A LOVE POEM IN MARBLE

It's been called the world's most beautiful building and mankind's closest brush with perfection. But, more than anything else, India's Taj Mahal stands as a testament to one man's enduring love.

Glistening like a perfect gem set into the heart of Agra, India, the Taj Mahal inspires the most lavish of praise. It has been called one of the seven wonders of the world, the world's most beautiful building, and mankind's closest brush with perfection.

But the glory of the white marble monument lies not only in its elegant design and extraordinary craftsmanship. For 400 years, the Taj Mahal has stood as a testament to a story of enduring love.

The story begins in 1526 when Babar, a Muslim ruler from what is now Afghanistan, invaded and conquered the ancient Hindu land of India. During the next 200 years, Babar's descendants, known as the Mogul emperors, stretched their power across most of the land that is now Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal.

THE MOGUL EMPIRE

The Mogul Empire brought India peace, stability, and a renowned cultural life. Babar's grandson, Akbar, the greatest of the emperors, won respect for his keen sense of justice and his belief in religious tolerance for the empire's Hindu majority.

At the height of the Mogul reign in 1628, Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan took the throne. The young emperor served as a patron of the arts, encouraging both Hindu and Islamic architecture to flourish. Hindus decorated their temples with carved sculptures of their gods. Muslims, forbidden by their religion to carve the human figure, decorated their mosques with quotations from the Koran, Islam's holy book.

Like his predecessors, Shah Jahan had many wives. But his most cherished was Arjumand Banu, better
known by her title of Mumtaz Mahal, or Taj Mahal—the Crown of the Palace. The two were married when Shah Jahan was just 20, and during their 18 years together, they were inseparable.

The empress became the ruler’s chief political adviser, counselor, and constant companion. She even followed him into battle to wipe the sweat from his brow.

Mumtaz Mahal pleased her husband even more by bearing 14 children. In 1631, while delivering their last child, she died. On her deathbed, she asked her husband to build “a monument of perfect proportions” to symbolize their perfect love.

A PERFECT MONUMENT

The grief-stricken emperor complied. He spent the next 20 years creating for his wife a magnificent tomb, the Taj Mahal.

Shah Jahan commissioned an architect from Persia to design the building. He imported turquoise from Tibet, jasper from the Punjab, jade from China, and carnelian from Arabia. He shipped hundreds of tons of pure white marble to Agra, his capital city. He hired 20,000 jewelers, builders, masons, and calligraphers. The craftsmen toiled for two decades to assemble a masterpiece of perfect proportions.

A GLISTENING SHRINE

The completed monument, then as now, rests on a vast platform, 2,000 feet long and 1,000 feet wide. At each of the four corners stands a three-story minaret, or Muslim prayer tower.

In the center, the domed mausoleum, a glistening white shrine encrusted with semi-precious jewels, looms above a calm reflecting pool. At its very heart, enclosed by a lacy marble screen, lie the cenotaphs, or burial monuments, to Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Directly below, sealed in a vault, rest the remains of the famous lovers.

Actually, Shah Jahan never intended to rest eternally beside his wife. He planned a black marble replica of the Taj Mahal for himself. He dreamed of building it directly across the Jumna River from its white twin. The two were to be joined by a black-and-white bridge across the waters. But in 1658, Shah Jahan fell ill. His son, Aurangzeb, anxious to beat out his brothers to the throne, seized control of the empire. He imprisoned his father in an Agra fortress.

HIS LAST WISH

Shah Jahan lived out the rest of his days in the fortress tower, gazing hour after hour at his life’s work, the Taj Mahal. His last wish was to be carried to a window, where, one legend says, “dimly looking across the waters at the glowing whiteness and the glittering of that melody in marble, he fell into a deep and endless sleep.” —Leah Eskin

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Directions: Read “A Love Poem in Marble,” then answer the following questions in complete sentences below.

1. What was Babar’s influence on India?
2. How did Mogul rule benefit India?
3. Under whose rule was the Taj Mahal built? Why?
4. How did the design reflect the religious beliefs of Islam?
5. What was used in the construction? How many workers? How long did it take?
6. What happened to Shah Jahan at the end of his life?
7. Explain how the title of the article “A Love Poem in Marble” fits the Taj Mahal.