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A Brief History of Ancient Architecture

Throughout history, wherever people have lived on Earth, they have had to find or create shelter. Thus, the history of architecture is the history of humanity. Starting with the earliest settlements built by Neolithic cultures in 10,000 BCE, humans have sought to create pleasant, useful structures in which to live and work. The more we know about these structures, the more we know about humanity itself.

In this paper, I will present a brief history of ancient architecture from around the world, starting with Neolithic constructions, and continuing on through the ritualistic buildings of the Egyptians, the civic-minded monuments of the Greeks, the engineering marvels of the Romans, and the geometric complexities of the Byzantines. Throughout, I hope to illustrate the ancient world's ingenuity in creating structures that served as homes, government facilities, businesses, and places of worship.

Neolithic Settlements

According to Alisha Garland, the Neolithic era, the last part of the Stone Age, marks the point when humans began cultivating grains and raising domestic animals (142). Because the rise of agriculture did not occur at the same time everywhere in the populated world, we have no single date for the start of the Neolithic era. However, historians estimate that the first attempts at agriculture occurred in the Near East around 9600 BCE.

The rise of agriculture introduced major changes in the way humans organized their family and communal life. As it was no longer necessary to move from place to place in search of food, people took more care in the construction of their homes. Because food was more plentiful, populations increased and cities became common. Hierarchical social structures developed. As at least one historian of architecture has observed, people quickly learned that creating magnificent abodes was an excellent way to increase one's social standing (Brower 37). Around the world, societies poured their energies into developing new and increasingly complicated forms of construction.

The Neolithic societies of central Asia mastered the art of creating bricks made of mud (Garland). These vital building materials were generally dried in the sun. In areas where wood was readily available, some were also baked in kilns. Mud bricks were used to construct homes and places of worship, some on a surprisingly vast scale.

The most stunning examples of Neolithic architecture are the tombs and other memorial sites built from large rocks known as megaliths. Stonehenge is probably the most famous example of a megalith structure, but they are found throughout the world, and provided a focus for communal worship and remembrance.

Egyptian Construction

Wood was scarce in ancient Egypt. For this reason, constructions of this era relied on mud bricks, limestone, sandstone, and granite. Houses were generally built of bricks made with mud from the Nile. Brickmakers poured the mud into molds, and then let them to dry in the hot Egyptian sun until they were ready to be used by builders. Because of the periodic flooding of

the Nile valley, many towns and palaces constructed entirely of mud bricks have disappeared, with the bricks dissolving in the invading flood waters.

Stone was typically reserved for temples and tombs. The interior and exterior walls of these structures were covered in frescoes and hieroglyphs. The pyramids of Giza testify to the masterful engineering techniques developed by the ancient Egyptians. The largest of these, the Great Pyramid of Giza, was completed around 2500 BCE. Rulers built pyramids as a testament to their earthly power, and as a way to make their names famous long after they were dead.

The Civic-Minded Greeks

The two most important types of ancient Greek architecture are temples and open-air theaters. Abundant limestone and marble made stone a popular building material for these structures. Unusually high quality potter's clay, found throughout the Greek islands, was used to create roof tiles and various types of architectural decoration. Builders took pride in creating structures that showed to their best advantage in the brilliant Grecian sun.

The civic-minded Greeks saw humanity as the ultimate expression of the order of the universe. Their elegant architecture reflects their society's focus on order and reason. Temples often included rows of stone columns constructed according to exacting specifications. Ideal proportions were calculated by referring to a complex geometrical progression known as the golden mean.

Ancient Greek architecture is divided into three eras, or orders. The first, the Doric order, is associated with the fluted columns used in the Parthenon. The second, the Ionic order, is typified by columns that are thinner than Doric columns. The third, the Corinthian order, is essentially a later development of the Ionic order, and is marked by elaborate carvings, meant

to resemble acanthus leaves, at the top of each column. All three orders were employed throughout ancient Greece, and were eventually adopted by Roman architects.

Roman Achievement

The ancient Romans adopted the Greek concept of the agora, or public space, creating public squares that shaped their communal life for centuries. Advances in engineering led to inventions such as arches and concrete, which in turned enabled the construction of ever more complex public spaces, not to mention roads and bridges.

Works Cited

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Garland, Alisha. "The Rise of Human Settlements: Neolithic Culture and Early Agriculture in Central Asia." *Journal of Ancient Architecture and Cultural Studies* 30.5 (2015): 122-145. Web.