shadow of the full-sized mosque.
- The Chinese in the medieval world believed that the emperor's palace marked the center of both the country and the entire universe.
- European castle designs grew more elaborate and complex as the weapons of potential attackers became more sophisticated.

Genre	Comprehension Skill	Text Features
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As people in the medieval world engaged in trade, they shared not only goods but also methods for doing things. Among the methods they shared were techniques for building places of worship, along with both elaborate and simple houses. Even so, buildings in different parts of the world retained many features that were unique to their cultures. In this book you will learn why people in medieval Asia, Africa, and Europe built particular structures the way they did and how these buildings affected their lives.



Vocabulary

mosque

caliph

monk

pilgrimage

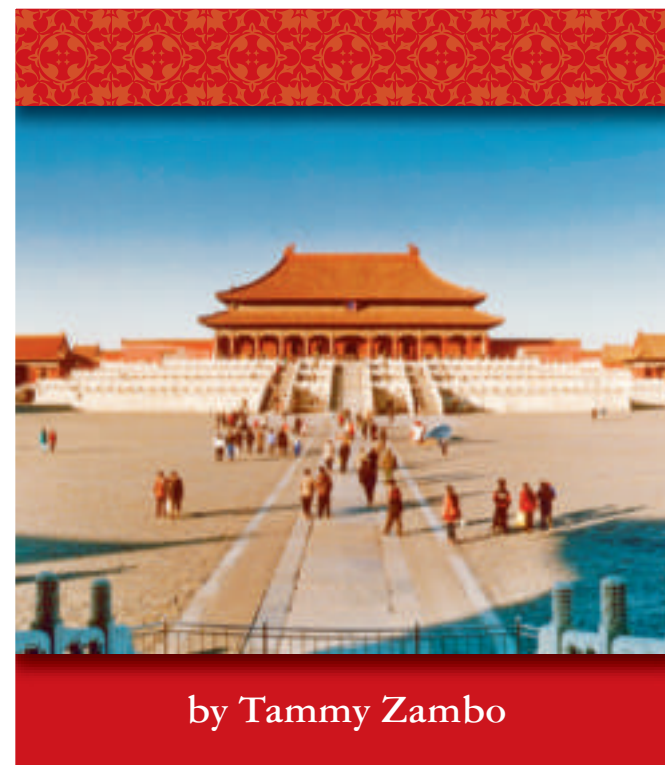
monarch

knight

cathedral



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The Spread of Cultures

Throughout the Middle Ages, people from every direction interacted with each other through the trade of goods. Their interactions resulted in the spread of ideas and religions. In this way, Islam spread widely through early Arabia, and Muslims built **mosques** for their worship.

The Dome of the Rock

One of the mosques that Muslims today consider holiest, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Israel, was built in the Middle Ages. The rock on which the Dome of the Rock rests is sacred not only to Muslims, but also to Jews and Christians, because it is the site on which important Jewish temples once stood. To Muslims it is holy because they believe that Muhammad ascended to heaven from this site.



The Dome of the Rock has changed very little since it was built, between about 687 and 691.



The great dome of the Dome of the Rock is held up with arches supported by columns and piers. The mosque is built around the rock itself, which is exposed.



A Holy Destination

The Dome of the Rock was built by a Muslim **caliph**, or successor to Muhammad, by the name of Abd al-Malik, who wanted to construct a spectacular mosque that would draw large numbers of Muslims to Jerusalem. Abd al-Malik wanted the mosque to be perfect, so he had an entirely separate mosque built first as a model near the primary site. Only when Abd al-Malik approved of the model mosque did building on the Dome of the Rock begin.

The Romans had already perfected the use of arches and had used them to build other domed buildings. Still, this shape was not at all common for mosques at the time that the Dome of the Rock was constructed. The architects followed the Romans' practice of building the dome on a base with eight sides. To strengthen the base sufficiently, they used a series of arches that spanned columns and other supports called piers.





A Lasting Treasure

The interior of the Dome of the Rock is divided by three rings of marble columns and piers. The innermost ring encircles the exposed sacred rock itself, instead of a floor. The two outer rings provide walkways along the eight sides of the outer wall. Entrances in four of these sides correspond to the four directions of a compass. All the elements of the mosque were carefully designed using mathematics so that the building would reflect balance and harmony. In addition nearly every surface was elaborately decorated to dazzle the worshippers.

The exterior of the building was also magnificent. The walls were constructed of marble and embellished with rich mosaics featuring a variety of colors. The dome itself was initially covered in gold. Today's dome is covered with gold-plated aluminum, a more durable material.

Islamic Art

The early Muslims lavishly decorated public buildings such as the Dome of the Rock. However, they usually did not create representations

of human beings or animals in their art. Instead, they depicted plants and other vegetation, or they used geometric shapes and patterns along with a variety of colors.

Another prominent feature of Islamic art is calligraphy. At the Dome of the Rock, calligraphy inside the dome tells the story of Muhammad's ascension to heaven from the rock below. Verses from the Quran appear in calligraphy on the outside of the dome.



The interior of the dome is decorated with calligraphy and mosaics featuring a great deal of gold.



The Hall of Supreme Harmony

Another great feat of medieval architecture is the Hall of Supreme Harmony. This is the most important building in the imperial palace, or the Forbidden City, in Beijing, China. It is also one of the largest medieval Chinese buildings still in existence. This building, completed in 1420, housed the emperor's throne and was used for grand public ceremonies, such as his ascension to the throne, his announcements of war and peace, and celebrations of his birthday and wedding day and New Year's Day.



In the vast courtyard in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in China's Forbidden City, twenty thousand people could pay their respects to the emperor.





An Emperor's Realm

Many features of the hall's grand exterior symbolize concepts that were important to the Chinese. For example, the building itself faces south, toward the sun, to show honor and respect. The yellow roof tiles are a color that was reserved exclusively for the emperor. The carved figurines on each end of the roof's main ridge are dragons, which represent the emperor. Each dragon is 11 feet (3.3 meters) high and weighs 4.3 tons. It was thought that the two dragons would guard the building from fire because they were believed to have the ability to gather clouds and make rain.

Despite the presence of the protecting dragons, the Hall of Supreme Harmony burned down less than a year after it was finished. It was rebuilt three times, each time only to burn down again. The present hall, which preserves the original style, was built in 1695.

The interior of the Hall of Supreme Harmony is as impressive as the exterior. The floor area of the hall is the size of nine tennis courts. The golden throne gleams on an elevated platform. Twenty-four giant pillars support the roof above the throne. Each one is 41.5 feet (12.5 meters) high and 3.5 feet (1.1 meters) in diameter. The six pillars closest to the throne are plated with gold, and the rest are painted red. The throne itself, like the hall as a whole, faces south.

Dragons are abundant in the interior decoration. The throne has carvings of them. They are depicted on every inch of the six golden columns, and they are painted on the walls. Even on the ceiling, a central design features two dragons playing with another symbol, pearls. Pearls were believed to protect the emperor's power.

The emperor's throne is the centerpiece of the Hall of Supreme Harmony.





The Church of the Savior of the World is supported by a total of sixty-two columns.

The Rock Churches of Lalibela

Some of Africa's most fascinating works of medieval architecture are found in the isolated rocky highlands of Ethiopia. There, the Zagwe king Lalibela (for whom the area is named) had eleven churches carved from solid volcanic rock between the late 1100s and the early 1200s. It is said that Lalibela had a vision of the city of Jerusalem in heaven, where churches were carved from a single stone. He wanted to build the churches he saw in his vision. The resulting structures are not the only churches in Ethiopia carved from rock, but as a group they are the most impressive.



Some of the stone churches stand below ground level, surrounded by deep trenches. These churches are monoliths, which means that workers carved them—including their doors, windows, arches, and staircases—out of a single block that remains attached to the ground at its base. Other churches are carved directly into the side of the rock. Each church is between three and four stories tall. A maze of underground tunnels connects the churches.

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

Christianity, in the form of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is the oldest surviving religion in Ethiopia. A large proportion of the Ethiopian population has practiced Christianity for centuries.

All of the stone churches at Lalibela are still in use today as places of worship. **Monks** conduct daily activities in the churches, and some of them live nearby in caves also carved out of rock. In addition, thousands of believers flock to the churches on **pilgrimages**, especially at Timkat, a holiday that celebrates the baptism of Jesus.

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the most sacred object is the tabot (TA-but), a tablet made of wood or stone that is engraved to represent the Ten Commandments. Each church has a tabot that is stored in a special place only priests can enter. During Timkat, the priests of Lalibela take all the church tabots in a procession to the Jordan River, which separates the two main groups of churches. There, the priests lead the crowd of pilgrims in a worship service.



A Mixture of Architectural Styles

A variety of architectural styles were used in building the Lalibela rock churches, and each of the structures is unique. The largest church is the Church of the Savior of the World, which is also called the Church of the Redeemer. Its exterior features a colonnade, or row of rectangular columns. The roof is carved with eight arches on each slope, and arches are also carved above the colonnade.

The Church of St. George is carved in the shape of a cross. In addition, two crosses are carved on the roof, one inside the other, following the shape of the building. The roof is flat and lies at ground level. The carved crosses are decorative, but they also function as channels for draining water that pours out through the mouths of fantastic face carvings, called gargoyles, on the sides of the church.

Like the exteriors, the church interiors differ from one another in style. Most of them are fairly simple and plain, but the Church of Mary is richly decorated with carvings and murals depicting scenes from the Bible, along with images of the sun, animals, and flowers. This church also features a very tall column called the Pillar of Light, which is draped in fabric. It is said that at one time the fabric was removed and the pillar filled the church with light.

The interior of the Church of Mary is decorated with carvings and murals.



Houses in medieval European cities between 1300 and 1400 reflected the increasing wealth of a new middle class. This illustration represents a typical house that could be found in central Europe.



A Central European House

As Europeans in the Middle Ages conducted more trade, cities grew and more people than ever before began to thrive. As a result, a middle class formed for the first time. This prosperity was reflected in the houses of city dwellers.

Living space was limited, so the houses were usually built upward. The ground floor of a house in central Europe was typically the location of a retail shop or craftsman's workshop. Windows and doorways often featured pointed arches, which were also used in cathedrals of the time. Above the middle floors of living space, the top floor of a house was often a storage area. A hoist might extend from this floor all the way to the ground floor to help the shopkeeper lift and move heavy objects. The roof usually sloped steeply so that heavy snow could not accumulate.



European Castles

Today, throughout the countryside, small towns, and even cities of Europe, you can still see marvelous examples of a famous type of medieval building, the castle. A castle was the home of the lord of a manor, or sometimes a **monarch**. It was much more than just a home. Castles were carefully planned fortresses that encompassed enough land to provide areas for storing weapons and supplies, a kitchen, stables and pens for keeping horses, pigs, and other animals, and even a vegetable garden. They also provided housing for the lord's main supporters, including **knights**. People also needed access to a reliable water supply. Every aspect of a castle was designed to protect the lord and his primary followers from an attack and to sustain life in case attackers blocked the exits for an extended period in what was called a siege.

The castle's main features are the gatehouse, the moat, the towers, and the keep. The entry to the castle is the gatehouse, but this was also its weakest point. Often a drawbridge, which could be lowered to cross the moat or raised to cover the gate, would be added. Gates often consisted of one or more portcullises, doors with heavy grates that could be raised and lowered inside the gateway. The moat was a channel filled with water that surrounded all or part of a castle. Towers were built into the castle walls to strengthen them and to allow defenders to fire arrows and other missiles at the enemy. Towers were often topped by crenellations, the "toothed" effect of notches that provided defenders both protection and openings for shooting. A structure called a keep included lodging for the lord and a great hall where most of the business and social life of the castle took place. The keep might be a separate building in the center of the castle grounds or a specific tower in the inner wall.

This is an aerial view of Beaumaris Castle in Anglesey, north Wales.





The “Bible of the Poor”

Some of the most spectacular architecture of the Middle Ages is found in magnificent **cathedrals** all over Europe. Often taking hundreds of years to build, these impressive structures were designed with the intention that Christian worshippers would glimpse in them a vision of heaven.

Nearly every aspect of a cathedral’s design had significance. Most important, the end of the cathedral where the altar was located faced east, toward the rising sun. Another common feature was the cross-shaped design of the building, which incorporated an important Christian symbol. The walls of a cathedral were built as high as possible to give worshippers the impression that the building was reaching toward heaven. Windows let in the maximum amount of light, which symbolized God’s presence.

Many of the windows in a cathedral were made of stained glass. Besides admitting light and inspiring worshippers with their beauty, these windows often served a practical function. Very few people in the Middle Ages could read. They could not understand the words of church services, because priests performed services in Latin. Most people turned to the windows around them, which often depicted Bible stories, to learn about their religion. They learned, too, from the statues of important biblical figures that adorned cathedrals inside and out. For these reasons, cathedrals were sometimes called “the Bible of the poor.”



One of the finest examples of cathedral architecture is Notre-Dame, a cathedral in Paris, France, built from 1163 to about 1250.



Medieval Architecture

The building of places of worship and houses of various types in the medieval world used techniques shared by people from different parts of the world. For example, the Dome of the Rock was designed using domes and arches, a technique borrowed from the Romans. This carefully designed and elaborately decorated mosque became a place of worship for large numbers of Muslims. Carved from single blocks of stone, the rock churches of Lalibela remain special places for pilgrims to visit. The Hall of Supreme Harmony, with its impressive exterior and abundant decorations, reflects the Chinese emperor’s power and importance. In medieval Europe, houses in the cities were built upward due to limited space, castles were homes as well as fortresses, and cathedrals served as the “Bible of the poor” with their stained-glass windows. Places of worship and houses throughout the medieval world shared common building techniques, yet each reflected its particular culture.



Glossary

caliph a successor to Muhammad

cathedral a large, important Christian church

knight a warrior trained and prepared to fight on horseback

monarch a king or queen who is the supreme ruler

monk a man who devotes his life to religion

mosque a Muslim place of worship

pilgrimage a journey to a place of religious importance

Write to It!

People in medieval Asia, Africa, and Europe designed buildings with features that reflected their cultures. Choose one of the buildings described in this book and write two or three paragraphs explaining why people built it the way they did.

Write your paragraphs on a separate sheet of paper.

Photographs

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