

Early Architecture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Early architecture, such as that from England, Malta, and Turkey, is full of unique characteristics and construction techniques. In this lesson, you will examine megalithic structures and their possible functions compared to modern-day cities. More specifically, you will learn about:

1. The Time Period of Early Architecture
2. Post and Lintel and Corbel Arches
3. Stonehenge
4. Malta and Early Architecture
5. Turkey and Çatal Huyuk

1. The Time Period of Early Architecture

The transition from small, handheld objects to monumental stone structures suggests major societal changes and the development of **agrarian** civilizations.

Early architecture was prevalent between around 7400 BCE to about 1500 BCE. This is the tail end of the Stone Age, called the **Neolithic** Era, which means “new stone” or “new stone age.”



TERMS TO KNOW

Agrarian

Farming or relating to land.

Neolithic

The Stone Age, 7000–3000 BCE, when humans transitioned from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian societies.

2. Post and Lintel and Corbel Arches

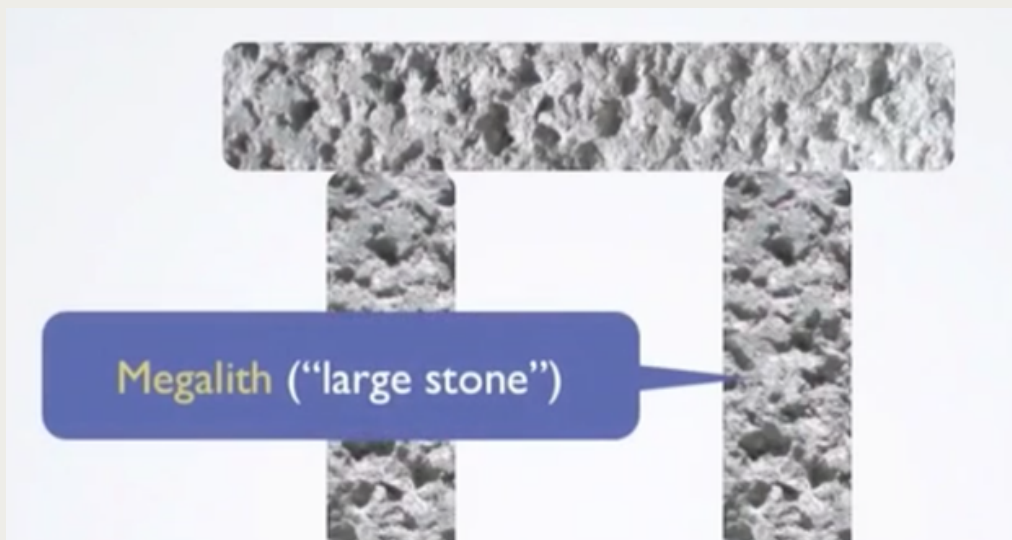
Post and lintel refers to a type of simple construction where a horizontal lintel is supported by two vertical posts.

IN CONTEXT

A wide variety of materials can be used to construct post and lintel. Stone construction with large stones called **megaliths** were common materials for post and lintel.

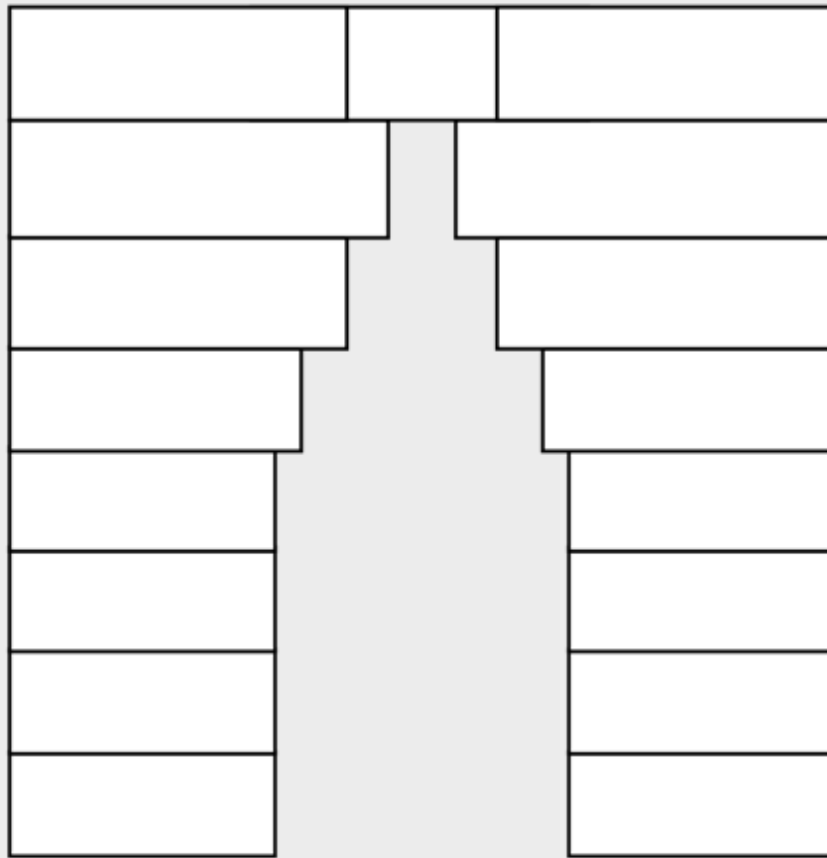
Take a look below at this image of post and lintel construction. Notice the large stones (megaliths) used in constructing the structure.

The main problem with post and lintel is that it is not very efficient at distributing thrust, or gravity. The center of the lintel is weak and will tend to break or collapse. For this reason, ancient builders were constantly in search of stronger forms that would provide better support.



Post and lintel construction doesn't lend itself to very tall structures because the unsupported portions in the middle and on the ends become the weak spots. As an alternative, corbelling can be used as a way of adding support for these weaker areas. It wasn't until the invention of rounded and pointed arches centuries later that architecture was able to reach higher and higher.

Below is a drawing of a **corbel, or false arch**. You can see that it is not a true arch because the supports consist of a series of steps. Although it is stronger than post and lintel, it is still much less supportive than both rounded and pointed arches.



A diagram of a basic corbel, or false arch design



TERMS TO KNOW

Post and Lintel Construction

A simple construction consisting of two vertical beams, or posts, and one horizontal beam, or lintel.

Corbel Arch

A type of support in which stones are arranged in a series of steps.

Megalith

A very large stone.

3. Stonehenge

The classic example of post and lintel construction is Stonehenge, one of the most famous Neolithic structures in Europe, if not the world. Construction began around 2900 BCE and continued until around 1500 BCE. Stonehenge is located on the Salisbury Plain in southern England.

“Henge” refers to a circular arrangement of posts or stones. These weren’t just any stones, however, but rather megaliths. Some of these were transported from as far away as 150 miles west of Stonehenge’s location.



DID YOU KNOW

The location of the megaliths might be a clue that the builders of Stonehenge migrated from the west and used the stones as a way of connecting to this important place.

IN CONTEXT

There have been many misleading theories of modern times with regards to Stonehenge. One of these is Stonehenge’s use as an astrological calendar or as a worship site for druids, which were Celtic priests. The most widely accepted purpose for Stonehenge is that it was used as a ceremonial site for death and burials.

This is Stonehenge as it is today:

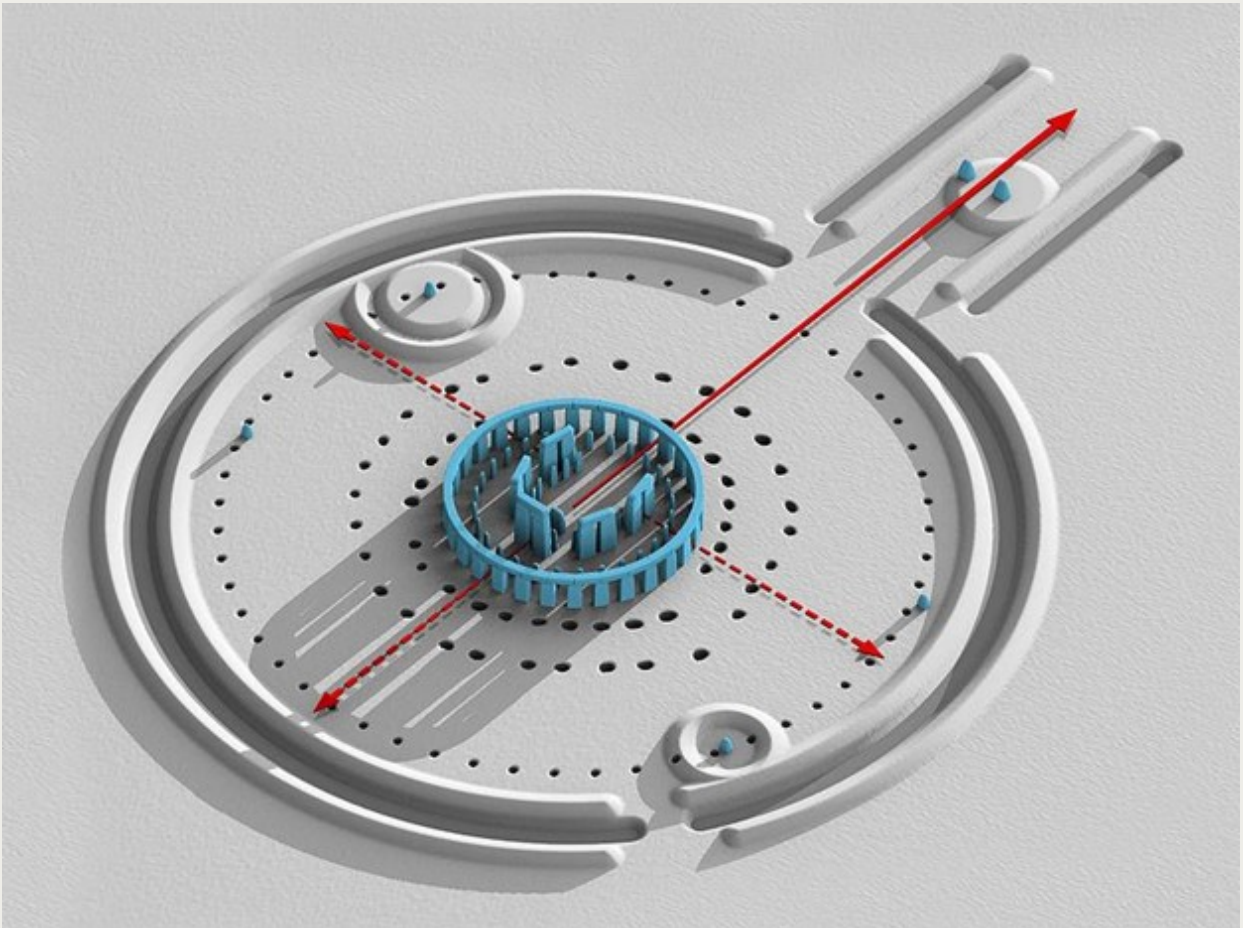


Stonehenge

3000 BCE to 2000 BCE

Sandstone and bluestone

Below is a 3D artistic rendering of the layout of a completed Stonehenge, with the megalithic structures that we tend to associate with the site. Those form the inner circles, surrounded by smaller stones in expanding concentric circles. On the outer edge is actually a ditch with edges that are built up on either side.



3D artistic rendering of Stonehenge layout

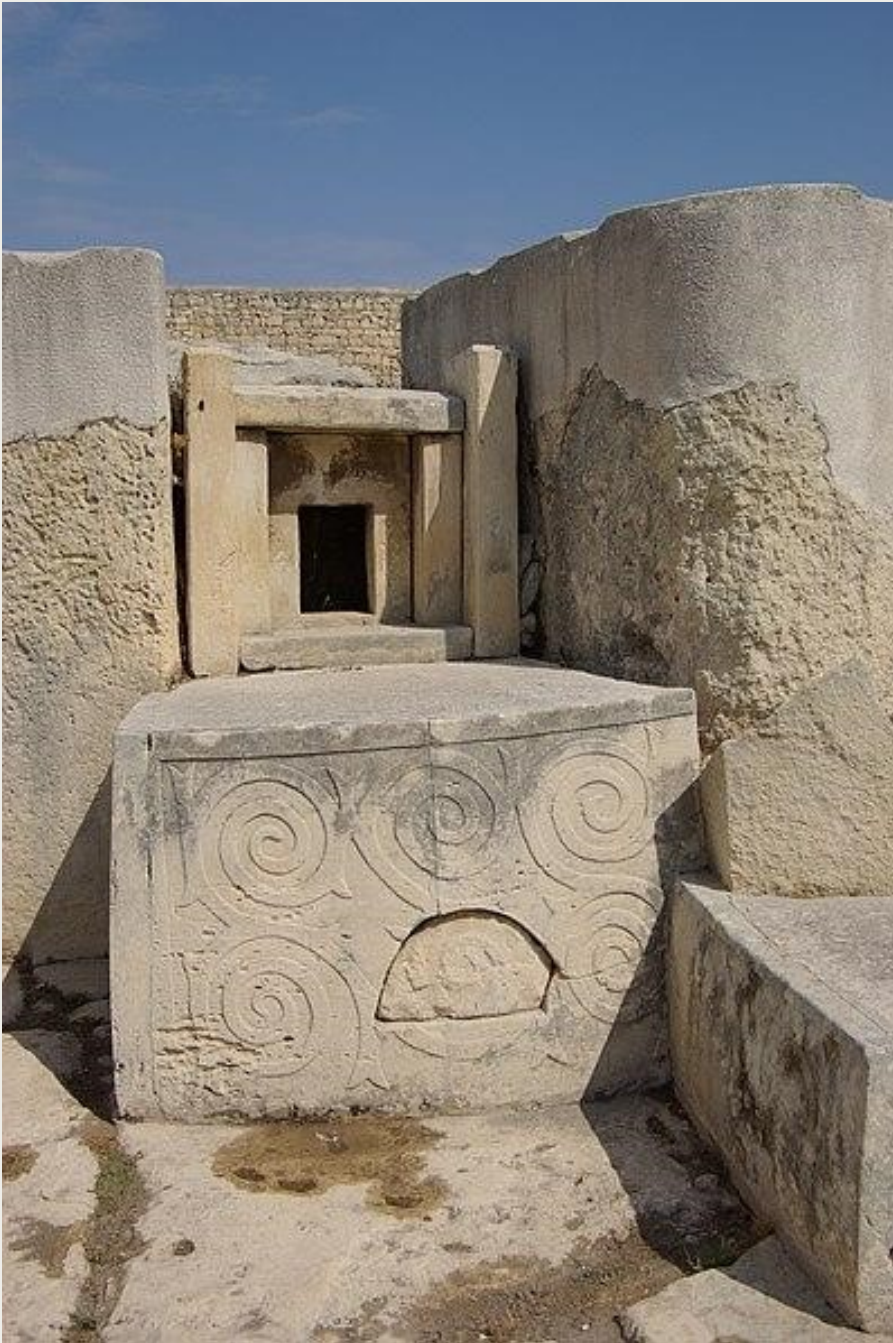
4. Malta and Early Architecture

Malta, an island that lies in the Mediterranean Sea south of Sicily and Italy, has some of the most extensive and best-preserved remains of Neolithic structures in the world.

IN CONTEXT

This entrance to the Tarxien Temple in Malta, which was built around 3000 BCE, is another great example of stone post and lintel construction. The temple itself contains both straight and curved walls, a combination of styles of **masonry**. It is thought to have served as a religious site, as evidence

of sacrificial animal remains have been found at the site.



Tarxien Temple

3000 BCE

Limestone



TERM TO KNOW

Masonry

5. Turkey and Çatal Huyuk

Çatal Huyuk, a Neolithic site located in present-day Turkey, is of tremendous importance to our understanding of Neolithic communities and culture. It was constructed around 7400 BCE and remained inhabited until around 6200 BCE. During this time, its population varied from 5,000 to 7,000 inhabitants.

IN CONTEXT

When comparing Çatal Huyuk to a modern-day city, there are some staggering differences, apart from just the age. For example, there are no public buildings or streets. Instead, the personal enclosures are built right next to each other, connected by roofway accesses. Holes in the roofs and ladders were the entrances to homes in this area.

Here is an image of a reconstructed room in Çatal Huyuk:



Entrance to a home in Çatal Huyuk
7400–6200 BCE

While this settlement might look like a shelter of sorts, it is much more than just that. Much of the day-to-day activity occurred within the city itself. Çatal Huyuk was a community with strong spiritual and ancestral connections. There are many preserved examples of elaborate artistic works on the walls depicting what appear to be hunting rituals. Familial and community burials took place within the actual homes, which suggests the possible importance that a continuous ancestral connection may have played in the day-to-day lives of Çatal Huyuk's residents.

Çatal Huyuk has a number of well-preserved sculptures as well, such as this example of a seated mother goddess:



Goddess Mother of Çatal Huyuk
6000–5500 BCE

Note the sculpture's abstract appearance, as well as the grossly exaggerated feminine features, such as the breasts and the belly. These are elements found in Austria's Venus of Willendorf, another example of prehistoric art, which precedes this piece by about 18,000 years and is separated from it by about 1,300 miles. Another interesting note about this sculpture is how the size of the sculpture has changed.



DID YOU KNOW

As the lifestyle changed from nomadic to agrarian, we see a corresponding change from portable sculptural figurines such as this to larger, more permanent sculptural figures.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **the time period of early architecture**, the Neolithic Era. During this era, **post and lintel and corbelling** were two types of construction used. **Stonehenge**, one of the most famous Neolithic structures in Europe, is just one example of post and lintel construction.

Finally, you examined **Malta and early architecture** as you looked at an entrance to the Tarxien Temple in Malta, which was built around 3000 BCE. Additionally, you looked at **Turkey and Çatal Huyuk**, a profound example of Neolithic communities and culture.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Agrarian

Farming or relating to land.

Corbel Arch

A type of support in which stones are arranged in a series of steps.

Masonry

Stonework.

Megalith

A very large stone.

Neolithic

The Stone Age, 7000–3000 BCE, when humans transitioned from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian societies.

Post and Lintel Construction

A simple construction consisting of two vertical beams, or posts, and one horizontal beam, or lintel.