

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

Taj Mahal



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Focus Question

What is the significance of the Taj Mahal?

Words to Know

conservation
dominates
dynasty
Islamic
mausoleum
memorials

minarets
mosque
restoration
sarcophagus
symbolize
symmetrical

Front cover: The white marble mausoleum at the Taj Mahal reflects the colors of the sunset.

Title page: A floral carving in one of the Taj Mahal's red sandstone buildings

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

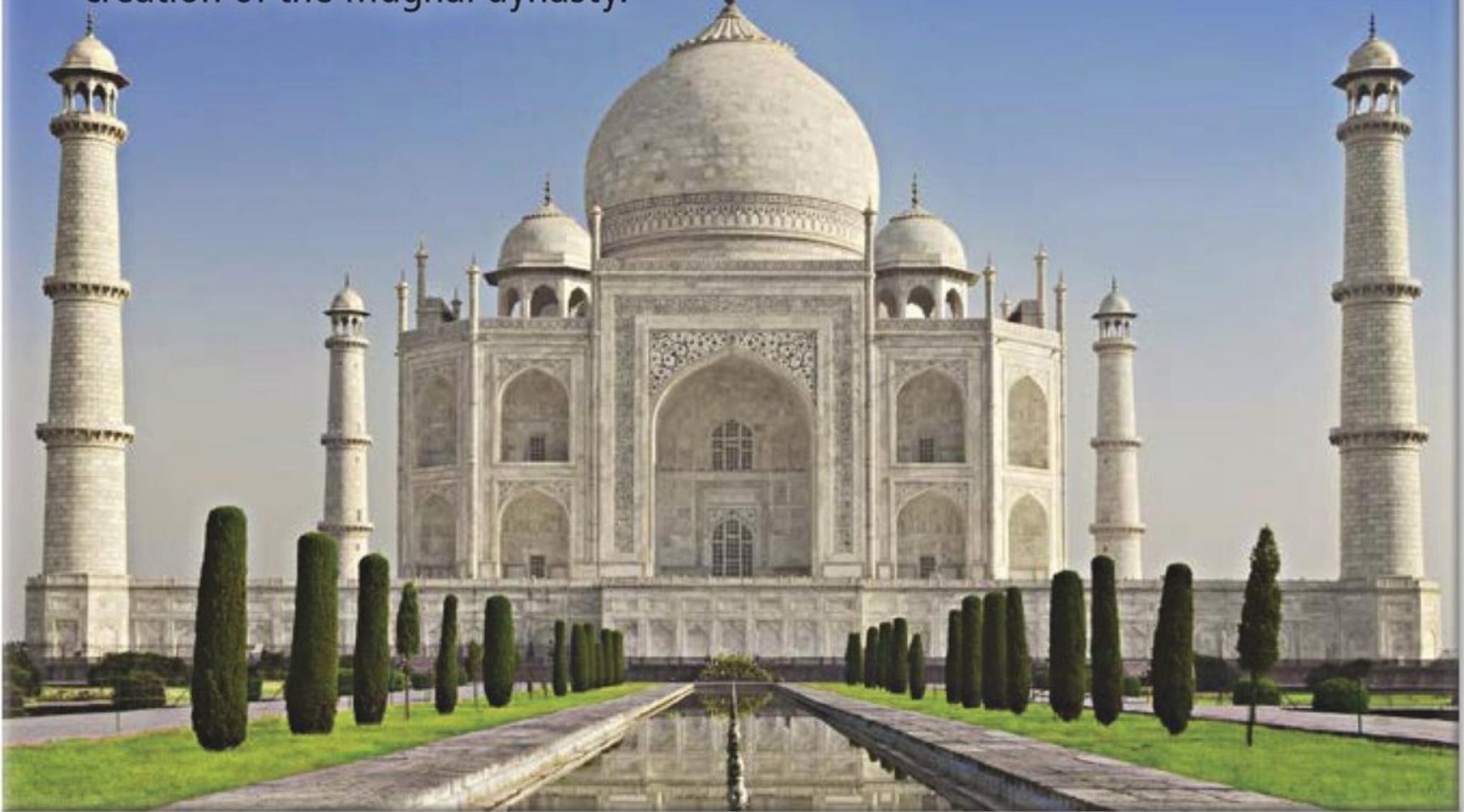
Agra, India: Home of the Taj Mahal



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Known for its perfect symmetry, the Taj Mahal is the most magnificent creation of the Mughal dynasty.



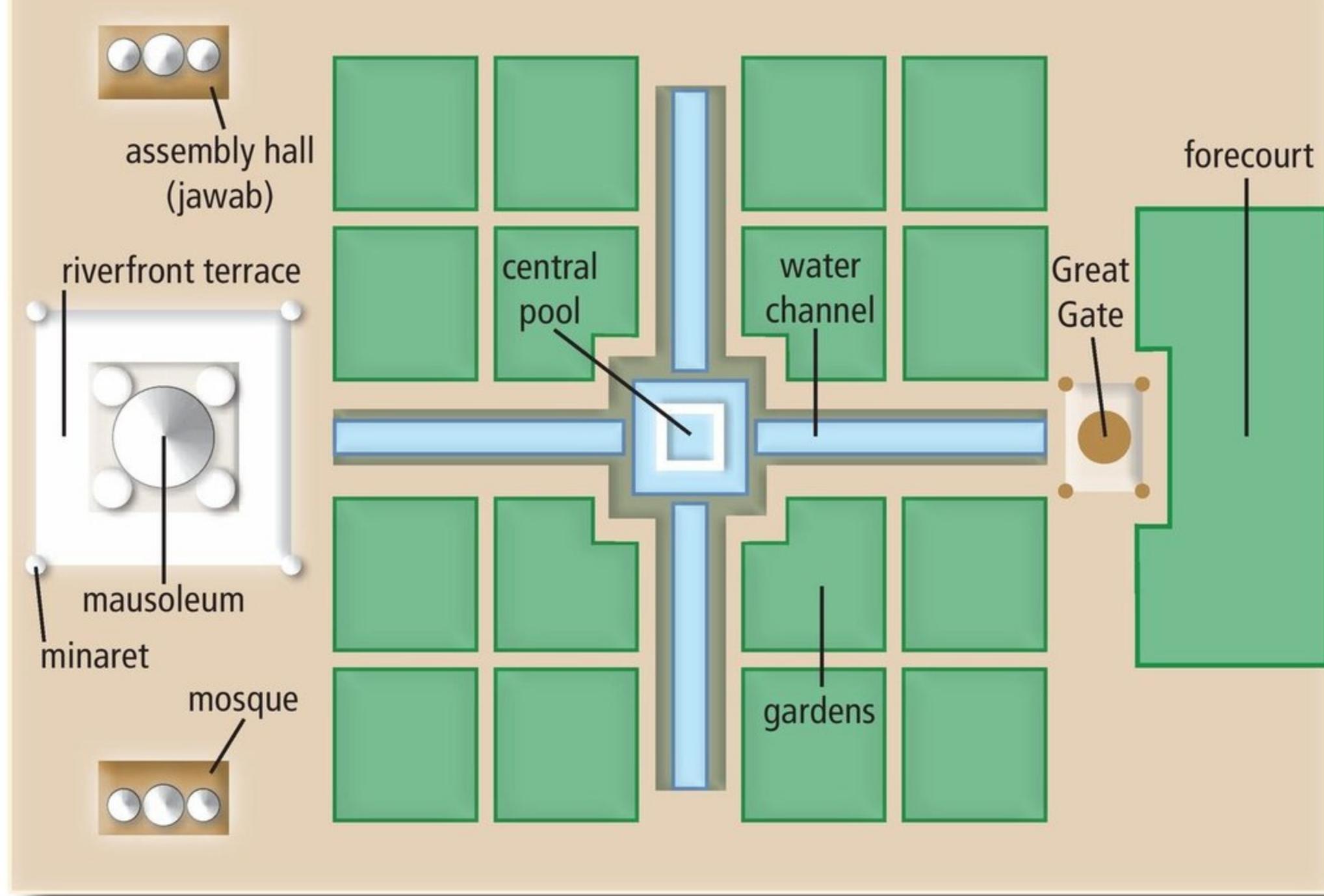
The Taj Mahal

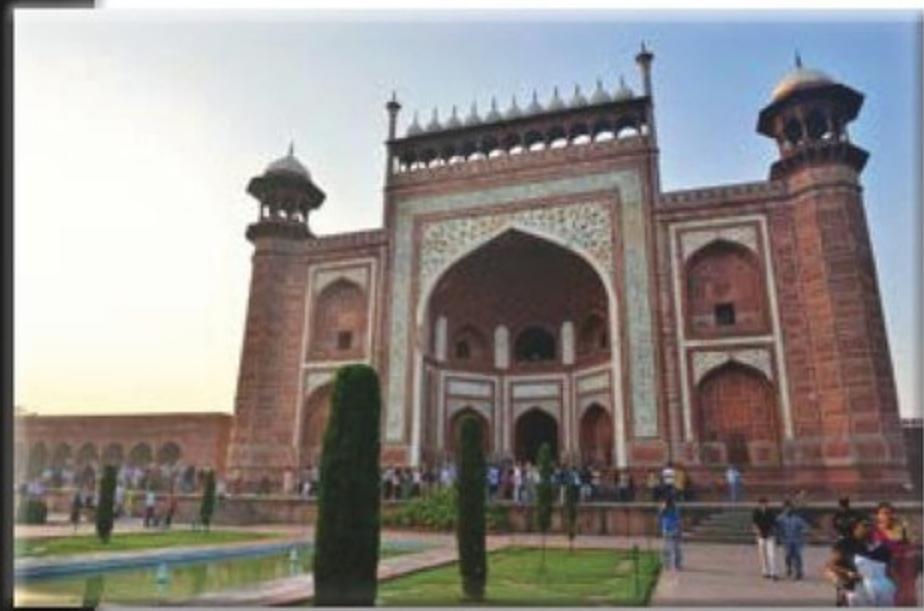
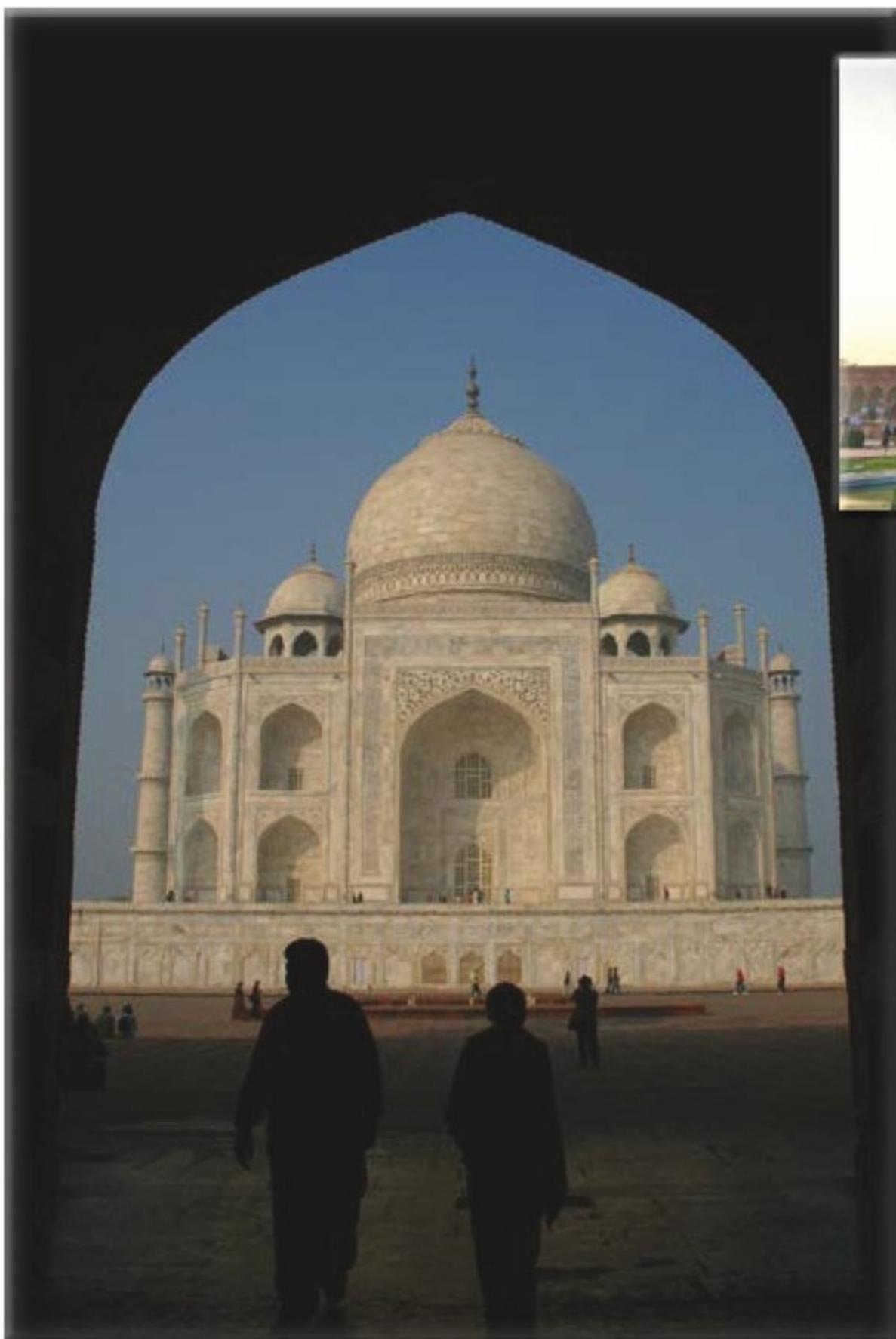
Imagine a family so wealthy that their name signifies riches and power. This situation describes the Mughal (MOO-guhl) **dynasty**—northern India's rulers in the 1600s. The Mughals vied with one another to create the most beautiful mansions and **memorials**. Their family name gave rise to the term *mogul*, a word for someone as wealthy and powerful as the richest king and most famous rock star bundled into one.

Today, the Mughals are famous for the jewel-encrusted works of art and extravagant architecture they left behind. Their most famous creation is a tomb built by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan: the Taj Mahal.

When people think of the Taj Mahal, most picture the **mausoleum** with its immense white dome. However, the Taj Mahal is actually a 16-hectare (42-acre) area designed to represent the paradise home of Shah Jahan's favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Buildings, walls, gates, and gardens are all laid out in a **symmetrical** way to represent the **Islamic** idea of a perfect heaven. Although grass now fills the grounds, flowers and fruit trees once suggested paradise's gardens. Four water channels divide the garden into four equal parts that meet at a pool in the garden's center. They **symbolize** the four heavenly rivers described in the Koran, the Islamic holy book.

Layout of the Taj Mahal Complex





The Great Gate is flanked by octagonal towers topped with white marble domes (top). The mausoleum's onion-shaped dome is perfectly framed in the Great Gate's archway (left).

Center Stage: The Mausoleum

To enter the Taj Mahal today, visitors pass through the Great Gate, a fortresslike building constructed of red sandstone and marble. Letters spell out welcoming words from the Koran. The Great Gate is adorned with enormous archways, domed ceilings, and octagonal niches similar to those found in the mausoleum—hinting at the luxury lying beyond.

The Taj Mahal's many structures and gardens all point visitors toward the mausoleum where Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan are buried.

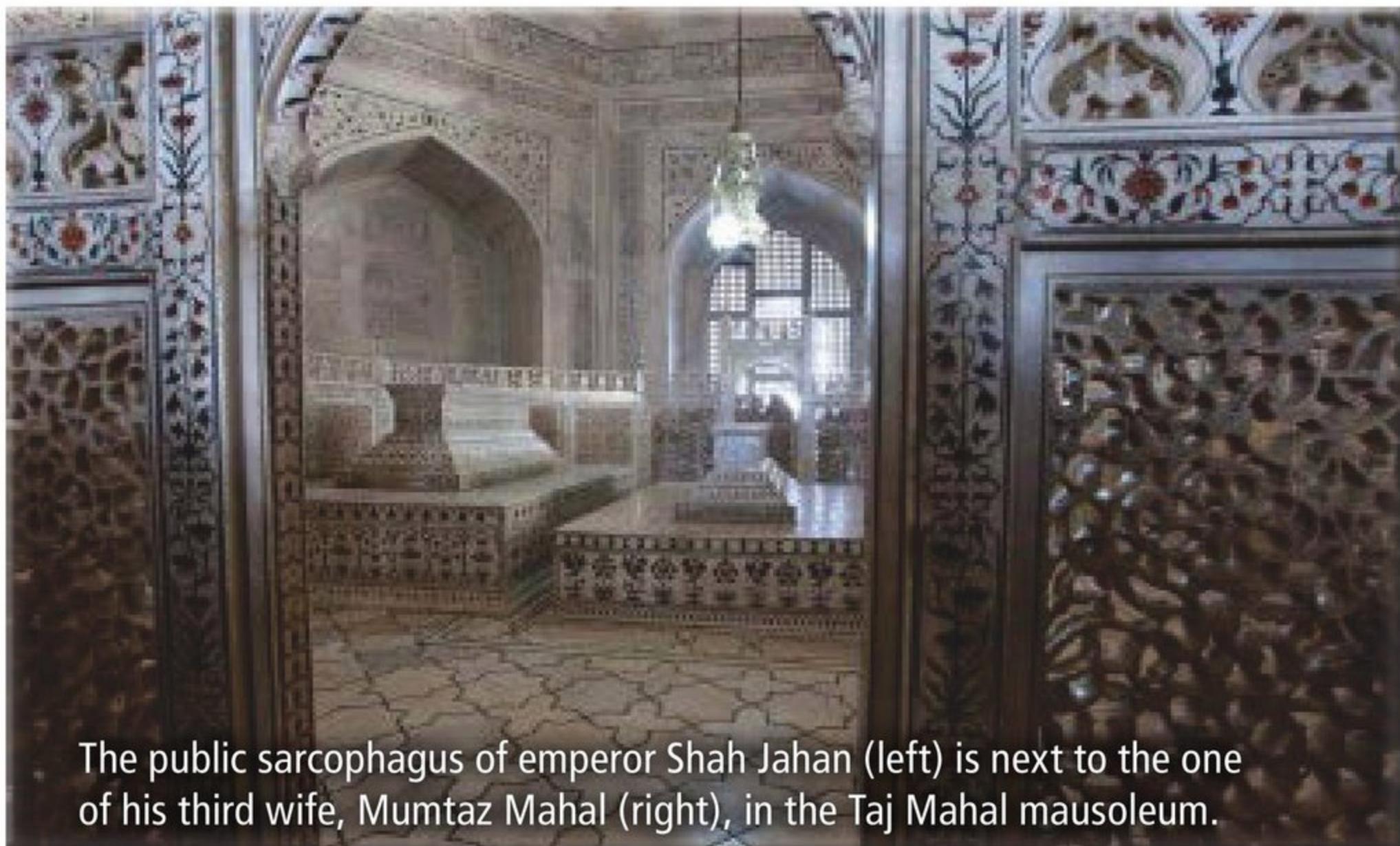
Strolling through the gardens, visitors see the mausoleum reflected in the central water channel. Situated on a raised marble platform, the mausoleum **dominates** the landscape. Four **minarets** rise from the platform's corners like guards standing at attention. Each one is more than 40 meters (130 ft.) tall.

Translucent white marble covers the mausoleum, the platform holding it, and the surrounding minarets. The marble's crystalline structure causes it to change color with the changing light. At times, the building seems to glow with unearthly radiance.

White is the Islamic color of mourning and on a tomb, it is intended to show the faith of the person buried within. Other structures on the grounds, such as the **mosque** (MAHSK) and assembly hall that flank the mausoleum, are red sandstone.



The white marble of the Taj Mahal seems to change color with changing light and atmospheric conditions.



The public sarcophagus of emperor Shah Jahan (left) is next to the one of his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal (right), in the Taj Mahal mausoleum.

The mausoleum was designed to be a holy building, a reflection of Mumtaz Mahal's mansion in the gardens of paradise. Muslims believe that the number eight symbolizes paradise, so Mughal tombs were often octagonal in shape. Mumtaz Mahal's mausoleum follows this tradition, with four long and four short outer walls. Massive arches provide entry on the four long walls of the building, flanked by smaller arches on either side. Within, the building is honeycombed with rooms and passages laid out in perfect symmetry.

Mumtaz Mahal's **sarcophagus** (sar-KAH-fuh-guhs) sits at the center of an octagonal room in the center of the building. A second sarcophagus rests beside it, the sole off-center element, marking her husband's burial site. A perforated marble screen surrounds them both.

Both sarcophagi are cenotaphs, or fake burial sites for visitors to view. The real burial sites are located in a private chamber on the lower level, directly below the cenotaphs.

The word *taj* comes from the Persian word for “crown.” Some experts suggest that the mausoleum, the most richly decorated structure in the Taj Mahal, represents Mumtaz Mahal’s jewel-covered crown and is meant to honor her in death. Geometric designs cover nearly every inch of the floor. Vines, flowers, and butterflies decorate the walls, bright with precious and semiprecious stones—jade, jasper, turquoise, and lapis lazuli (LAP-is LA-zuh-lee). Artisans also set thousands of diamonds, rubies, amethysts, and other gems into the designs, and a thin sheet of pearls was constructed to cover Mumtaz Mahal’s sarcophagus on holy days.



Artisans carved elaborate floral patterns and embedded expensive colorful stones in the interior walls of the mausoleum.

The Story Behind the Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal was not the first tomb created by Mughal rulers, but it was one of few such monuments created for a woman. Shah Jahan's other two wives' tombs are located on the Taj Mahal grounds in unmarked buildings near the Great Gate. What inspired Shah Jahan to build such a magnificent memorial for Mumtaz?

Shah Jahan met Mumtaz Mahal, then called Arjumand Banu, when he was a fifteen-year-old prince and she was fourteen. They were engaged shortly thereafter and married five years later, in 1612. Shah Jahan gave her the title Mumtaz Mahal, which means "Chosen One of the Palace."

An Islamic Taboo

According to poets of the time, Mumtaz Mahal's great beauty caused the moon to hide its face in her presence—and few were permitted to see this beauty. As a noblewoman, Mumtaz had to keep her face covered in public. No paintings survive to show us her appearance, as painting noblewomen was an Islamic taboo. Paintings show artists' ideas of how she may have looked.



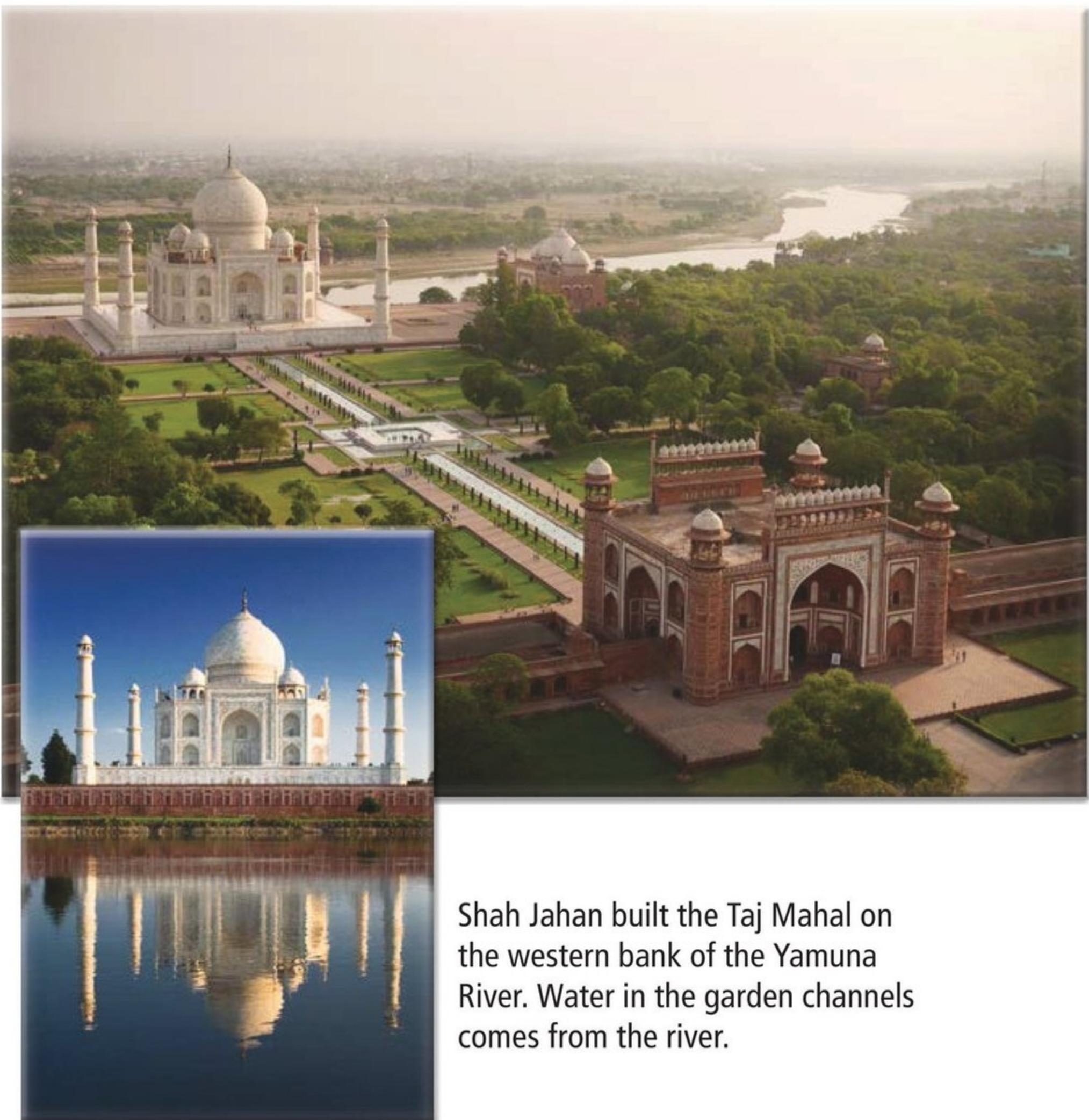
Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal



Shah Jahan was a powerful military leader at the peak of Mughal rule. He demonstrated skill in battle at an early age.

Over the next eighteen years, Mumtaz traveled everywhere with her husband, even accompanying him when he traveled to war. She was in his battle camp when she died giving birth to their fourteenth child in 1631. She was only thirty-eight years old.

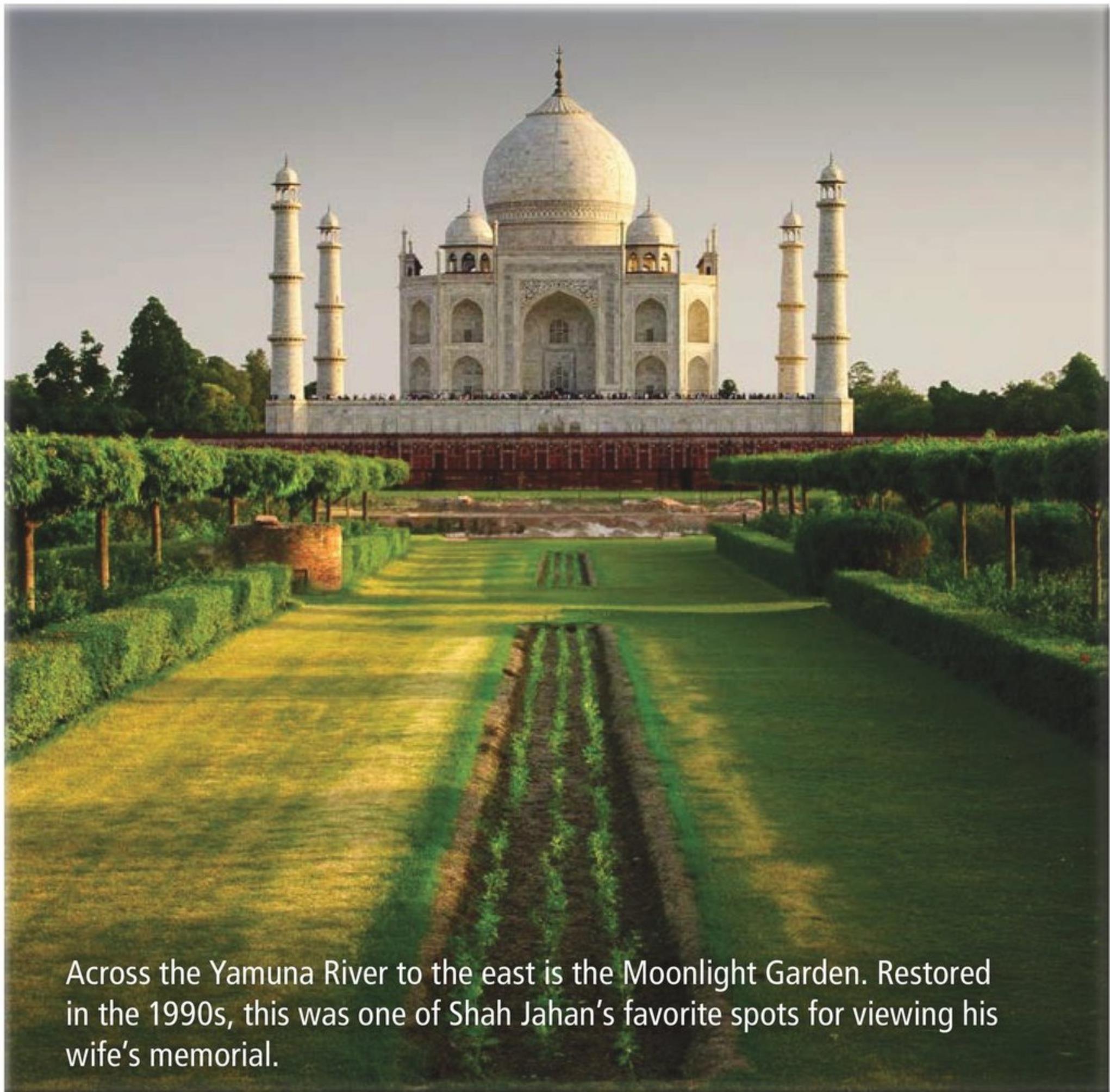
Shah Jahan was heartbroken. He gave up jewelry, fancy clothes, and music, and even delayed his sons' weddings for two years. Every Wednesday, the day on which Mumtaz had died, Shah Jahan banned celebrations. On the yearly anniversary of her death, he would not allow celebrations during the entire month and required his court to wear white in her memory.



Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal on the western bank of the Yamuna River. Water in the garden channels comes from the river.

Shah Jahan chose a site for Mumtaz Mahal's memorial shortly after returning to his capital city of Agra. He selected land beside the Yamuna (YAH-moo-nah) River, where Mughal royalty lived in large riverside garden mansions. The mausoleum would be built along a bend in the river where slower water protected the riverbanks from erosion. There, the river creates a natural mirror and reflects light onto the mausoleum's white marble walls and towers.

At the time, mausoleums were usually placed in the center of a garden, so the position of Mumtaz's mausoleum—at one end of the gardens—was unusual. However, the ruins of a second garden property, called the "Moonlight Garden," were discovered on the opposite riverbank. Archaeologists now think the Moonlight Garden was an important part of the Taj Mahal grounds, a spot from which visitors could view the mausoleum by moonlight.



Across the Yamuna River to the east is the Moonlight Garden. Restored in the 1990s, this was one of Shah Jahan's favorite spots for viewing his wife's memorial.

Building the Mighty Taj

Construction of the Taj Mahal began in 1632, about a year after Mumtaz Mahal's death. The Taj Mahal was the largest architectural project of the Mughal dynasty, requiring more than twenty thousand workers and more than a thousand elephants. Shah Jahan brought in architects, stoneworkers, and painters from all over the world.

Amazing Facts

- The mausoleum is about 70 meters (240 ft.) tall. Its dome is 44 meters (144 ft.) tall and is estimated to weigh 11,000 metric tons (12,000 tn.).
- The Taj Mahal took 22 years and about 32 million rupees to build in 1632.
- Building the Taj Mahal today would cost about \$1.6 billion—four times as much as the cost of building Disney World.
- The minarets are built at a slight slant so they will fall away from the mausoleum if they ever fall.



Gems, semiprecious stones, and different colors of marble came from China, Tibet, Afghanistan, and other countries. The slabs of white marble used to cover the mausoleum had to be transported hundreds of miles on carts pulled by teams of twenty to thirty oxen. At the building site, workers constructed a dirt ramp 4 kilometers (2.5 mi.) long and a complicated system of scaffolds, ropes, and pulleys to move the marble into position. Work on the Taj Mahal continued for the next twenty-two years.

Late in his life, when three of his sons fought among themselves to decide who would be the next emperor, Shah Jahan was imprisoned in Agra Fort. The victor of the fight—Aurangzeb (aw-ruhng-ZEB)—kept his father in the fort until his death in 1666.



From the time he was imprisoned by his son, Shah Jahan could only view the Taj Mahal from afar. This view is from a room at Agra Fort.

The Taj Mahal After Shah Jahan

Today, the Taj Mahal is open to the public from sunrise to sunset every day except Friday, the Islamic holy day. On Fridays, the Taj Mahal is available for religious use by local Muslims, who can offer prayers from the mosque located near the mausoleum. Visitors can also view the Taj Mahal by moonlight on the night of a full moon and the nights immediately before and after, except during the holy month of Ramadan.

However, the Taj Mahal today is not the same as the one Shah Jahan built in the seventeenth century. In the years after the Shah's death, it was practically abandoned. Looters and vandals chiseled out many of the gems and semiprecious stones that decorated the mausoleum. Gold lamps, Persian carpets, the pearl overlay for Mumtaz Mahal's sarcophagus, and other decorations disappeared. The gardens became overgrown, and buildings fell into disrepair with no one to care for them.

In the late nineteenth century, the British viceroy in charge of Agra began **restoration** of the Taj Mahal. He planted neat lawns in place of the former gardens, fixed broken marble inlay, and replaced missing screens and lamps.

However, even as looters and vandals were stopped, new enemies arose to threaten the Taj Mahal. Iron foundries, factories, and other industries that came to Agra emitted high levels of air pollutants. Acid rain caused the white marble to deteriorate. “Marble cancer,” a yellow fungus caused by pollutants, began to discolor and eat away the soft marble surface. Behind the mausoleum, the Yamuna River now carries raw sewage and garbage from upstream cities. Scientists suspect that gas produced by these contaminants may contribute to the marble’s discoloration.

Increasing numbers of visitors to the Taj Mahal brought more attention to the monument, but they, too, brought problems, as the moisture of thousands of visitors’ breath promoted the growth of marble-damaging algae.



Artisans work to restore beautiful marble artwork created hundreds of years ago.

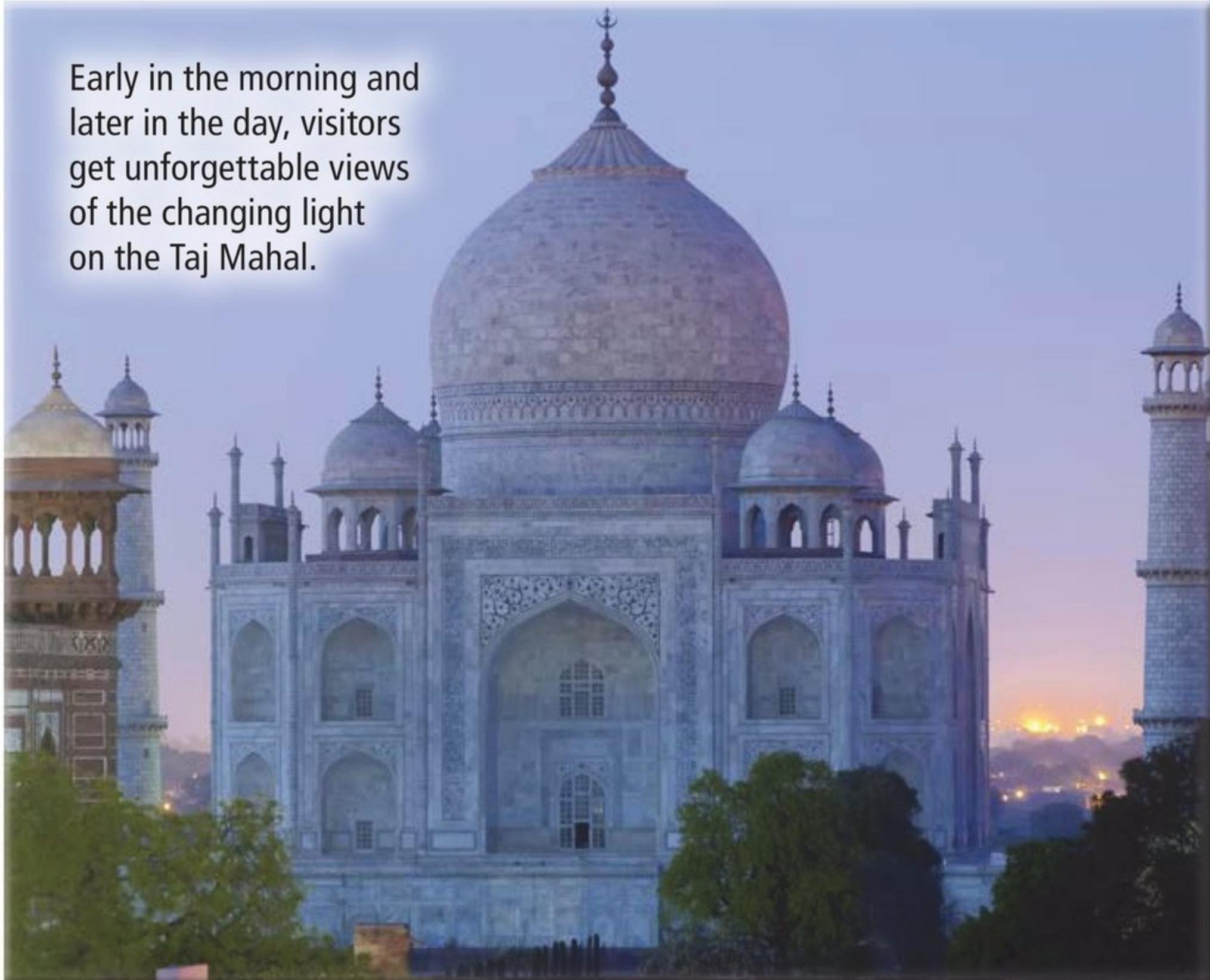
In the 1980s, the Indian government put a number of measures in place to help protect the monument from pollution. The “Taj Trapezium”—an area surrounding Agra where no major polluting industries would be permitted—was created in 1982. Two years later, the government created a 2-kilometer (1.2 mi.) emission-free zone surrounding the Taj Mahal.

The Indian Supreme Court put additional measures in place in 1996 since air pollution levels remained high in the city. As a result, polluting industries located near the Taj Mahal had to switch to a cleaner fuel source (natural gas) or move beyond the protected zone.

In 2001, several organizations came together to form the Taj Mahal **Conservation** Collaborative, a group dedicated to the conservation, restoration, and beautification of the Taj Mahal. This group has undertaken projects such as removing stains from the Taj Mahal’s white marble using detergents and absorbent clay packs.

Although the Taj Mahal faces numerous challenges, it has survived earthquakes, lightning, wars, and floods over the past several centuries. With a bit of luck and a lot of hard work, it will survive the coming centuries as well.

Early in the morning and later in the day, visitors get unforgettable views of the changing light on the Taj Mahal.



A Lasting Memorial

Shah Jahan desired a memorial for his beloved wife so magnificent that it would be admired by the entire world for all time. Today, the Taj Mahal sees thousands of daily visitors—millions each year—from all over the world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the Taj Mahal a World Heritage Site, and an international vote established it as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Centuries after its construction, the Taj Mahal remains one of the most beautiful memorials ever created.

Glossary

conservation (<i>n.</i>)	the protection and preservation of historical or cultural items, structures, or locations (p. 18)
dominates (<i>v.</i>)	has continuing power or a commanding presence over something or someone (p. 7)
dynasty (<i>n.</i>)	a series of rulers in a country from the same family (p. 4)
Islamic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the monotheistic faith of Muslims (p. 5)
mausoleum (<i>n.</i>)	a large tomb or a structure that contains several tombs (p. 5)
memorials (<i>n.</i>)	things that represent the memory of a person, place, thing, or event (p. 4)
minarets (<i>n.</i>)	narrow towers near a mosque from which worshipers are called to prayer (p. 7)
mosque (<i>n.</i>)	a place of worship in the Islamic faith (p. 7)
restoration (<i>n.</i>)	the act of returning something to its original condition (p. 16)
sarcophagus (<i>n.</i>)	a stone coffin or tomb, often inscribed and elaborately ornamented (p. 8)
symbolize (<i>v.</i>)	to represent an idea with an object, picture, or sign (p. 5)
symmetrical (<i>adj.</i>)	having sides that are the same shape and size, like a mirror image (p. 5)

Taj Mahal

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,778

Connections

Writing

Research to learn more about Shah Jahan and write a biography about him. Use facts from the book as well as additional resources in your biography.

Social Studies

Create a travel brochure for the Taj Mahal. Include information from the book to entice travelers to visit this historic landmark.

A photograph showing the Taj Mahal's famous reflecting pool in the foreground, which perfectly mirrors the white marble structure above. The pool is surrounded by a large, symmetrical garden with intricate patterns in the grass and pathways. People can be seen walking along the paths in the distance.

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