

The Lighthouse of Alexandria

The Lighthouse of Alexandria was one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World. Situated on the small offshore island of Pharos, the Lighthouse lit the way for sailors navigating the tricky harbor into what was then one of the world's centers of civilization. Pharos actually was not a true island: it was connected to the mainland by a dike called the Heptastadion. Thus Alexandria had two harbors, one on either side of the dike.

The Lighthouse was the idea of Ptolemy Soter, who took over command of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great. He ordered construction of the lighthouse in 290 BC, and the project was finally finished by his son Ptolemy Philadelphus. The main architect was Sostratus. Detailed calculations for the project were completed at the famed Library of Alexandria.

The Lighthouse was a huge building that had 3 parts, one built right on top of another. The lowest part was square, about 183.4 feet high. The middle was octagonal, 90 feet high. The highest part was a 24-foot-high cylinder. The total heights, including the base, was 384 feet, which is the same as a modern 40-story building.

Inside the base was a cylinder that stretched from bottom to top and carried fuel needed to light the fire that burned at the top of the structure. This fire was the beacon during the night. In the daytime, a mirror reflected sunlight and served as the same sort of beacon. A legend also says that the mirror could be used to burn enemy ships before they could sail into the harbor.

The Lighthouse stood for centuries. Earthquakes eventually brought it down, however, with the final one in 1323 doing significant structural damage. It was not repaired, and in fact the stones were later used to build a fort on the spot where the lighthouse once stood.

