In prehistoric times, when people were nomadic hunters, they found shelter where they could, or carried it with them. But as tribes began to put down roots and to become farmers as well as hunters, they needed simple but more permanent buildings to house their families. They made round or square huts out of what they could find nearest them, first wood, and then wood and stone.

They also built temples to the gods and tombs for the dead. The remains of some of their monuments can be seen in stone circles such as Stonehenge in England.

Around 3000 BC, people began to come together in larger numbers and to construct towns. Among them were the Egyptians who designed and built not only houses but also huge pyramids, tombs, and temples. Houses were built with sun-dried clay bricks, but temples were heavy stone buildings with flat roofs or beams supported on thick walls or solid columns. Many great temples were built at Luxor on the Nile, around 1500 BC. The temples were mysterious places, Egyptian architecture was intended to be impressive and solemn.

A different kind of architecture grew up in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Western Asia. Among the huge buildings made with brick were artificial mounds, called ziggurats which had temples at the top. The ziggurats were several storeys high, and there were sloping ramps on the outside to provide a way to the top.

One of the ancient empires in this part of the world was that of the Assyrians. One of their main buildings was the palace of the emperor Sargon, begun at Khorsabad around 700 BC, which was built on a brick platform 14 metres(46 feet) above the ground. There were figures of bulls with wings and human heads at the gateways. The Assyrians used arches for the roofs of long narrow rooms, and for the drains to carry water away from the platforms of the palaces.

Wonderful palaces were also built in the Persian empire during the 6th century BC. One was built in the capital city of Persepolis for King Darius, who reigned from 522 to 486 BC. Like the palace of Sargon, it stood on top of a platform 12 metres high, and it contained what is known as the "Hall of a Hundred Columns" The roof was held up by 100 pillars, which had carved capitals. The top of a stone pillar is called the capital.

All these societies were empires, founded on military conquest. People grew richer and society grew stronger by capturing more and more lands, to provide food and goods, and by enslaving the conquered people. These great empires also fought and traded with each other, and people even made their way, despite the hard journey, between western Asia and India and China, where other kinds of architecture could be seen.