

In the air

# Monuments

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**After a fortnight that began with the inauguration of Luxembourg's wondrous new Philharmonia, was haunted by the little urn that held the ashes of a friend and ended with the spectacle of fellow-Londoners being blown up by bombs, it is inevitable perhaps to be invaded by thoughts of mortality and the monuments people raise to achieve perennity.**

Two of the most famous monuments in the history of man are in fact tombs. And they also happen to be two of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Many observers drew up lists of Wonders, but the one we know today is the work of the writer Antipater of Sidon and someone who claimed to be the mathematician Philon of Byzantium, in the second century BC.

When naming their seven Wonders, Antipater and Philon were compiling a sort of Baedeker of the pre-eminent architectural and monumental features of the known world, confined in their day of course to the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East.

Their list of Wonders includes five buildings and two monumental sculptures:

The Pyramids of Giza were the senior Wonders, constructed between 2575 and 2465 BC, during the Egyptian Fourth Dynasty, as tombs for kings Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure. The Cheops pyramid, as Khufu is known in Greek, is probably the biggest single building ever erected on our planet, comprising about 2.3 million blocks of limestone and granite. The blocks were cut, transported and assembled by labourers who lived in the community that grew up round the site. Recent excavations have revealed bakeries, storage areas, workshops...and the small tombs of workers and artisans. These range from simple mud structures to elaborate stone monuments – miniature pyramids – containing statuettes and other artworks. Some even have hieroglyphic inscriptions naming the person buried there...

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were laid out within the Royal Palace, in the south of today's Iraq. The gardens did not really hang, but were planted on a series of ziggurat terraces, irrigated with water pumped from the Euphrates. Legend has attributed the gardens both to Queen Sammu-ramat (Semiramis) and to King Nebuchadrezzar II, trying to comfort his wife, Amytis, who missed the lush greenery of her homeland.

The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus was built by King Croesus of Lydia in about 550 BC – and rebuilt after the madman



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

The Cheops pyramid, the sole surviving Wonder

Herostratus burned it down in 356 BC. The temple was famous for its vast dimensions and the artworks that decorated it – such as the statue of Artemis, the familiar mummy-like image, made of gold, silver, ebony and black stone, with its tall headdress.

The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus is the other tomb, built between 353 and 351 BC for Mausolus, the tyrant of Caria in Asia Minor, at the behest of his sister and widow Artemisia, and destroyed by an earthquake in the Middle Ages. Artemisia herself was a botanist and medical researcher and her name survives to this day in the species of plant called after her.

The Pharos of Alexandria was a technological triumph in its day and remains the archetype of all lighthouses everywhere. It was conceived by Sostratus of Cnidus and was completed in about 280 BC. The highest man-made structure of the ancient world, except for the pyramids, it towered 100 metres over the harbour of Alexandria. It too was destroyed by an earthquake in the 1300s.

The statue of Zeus in the Temple at Olympia was made by the Greek artist Phidias in about 430 BC. It was 12 metres high, plated with gold and ivory and represents the god seated on a cedar wood throne, decorated with ebony, ivory, gold and precious stones. The statue took eight years to build but was only to remain in place half that time: the temple was destroyed in 426.

The Colossus of Rhodes commemorated the raising of Demetrius I Poliorcetes' long siege of Rhodes in 305 BC and was the work of Chares of Lyndos. The enormous statue of the sun god Helios, rose 30 metres above the entrance to Mandrakion harbour and was made of bronze, reinforced with iron and weighted with stones. The Colossus remained standing just over 50 years before falling victim to yet another earthquake. The statue lay where it fell until 654 AD, when invading Arabian forces had it

broken up and sold for scrap.

Of the seven Wonders, only traces of the pyramids remain today.

This fact led a Swiss-born filmmaker, aviator, explorer and museum curator called Bernard Weber to launch a global competition, in which all inhabitants of our planet are invited to vote for the New 7 Wonders. So far, 113 assorted buildings and man-made structures have been nominated, ranging from Aachen Cathedral to the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, passing through the Rose Red City of Petra in Jordan, and the British Library Reading Room. When I last looked, the Great Wall of China was in the lead, with the Acropolis in 28th position and my beloved Bilbao Guggenheim Museum 53rd. Voting lasts until the end of the year.

But, I wonder... must the Seven Wonders of the World really always be buildings or monuments? Why can't they be works of music or literature or philosophy? If we are talking about the seven greatest human achievements, why are Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, or *The Marriage of Figaro*, or the *Odyssey*, or *The Divine Comedy*, or even the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, not eligible? Buildings, especially vast ones, are a hallmark of tyrants, who have always built palaces, monuments and tombs, designed to survive, like their empires, for a thousand years and ensure them immortality.

Shakespeare, for one, knew that in this they are deluded. He knew there exists nor „brass, nor stone, nor boundless sea, but sad mortality o'er sways their power.“

He knew the word is mightier, that „not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.“

And he knew that the word lasts for ever: „So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see“, he wrote to his beloved, „so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.“