

# Building Barriers

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# Walls of History

**T**hroughout human history, walls have stretched across the landscape. They have separated towns and tribes. They have penned in animals, marked property and borders, and prevented people from entering—or leaving—communities.



# Multipurpose Marvels

The word *wall* comes from the Latin word *vallum*. A vallum was what the ancient Romans called a defensive barrier. The Romans would place wooden stakes on top of high earthen ramparts to keep attackers out. Over time, these stakes were made stronger with materials like stone and brick. They grew into the kind of walls that people build and use today.

In past centuries, walls were often built to last—and last they did. The planet is dotted with walls from earlier ages. They may have been built in different ways

and for different purposes, but each has stood the test of time.



▲ These walls from the ancient city of Troy (now in modern-day Turkey) are believed to be over 3,300 years old.



◀ These walls lie just outside the city of Cuzco, Peru. They were built over 500 years ago, when the Inca Empire ruled the area.



# The Great Wall of China

**T**he Great Wall of China is an instantly recognizable landmark. It runs across northern China and is one of the biggest construction projects ever completed.

The Great Wall was built to defend China against invaders from the north. Though most of the wall was constructed in the 1300s, parts of it are much older. In some places, tourists can walk the same path as travelers and soldiers from over 2,000 years ago.



**Constructing the Great Wall required a lot of manpower. ▼**



Measuring the length of the Great Wall of China is as tricky as measuring its age. This is because it is not one single wall, but a network of walls built by many different rulers over centuries. A traditional Chinese name for the wall is “The Wall of 10,000 li.” A li is a distance measurement of about one-third of a mile. In China, “10,000 li” is an expression used to mean “endless.”

In 2012, China’s State Administration of Cultural Relics announced the results of a five-year survey: the total length of the Great Wall of China is 13,000 miles. That is longer than the borders between the United States and Canada and the United States and Mexico combined.

The Chinese emperors who built the Great Wall did so in the hope that it would keep foreigners out of their land. For centuries, China’s borders were closed to foreigners. Europeans, in particular, knew very little about the Chinese empire.

Marco Polo, an Italian explorer, was the first European to write about China in detail. He recorded his experiences traveling through Asia in the late 1200s. Even though he spent seventeen years in the region, Marco Polo didn’t write a single word about the Great Wall.

## >> FROM THE SOURCE

Like the Chinese, the ancient Egyptians tried to keep out invaders with a wall. Over 2,700 years ago, King Piye of Kush, an African kingdom, went to war with the Egyptians. The story of his conquest of the Egyptian capital, Memphis, is carved into a slab of granite. It includes details about the city’s defensive walls:

*When day broke . . . his majesty reached Memphis. When he had landed on the north of it, he found that the water had approached to the walls, the ships mooring at the walls of Memphis. Then his majesty saw that it was strong, and that the wall was raised by a new rampart, and battlements manned with mighty men.*







▲ Badaling, near Beijing, is the most popular stretch of the wall for tourists.

It could be that, before the 1300s, the wall was simply unremarkable. Or maybe there's another reason. Ever since Marco Polo first published his writings, skeptical historians have suggested that he never actually went to China. If true, he never would have encountered the amazing wall.

However, in the centuries after Marco Polo, the wall impressed many other travelers from Europe. Today it ranks as one of China's most popular tourist attractions. It's perhaps the best-known wall in the world.



## Trophy or Tragedy?

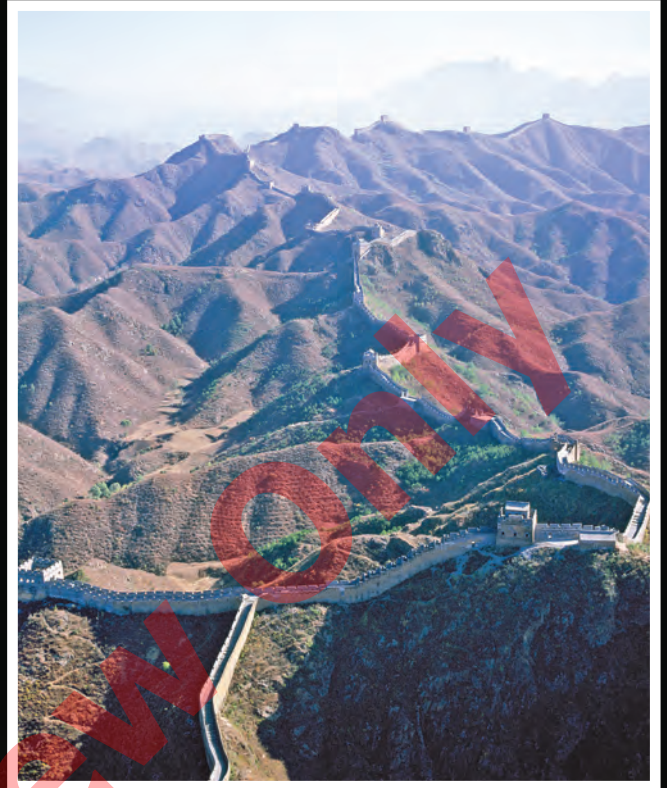
Today, the Great Wall is a national symbol of China. But thousands of years ago, Chinese people thought differently about the wall. According to the *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, the wall “was not regarded by the Chinese people as a symbol of national pride or unity but as a place where people were sent to labor for the emperor until they died.”



## World Famous (but not in space)

A popular claim about the Great Wall is that it is the only human-made structure visible from space. The origin of this claim probably dates back to 1754. That's when an English historian named William Stukeley wrote, "The Chinese Wall, which makes a considerable figure upon the terrestrial globe . . . may be discerned at the Moon." This was more than 200 years before anyone saw anything from space!

However, this claim is a myth. In 1996, the astronaut Jeffrey Hoffman made a more reliable claim: "I have spent a lot of time looking at the earth from space, including numerous flights over China, and I never saw the wall," he said.



China from  
space (no wall  
visible)

