



NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

# HISTORY

WONDER  
&  
THUNDER

THE STATUE  
OF ZEUS AT  
OLYMPIA

CHRISTMAS  
TRUCE OF 1914  
PEACE ALONG THE  
WESTERN FRONT

AN EMPEROR'S  
GUIDE TO LIFE  
MARCUS AURELIUS'S  
MEDITATIONS

LEGENDS OF THE  
HOLY GRAIL  
SEEKING THE  
CUP OF CHRIST

PLUS:

**Freedom Writer**  
Olaudah Equiano  
Exposes Slavery



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**A favorite first step** of planning a trip to a place I've never been before is checking out travel guides. I'll consult books, websites, TV shows, or videos (I'm pretty format agnostic) to get the lowdown on when to go, what to see, and where to stay. Travel guides have been around for centuries. The first mass-produced ones appeared in early 19th-century Britain when enterprising tourists learned how to turn their trips to the Continent into bestsellers at home.

But sightseeing guides have an even deeper past. One of the earliest—and most famous—came from ancient Greece around the third century B.C. After Alexander the Great's triumphs opened up a new part of the world to Greek travelers, they began compiling lists of must-see destinations. We know them better today as the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

It's lucky for us that the statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of those ancient wonders, was copied many times before its destruction around the fifth century A.D. It appears on ancient coins, and sculptors made impressive marble replicas. But the one I'd like to see the most is the 3D-printed version of Zeus on his throne that greets visitors to the Millennium Gate Museum in Atlanta, Georgia. A visit to the Peach State may be in order!

*Amy Briggs*  
Amy Briggs, Editor in Chief



**CHALICE AT THE PALACE**

A 14th-century illumination from Chrétien de Troyes's unfinished *Perceval, The Story of the Grail* depicts a procession of the Grail at the castle of the Fisher King. National Library, Paris

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Defender of the Roman frontier, Emperor Marcus Aurelius is perhaps better known today as a self-help author. His stoic *Meditations* proved to be his legacy and is still widely read, admired, and studied today.

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**GOLDEN GLORY.** A FIRST-CENTURY A.D. ROMAN COPY OF THE STATUE OF ZEUS AT OLYMPIA. HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST PETERSBURG, RUSSIA  
YAKOV OSKANOV/SHUTTERSTOCK



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AN ARTIST'S IMAGINING OF WHAT THE *HOMO NALEDI* CAVE BURIAL RITUAL MIGHT HAVE LOOKED LIKE. UNDER FIVE FEET TALL, *H. NALEDI* HAD A MIX OF HUMAN AND ARCHAIC TRAITS, WITH FEET FOR WALKING AND FINGERS FOR CLIMBING TREES.

ART: JON FOSTER/NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION



**Rising Star cave system** SOUTH AFRICA

**THE RISING STAR** cave system is located in the Malmani dolomites in South Africa's Gauteng Province. Part of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage site, the 180-square-mile area is famous for its important fossil finds.

NG MAPS

MORTUARY RITUALS

# Big Claim for a Small Brain: *H. naledi* Buried Its Dead

Research from a South African cave says that *Homo naledi* interred its dead many millennia before the earliest known human burials.

It is a bold claim: Equipped with skulls one-third the size of ours, hominins in South Africa were interring their dead long before the earliest known human burials.

This sensational finding was unveiled by a team of scientists led by Lee R. Berger, a paleoanthropologist at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, and

a National Geographic Explorer in Residence.

Berger made headlines in 2013 following his discovery of the remains of a hominin, later named *Homo naledi*. His most recent assertion—that *H. naledi* deliberately buried its dead and may have created cave art—has aroused both excitement and skepticism. To date, the earliest known

intentional human burials happened 100,000 years after *H. naledi* lived.

Published as preprints on the website bioRxiv, Berger's claims—if substantiated by more data—would rewrite the story of human evolution.

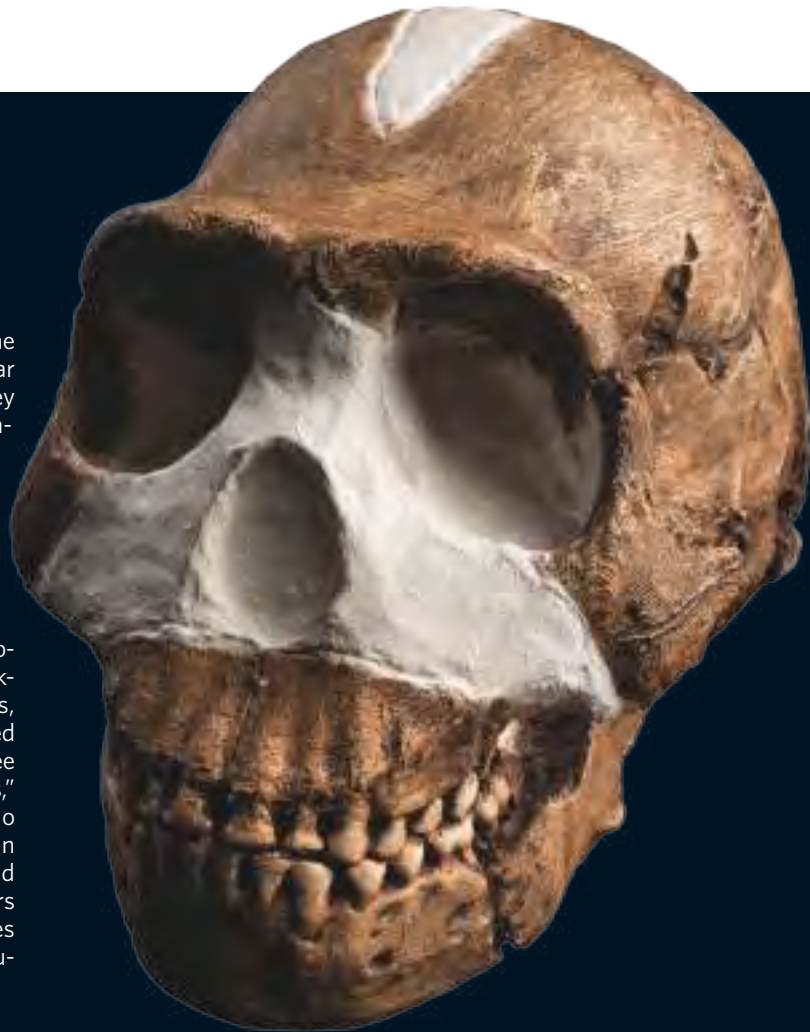
**Underground Astronauts**

The story of *H. naledi* began in 2013, when cavers in the Rising

## FACE-TO-FACE WITH AN ENIGMA

**WHEN RESEARCHERS** first examined the *Homo naledi* fossils from the Rising Star Cave, they were surprised by what they saw. The *H. naledi* skull (right) is human-like in form, sharing characteristics with other members of the *Homo* genus, such as *Homo habilis*. But its tiny skull resembles those of much earlier relatives. The bones recovered from the cave, consisting of up to 15 *H. naledi* individuals, share other features with modern humans: hands that can manipulate objects, skeletons adapted for walking upright. But, unlike human beings, they had shoulders and fingers adapted for climbing. “We never expected to see a combination of characteristics like this,” paleoanthropologist John Hawks, who worked on the project, said in 2015. In 2017 *H. naledi* was dated to have lived between 236,000 and 335,000 years ago. That such a small-skulled species lived in a relatively recent period of human history is more surprising.

BRETT ELOFF/UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND



Star Cave, northwest of Johannesburg, reached a hard-to-access chamber strewn with bones. They alerted Berger.

The bone cache lay in a deep chamber of the cave (later named the Dinaledi Chamber), a space accessed by squeezing down a 39-foot-long chute with a width of just 7.5 inches at its narrowest. Faced with the huge challenge of excavating such a site, Berger placed a global recruitment ad on social

media seeking archaeologists with very special qualifications: Applicants with the appropriate academic training had to be small and slim, with caving experience. Six women were chosen; they became known as the Underground Astronauts.

During the 2013-2014 excavation, funded by the National Geographic Society, the Underground Astronauts recovered a huge cache of bone

fragments belonging to an archaic human relative. Collected from the Dinaledi Chamber and other areas of the cave, the bones composed the skeletons of 15 individuals, the largest collection of a hominin species yet discovered in Africa. Berger's name for the new species, *Homo naledi*, is inspired by the word in the Sesotho language meaning “star.”

While not a direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*, *H. naledi*'s small brain is similar in size to the early human species *Australopithecus*, which became extinct over two million years ago. Some experts had surmised that the newly discovered species would be in this

age range. So, it was a surprise when, in 2017, Berger's team dated the *H. naledi* remains in the Rising Star Cave to between 236,000 and 335,000 years old.

They were living during the period when much bigger-brained Neanderthals were flourishing and *Homo sapiens* were emerging. Analysis of the skeletons suggested that *H. naledi* averaged four feet 10 inches tall and were much better tree climbers than modern humans.

### Deliberate Acts

The individuals found at the Rising Star Cave are a mixture of old and young and lived

The team's claim that small-brained *H. naledi* buried its dead is a challenge to established scholarship.



## TIGHT SQUEEZE

**DURING THE INITIAL** recovery of *H. naledi* fossils in 2013 and 2014, Lee Berger's six-woman team of caver-researchers, known as the Underground Astronauts, became expert navigators of the chute into the Dinaledi Chamber. At its narrowest point, the chute is less than eight inches wide. By the 2017-2018 expedition, more and more members of the team were learning how to pass down the chute, and in 2022, Berger decided he too would make the descent. After shedding 55 pounds, he successfully passed through the 39-foot-long fissure to the chamber below, "my body seemingly contorting like toothpaste in a gnarled tube," Berger recalled.

**FITTING IN.** ANTHROPOLOGIST MARINA ELLIOTT LEADS THE TEAM DOWN INTO RISING STAR CAVE DURING THE 2014 EXPEDITION.  
ELLIOT ROSS/NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

## Burial practices "were not limited to *H. sapiens* or other hominins with large brain sizes."

across several centuries. There is no evidence the remains were dragged there by animals.

Given the extreme difficulties in accessing the Dinaledi Chamber, in 2015 Berger's team proposed that *H. naledi* brought their deceased into the cave intentionally to dispose of them, either squeezing with them into the chamber itself or dropping the corpses down the chute. The practice is known as funerary caching. Carried out by a small-brained hominin, this alone would qualify as a major discovery.

### Startling Conclusion

Another major excavation began in Rising Star in 2017. In the fall of 2018, Becca Peixotto and Marina Elliott were in the Dinaledi Chamber examining sediment around bones. Watching their work via video link higher up in the cave, Berger noted signs that the bones lay in what looked to be not a natural depression but an artificial pit.

Five years on from the 2018 dig, Berger's preprint publications are heavily focused on this pit, known as Feature 1. The conclusion drawn by Berger and the team is startling: *H. naledi* intentionally hollowed out a space in the cave floor as a grave.

Until now, the earliest evidence for intentional burial among modern humans and Neanderthals took place at least 100,000 years after *H. naledi* lived. This time frame supported a general consensus that ritual funerary practice was the product of a

bigger brain. Berger's team's findings challenge that consensus. Their preprints posit "that mortuary practices were not limited to *H. sapiens* or other hominins with large brain sizes."

With so much at stake, the preprints have sparked a passionate debate among paleoanthropologists. Some experts find the claims persuasive. "Based on the current evidence, I think burial is the most logical explanation," said Tracy L. Kivell, a director at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, who was not involved in the project.

Others strike a more skeptical note. Flint Dibble, an archaeologist at Cardiff University in Wales, United Kingdom, conducted a public peer review of the evidence and posted it online. Concluding the preprints needed major revisions, he argued that the evidence presented is not sufficiently robust to support Berger's view that Feature 1 was created artificially.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Berger's findings is the decision to release them online prior to publishing in a peer-reviewed journal. In doing so, Berger said he was being transparent, allowing scrutiny of his work to advance more rapidly.

Some experts agree. Kivell said the preprints "[move] science forward." However, Chris Stringer, a research leader in human origins at the Natural History Museum in London, is one of several experts who



## HOW TO SPOT AN ANCIENT GRAVE SITE

**PALEOARCHAEOLOGISTS** have a checklist to determine if a body has been intentionally buried: a purpose-dug pit; bones that are mostly articulated; and evidence that, as the soft tissue decomposed, the covering soil kept the skeleton in position. Both *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals have confirmed sites where they buried their dead. A reconstruction of a Neanderthal burial (right) from some 60,000 years ago at La Chapelle, France, shows sharp angles of the pit and an articulated body. Some of the oldest *H. sapiens* burials are the remains of a mother and child discovered at the Qafzeh Cave in Nazareth, Israel. The pair (below) are around 100,000 years old.

RIGHT: GETTY IMAGES; BELOW: SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY/AGE FOTOSTOCK



do not agree with Berger's approach: "I'm keeping an open mind about it all. Personally, I don't think it was helpful to prerelease the papers before full review," he told *History*.

### Art and Fire

In addition to Berger's central claim of intentional burial, the preprints also describe cross-hatchings and shapes found on the cave walls. Berger's team concludes that these are associated with *H. naledi*.

To date, art has only been linked to *H. sapiens* and other big-brained hominins. If it were proven that *H. naledi* had intentionally created such

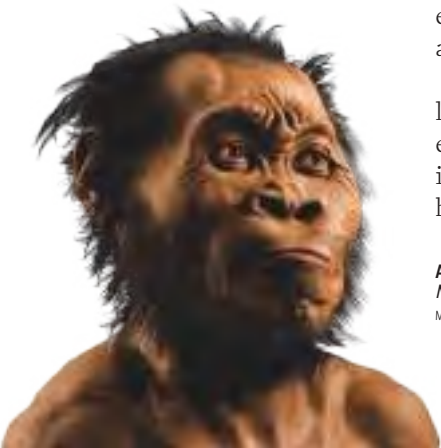
patterns, it would bolster the claim of *H. naledi*'s cultural complexity. Nevertheless, a peer review of the preprints on the online journal *eLife* noted that much data is still missing to validate such a bold assertion. Evidence is required that *H. naledi* in particular made such patterns, and that their creation took place between 200,000 and 300,000 years ago.

Evidence of fire use, essential to navigating the darkness of a cave, is not addressed in

the papers. Berger said it is available and will be analyzed at a future date. As the discovery of the bones in the Dinaledi Chamber passes its 10th anniversary, it is clear that more exploration is necessary. Whatever new information emerges from such studies, the little hominins of Rising Star will continue posing big questions about human evolution for many years to come. ■

—Braden Phillips  
& Julius Purcell

A REPRODUCTION OF THE HEAD OF *HOMO NALEDI* BY PALEOARTIST JOHN GURCHE  
MARK THIESSEN/NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION



# Olaudah Equiano: Scribe Against Slavery

Describing the atrocities he witnessed while enslaved, Equiano's 1789 autobiography played a crucial role in turning public opinion against the transatlantic slave trade.

## Long Voyage to Freedom

1745

Olaudah Equiano claims he is born to an Igbo family in southern Nigeria, where his father is a village elder.

1756

Equiano and his sister are kidnapped by enslavers and separated. He is transported to Barbados and sold.

1766

After years of enslavement, Equiano earns enough money to buy his freedom from Robert King, a Philadelphia merchant.

1774

Equiano converts to Methodism. He will become the leading Black campaigner in abolishing the slave trade.

1789

Equiano's autobiography is published. His firsthand account of slavery's horrors inspires the abolition movement.

ts title appears unassuming, but its impact is undeniable. Published in 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* is a two-volume autobiography that became one of the most important works of the late 18th century and a foundational text in the fight against slavery.

Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is the first book-length narrative by an enslaved person. It is the prototype for a genre that developed in the 19th century, culminating in Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography. His and other testimonies by formerly enslaved people are "the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfictional narrative forms are based," wrote African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

### Birth of a Bestseller

Equiano's book was immensely popular when it was published in England. Volume one describes Equiano's childhood in what is now Nigeria, his kidnapping, his brutal Atlantic crossing, and his enslavement and experiences in

the West Indies. Volume two recounts how he achieved his freedom, his life as an entrepreneur and adventurer, his religious conversion, and his life in England, which focuses on his campaign for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, an event he never lived to see.

Readers were taken by the story of how, in 1756, 11-year-old Equiano and sister were seized by enslavers and taken from their Igbo home. The siblings were separated, sold repeatedly in West Africa, then reunited. "She and I held one another by the hands ... all night," he wrote, "and thus for a while we forgot our misfortunes in the joy of being together." The next day they were separated again, this time forever.

There are few first-person accounts by Africans of the Middle Passage, the journey across the Atlantic from West Africa. Equiano's memoir captures the agony of the experience indelibly:

*The ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died.*

Equiano's account of the Middle Passage captures the agony of the experience indelibly.



AN IGBO MOTHER AND CHILD FIGURINE, EARLY 1900S, PRIVATE COLLECTION  
M. GRAHAM-STEWART/BRIDGEMAN/ACI



## 'WITHOUT DISTINCTION OF COLOR OF SKIN'

**IN A REVIEW** of pro-slavery texts in 1788, Equiano defended interracial marriage as a way to “encourage open, free, and generous love upon Nature’s own wide and extensive plan... without distinction of the color of a skin.” He concluded that interracial marriage would be “a national honour, national strength, and productive of national virtue.” In 1792 he put his theories into practice when he married Susannah Cullen, a white Englishwoman he met in 1789 while on tour to promote his book. The couple settled in the rural English town of Soham. Cullen bore two daughters, Ann Mary and Joanna, before she died in 1796.

**OLAUDAH EQUIANO, COLOR ENGRAVING FROM AN EDITION OF HIS MEMOIR, DATE UNKNOWN**

GRANGER/ALBUM

Upon arrival in Barbados, Equiano wrote that he was taken to Virginia and sold to a local planter. After about a month, he was purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, a Royal Navy officer, who brought Equiano to London and renamed him Gustavus Vassa, an ironic homage to the 16th-century Swedish king who freed his country from Danish tyranny.

While serving Pascal, Equiano fought in naval battles during the Seven Years’ War. In 1763 Equiano was purchased by Robert King, a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia, for whom he acted

as a clerk, working on trading sloops around the Caribbean. Equiano witnessed shocking brutality toward enslaved Africans throughout the West Indies and North America, and he spoke with many, which may have provided him with the data that he used to write the Middle Passage narrative.

Meanwhile, King allowed Equiano to conduct his own trading, which eventually earned him enough money to purchase his freedom in 1766. In the following years he lived a life of trade and adventure, traveling to North America, the Mediterranean, the West Indies, and the

Arctic, where he took part in a failed attempt to find a northern passage to India.

### **Zeal for Change**

After experiencing a spiritual awakening in 1774, Equiano converted to Methodism, inspired by its abolitionist leader, John Wesley. From the mid-1780s a movement calling for an end to the slave trade began to emerge. Equiano was its leading Black campaigner.

In 1788 he presented Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, with “a petition on behalf of my African brethren,” in which he supplicated “your Majesty’s



**FOUNTAIN OF HOPE**  
Erected in 1865 in front of Parliament in London, the Buxton Memorial Fountain commemorates the 1834 emancipation of enslaved people in the British Empire.

AGE FOTOSTOCK

compassion for millions of my African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny in the West Indies.” That same year, he hailed the Slave Trade Act, by which the British Parliament regulated the maximum number of enslaved people who could be transported on a ship. “The oppression and cruelty

exercised to the unhappy Negroes there, have at length reached the British legislature,” he said.

It was *The Interesting Narrative*, however, that put Equiano front and center. Wesley, the Methodist abolitionist, brought the book to the attention of William Wilberforce, who led the

movement in the House of Commons to abolish the African transatlantic slave trade. Feminist Mary Wollstonecraft gave the book a mostly positive review, though she thought it focused too much on Equiano’s conversion.

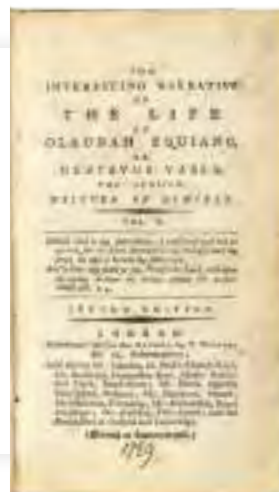
Equiano makes it very clear that the book is as much a political petition as an autobiography. In the introduction, addressing the two Houses of Parliament “with the greatest deference and respect,” he states his “chief design” is “to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave trade has entailed.”

The book’s first printing of some 700 copies sold out quickly. Over 300 subscribers bought copies prior to publication for the first edition, and by the last edition there were close to 2,000. Among prominent readers were the Prince of Wales (the future King George IV), many other

## MARKETING GENIUS

**DEMONSTRATING** business acumen, Equiano never sold his copyright. Although most books never saw a second edition, Equiano’s ran to nine British editions, and the profits were all his. He also traveled around Britain for public readings—an early promotional book tour that took him across the British Isles for more than five years.

**FIRST EDITION** OF EQUIANO’S *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE*, PUBLISHED IN LONDON IN 1789. BRITISH LIBRARY/ALBUM



## THE ZONG ATROCITY

**OLAUDAH EQUIANO** was a prominent voice bringing attention to the horrors committed on the slave ship *Zong*. Sailing from Ghana to Jamaica in 1781, the ship ran low on drinking water, prompting the crew to throw more than 130 enslaved people overboard. Outrage against the massacre provided fuel for Britain's growing abolition movement in the following decades. The *Zong* inspired a painting (right) by J.M.W. Turner. Vividly depicting the barbarity of the transatlantic slave trade, "The Slave Ship" was displayed at the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, whose aim was to end slavery around the world.

"THE SLAVE SHIP," 1840, J.M.W. TURNER,  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON ALBUM



aristocrats, and leading abolitionists Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Clarkson, and Granville Sharp. Equiano had turned to Sharp in 1783 to protest the massacre on the slave ship *Zong*, an atrocity that helped fuel the abolition movement. The two-volume work was translated into German, Dutch, and Russian, and it even found an audience in the United States.

Equiano constantly drummed up support for the abolitionist cause in any way he could, giving lectures and participating in public debates. Together with other Africans in Britain, he co-founded the abolitionist group Sons of Africa.

At age 52, Equiano died in 1797, before the slave trade ended in Britain. It was not until 1807 that Britain abolished it. Enslaved people in British colonies were finally emancipated in 1834.

### A Question of Birth

Equiano's eyewitness testimony of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade

was at the root of the book's emotional power, but modern scholarship has called some of his claims into question.

Vincent Carretta, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland and author of *Equiano, the African*, edited a 1995 edition of *The Interesting Narrative*. He found baptismal and naval records stating that Equiano was born in South Carolina around 1747. That would mean his Igbo childhood and much quoted account of the Middle Passage were inventions. The evidence is not definitive, Carretta says, but "has to be taken into account."

If it is true, Equiano's literary achievements have been greatly underestimated. "It makes it more interesting if we consider the possibility he created an African identity, which was exactly what was needed in the 1780s," Carretta says. "Equiano was aware of the need. You had proslavery people saying, 'if it was so bad, why do we not hear about enslaved

Africans complaining?' People he was corresponding with said we need to hear a first-person victim's account."

Other historians dispute the claim, while still recognizing the quality of Carretta's scholarship. The rest of Equiano's narrative contains no other discrepancies. To historian Adam Hochschild, that pattern indicates Equiano's African birth is most likely true. In his book *Bury the Chains*, Hochschild writes: "Seldom is one crucial portion of a memoir totally fabricated and the remainder scrupulously accurate; among autobiographers... both dissemblers and truth-tellers tend to be consistent."

The impact of Equiano's writing, whether part fiction or wholly fact, cannot be understated. His compelling story opened people's eyes to the horrors inflicted on humanity, a key early step in the march to end slavery.

—Mauro Cotone & Braden Phillips

# Louis XIV's Big Hair Revolution

Europe wiggled out over the 17th-century French king's fashions, including his love for long curls.

**D**olly Parton is credited with the phrase “the higher the hair, the closer to God,” but King Louis XIV might have shared her sentiments some 300 years earlier. The French king, famous for his ostentatious sense of style, donned wigs with long flowing locks, and men around the continent—from kings to commoners—followed suit.

## Covering Up

Wigs had been around for millennia in Europe and the Mediterranean before Louis XIV's reign. Some of history's oldest wigs were donned by the elite of ancient Egypt, both in life and death. Wigs have been found on mummies' heads, and ancient tombs contain wig boxes along with other personal items.

In ancient Greece, wigs were used mostly by actors in plays. Some Romans wore fashionable wigs; wealthy women favored blond hair imported from Germany.

During the Middle Ages, the church discouraged wig wearing, calling for simpler hairstyles for women and men.

Attitudes toward wigs changed drastically during the reign of England's Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). The aging queen hid her thinning hair with a collection of more than 80 red wigs. The archaic term for wig, periwig, from the French *perruque*, made one of its earliest written appearances in the 1590s, in William Shakespeare's early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

These English roots would give way to French dominance by the mid-17th century, when the 23-year-old king of France went prematurely bald in 1624. Before his hair loss, King Louis XIII had worn his natural hair luxuriantly long, a sign of health and virility. Thinning hair and baldness had become associated with sickness, perhaps because those who suffered from syphilis were “treated” with mercury, whose toxic



**FLOWING CURLS** were in style for Europe's nobility, including those present when the Prince Elector of Saxony (in red) met Louis XIV (in a silver wig). 1715 painting, Louis de Silvestre, Versailles, France

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

effects included hair loss. To give the appearance of long locks, the king's hairpiece was constructed from three broad sections of hair joined together. Once adopted by Louis XIII, wig wearing was embraced by the court elite as a status symbol.

## Tresses and Toupees

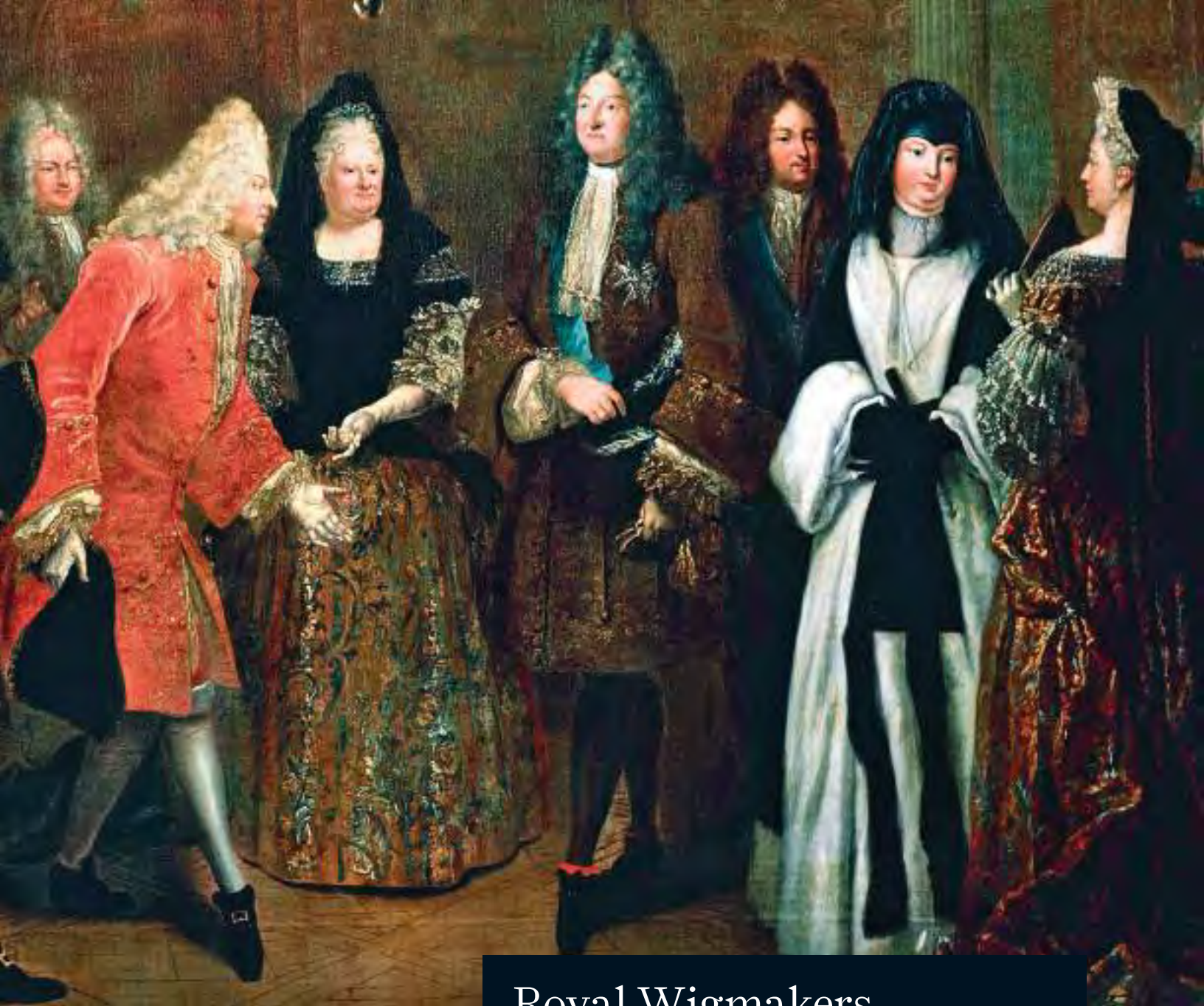
Louis XIII may have started the trend, but his successor, Louis XIV, would take it to new heights. The four-year-old king succeeded his father in 1643, when Europe's fashion capital was Madrid. The Spanish preference for elegantly dark, severe clothing held sway.

## FROM HEAD TO TOE

**LOUIS XIV'S** extravagant style didn't stop at his hair; it went all the way down to his feet. The king popularized red-heeled shoes, like the reproduction (left) of a pair of the king's. In 17th-century France, red dye was expensive. Its use proclaimed opulence and majesty. Other European monarchs, such as Charles II of England, aped the French king's style and donned red heels as well.

ALBUM





## Royal Wigmakers of Versailles

As he grew, Louis XIV wore his brown hair in long, wavy curls. Before the king began to bald, he supplemented his natural hair with falls to give it more volume. Like his father, he began to lose his hair and regularly wore wigs to disguise it. By the time Louis XIV was in his 30s, he gave up on half measures and wore a long, full-bottomed wig of tight curls, created for him by his personal barber, Benoît Binet.

The king employed 48 wigmakers in his retinue. They brought innovation to the craft by knotting strands of hair and interlacing them in intricate patterns with silk threads, which created an

**SOME 60 SERVANTS** were responsible for the personal care of Louis XIV. They included barbers and valets de chambre who combed the king's hair and kept it clean. Wearing a cap at night, the king received a valet every morning who presented him with wigs to choose from. Each wig was suited to specific events and times of day.

The wigs were kept in the *cabinet des perruques* (wig cabinet) near the royal bedchamber. The cabinet contained about a thousand headpieces, including a golden wig that the king wore when he appeared as the Sun King in a dance performance. His personal barber, Benoît Binet, would shave

him and place the day's wig on his scalp. Binet was allegedly the only person who saw the king in his natural bald state. Distinguished wigmakers, the Binet family created a number of large royal wigs. After Binet died in 1695, his son took over until Louis XIV's death in 1715.

## CUTTING COMMENTARY

**IN 1761** the English satirist and artist William Hogarth poked fun at the elaborate wigs worn by guests to the coronation of Britain's King George III and Queen Charlotte in his engraving "The Five Orders of Periwigs" (right). Mimicking the five orders of classical architecture, Hogarth organized the wigs and their wearers into five categories: Episcopal, Old Peerian, Aldermanic, Lexonic, and Queerinthian. Each of his detailed descriptions, written in the style of a contemporary architectural treatise, satirizes these different divisions of British society as well as their embrace of ostentatious, and often ludicrous, wigs.

SCALA, FLORENCE



effect of flowing tresses. Woven bands were then sewn onto a light textile cap shaped to the wearer's head. The weighty, full-bottomed wig popularized by Louis XIV was a labor-intensive creation that required roughly 10 heads of human hair.

Louis XIV's court began to dominate the fashion of Europe's elite. France was growing in economic and military strength, eclipsing Europe's former great power, Spain. Known as the *Roi Soleil* (Sun King)

for the magnificence of his fashions, Louis XIV made

the wig an essential accessory at his court for men and women alike. He applied the same demands he imposed on his wigmakers to all areas of taste and technology.

Louis XIV's taste in wigs spread well beyond France, reaching royal courts across Europe and becoming a standard feature of European noble costume. When King Charles II returned to his throne in England in 1660 after a long exile in France, he brought French fashion with him, including large wigs of flowing locks. Charles reportedly favored wigs not to hide baldness but

to hide another sign of aging: gray hair. Around this time, the word "bigwig" became popular in England, developing out of the wealthy's conspicuous consumption. Wealthy patrons would pay as much as 800 shillings on a wig. (When calculated for inflation, today that wig would cost around £8,000, or \$10,000.)

### Heavy Heads

Wigs may have been the height of fashion, but they posed plenty of problems for the wearer. Men had to learn how to manage their wigs in court. Handling one's wig while bowing, for example, to stop it from falling over the face was essential. Full-bottomed wigs could be oppressively hot and weighed three to four pounds. And with candles providing illumination indoors, wigs could easily catch fire.

Ghoulish superstitions attached themselves to hairpieces. During the

After his exile, Charles II returned to England dressed in French fashion, including large wigs.

CHARLES II OF ENGLAND, 1684 BUST BY HONORÉ PELLE, V&A MUSEUM, LONDON  
AGE FOTOSTOCK







**CUSTOMERS** try on wigs at a barbershop, in an 18th-century engraving by Thomas Rowlandson.

WELLCOME COLLECTION

Great Plague that raged in London during 1665 and 1666, people feared wigmakers were using the hair of the dead. London diarist Samuel Pepys had second thoughts about a wig that he bought in 1665 “because the plague was in Westminster when I bought it.” Eventually, he decided that enough time had passed since the purchase that he could safely wear it.

Once established at court, wigs became *de rigueur* among high-ranking professional groups, such as judges, priests, financiers, merchants, shopkeepers, prestigious artisans, respected domestic servants, and the hairdressers who constructed and cared for the wigs. To meet growing demand, the number of master wigmakers boomed in France during Louis XIV’s reign. In Paris, it increased from 200 in 1673 to 945 in 1771. In the provinces, journeymen wigmakers traveled around the country as well, and soon ordinary people began

wearing wigs, to the consternation of the upper classes.

At the heart of wig economics was the hair itself. Higher priced wigs used women’s hair because of its length and the belief that it was of higher quality than men’s. Traders at fairs would buy hair from peasant girls. Blond or silver-gray hair was often in high demand, followed by black. Naturally curly hair was the most valuable of all. With so many wigs to make, French artisans bought hair from all around Europe. In England tracts were written in defense of nationally sourced human hair, which competed not only against continental human hair but also against horsehair (from manes) or goat hair for cheaper wigs.

### **Big Hair Falls Flat**

Louis XIV’s death in 1715 heralded the end of the big wig craze. When King Louis XV came of age, he favored simpler hairstyles at his court. Portraits of

the new king depict him with powdered hair: Curls frame his face, while the rest is pulled back into a low ponytail.

The profound social changes that took place at the end of the 18th century brought the fashion for wigs to an end. Wigs were linked in the popular imagination with the excesses of France’s *ancien régime*, none more so than the towering wigs associated with Marie Antoinette and the court of Louis XVI, which gave rise to the French Revolution. Like Napoleon himself, men of fashion began to spurn wigs. Some professions still allowed for their use, however. Although aristocrats no longer wore them, their staff did. In England, judges retained the wig as a symbol of their official role. The custom remains to this day: In criminal cases English judges wear bob-style wigs, with shorter sides and a tail at the back.

—Barbara Rosillo

# MIGHTY ZEUS AT OLYMPIA

THE STATUE THAT BECAME A WONDER

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In the fifth century B.C. an enormous gold-and-ivory sculpture of the ruler of the Olympian gods captured the imagination of early Greeks and never let go. Its size and splendor made it one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

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MIREIA MOVELLÁN LUIS





#### THE WORK AND ITS CREATOR

A contemporary rendering of the Zeus sculpture depicts its massive scale.

**Opposite:** A 14th-century relief carved by Andrea Pisano for the bell tower of Italy's Florence Cathedral shows the Greek sculptor Phidias at work. Museo della Opera di Santa Maria dei Fiore, Florence, Italy

RE-CREATION: LOOK AND LEARN/BRIDGEMAN/ACI  
OPPOSITE: ALAMY/CORDON PRESS

### PHILIPPEION

A shrine created by Philip II of Macedon commemorates his victory at Chaeronea in 338 B.C.

### TEMPLE OF HERA

Worship of the queen of the gods, Zeus's wife, took place here starting at the end of the seventh century B.C.

### STADIUM

Dating to the fifth century B.C., and measuring 695 feet long, the arena could accommodate up to 20,000 spectators.

### TEMPLE OF ZEUS

Home to the god's massive statue, this site was the central focus of the complex.

### ECHO STOA

Construction of this covered colonnade, at 328 feet long, began in the fourth century B.C.

### SOUTHERN STOA

This portico gallery, dating to the fourth century B.C., was one entrance to the site.

## SANCTUARY OF OLYMPIA

Elis, named for the main city located about 30 miles away, is home to Olympia, the sanctuary in the northwest realm of the Peloponnese. Olympia comprised more than 760 structures, from temples dedicated to Zeus and other gods; to treasuries and administrative buildings; to statues and altars; to hostels, baths, and

the stadium. In ancient Greece, the sanctuary was an inviolable place where the Olympic Games could occur peacefully because of sacred truces held during the event. People from all over Greece would put aside their differences and come together for the games. Today the sanctuary is a World Heritage site.

ILLUSTRATION: RAIDEN STUDIO

### ca 430 B.C.

The monumental gold and ivory statue of Zeus is placed in his temple at Olympia and consecrated.

### 2nd-1st century B.C.

The earliest lists of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World appear. The Statue of Zeus is among them.

### A.D. 391

As Christianity spreads, Roman emperor Theodosius I outlaws pagan cults and ends the Olympic Games.

### 5th century A.D.

The Statue of Zeus is relocated to Constantinople (Istanbul), where it is lost or destroyed.

**AERIAL VIEW OF THE RUINS OF THE TEMPLE OF ZEUS IN THE SANCTUARY OF OLYMPIA, WITH THE ANASTYLOSIS, OR RECONSTRUCTION, OF ONE OF ITS COLUMNS.**  
ALAMY/CORDON PRESS



### **GOOD LIKENESS**

Coins from the ancient world, such as a silver tetradrachm minted during the time of Alexander the Great (below), reveal what the Statue of Zeus looked like.

ALBUM



That is, until the sixth century B.C., when both Elis and neighboring Pisa contended to control the games and all the political and economic benefits that came with it. Fierce battles and raids led to instability and disruption throughout the region until 464 B.C., when at long last Elis claimed victory. To celebrate its triumph, Elis embarked on the construction of a grand temple that would honor Zeus, using spoils won in the war.

Local architect Libon was chosen to build the temple in 460 B.C. A coat of fine white stucco was applied over the sturdy limestone base used to construct the massive Doric temple. Six columns fronted the structure, with 13 running along the sides. A second floor wrapped around the central nave, accessed by stairs ascending from each side of the main door.

Depicting myths and characters from Greek lore, sculptures decorated the temple. Many have survived and are on display in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Friezes of the chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus were represented in the front gable, and the battle

of the Lapiths and the Centaurs at the wedding of Pirithous decorated the back gable. Metopes depicted the 12 labors of Hercules. All are masterful works of classical sculpture, though their artist remains unknown. But the pièce de résistance appeared inside the temple itself.

### **Master Sculptor**

Phidias, a well-known artist and architect of the time, was commissioned to make the temple's most important work: a giant statue of Zeus enthroned. Details of Phidias's early life are few. Born in Athens around 500 B.C., he likely fought in the battle of Salamis or Plataea against the Persians. His military service gained the favor of Cimon, a wealthy Athenian politician and military man who chose Phidias to build the memorial for the victory of Marathon at Delphi.

Phidias's reputation spread throughout Greece, and he was awarded many projects before his commission at Olympia. His grand plans for Zeus relied on a technique known as chryselephantine, in which smooth ivory and glistening gold are placed over wood. Phidias was famous for designing colossal figures using the application; among his most celebrated,

**WISE AND POWERFUL**  
THE STATUE OF  
ATHENA PARTHENOS  
WAS ANOTHER  
CHRYSELEPHANTINE  
WORK BY PHIDIAS. INSET:  
A ROMAN-ERA REPLICA,  
HOUSED IN THE NATIONAL  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
MUSEUM OF ATHENS.  
PETER CONNOLLY/AG/ALBUM

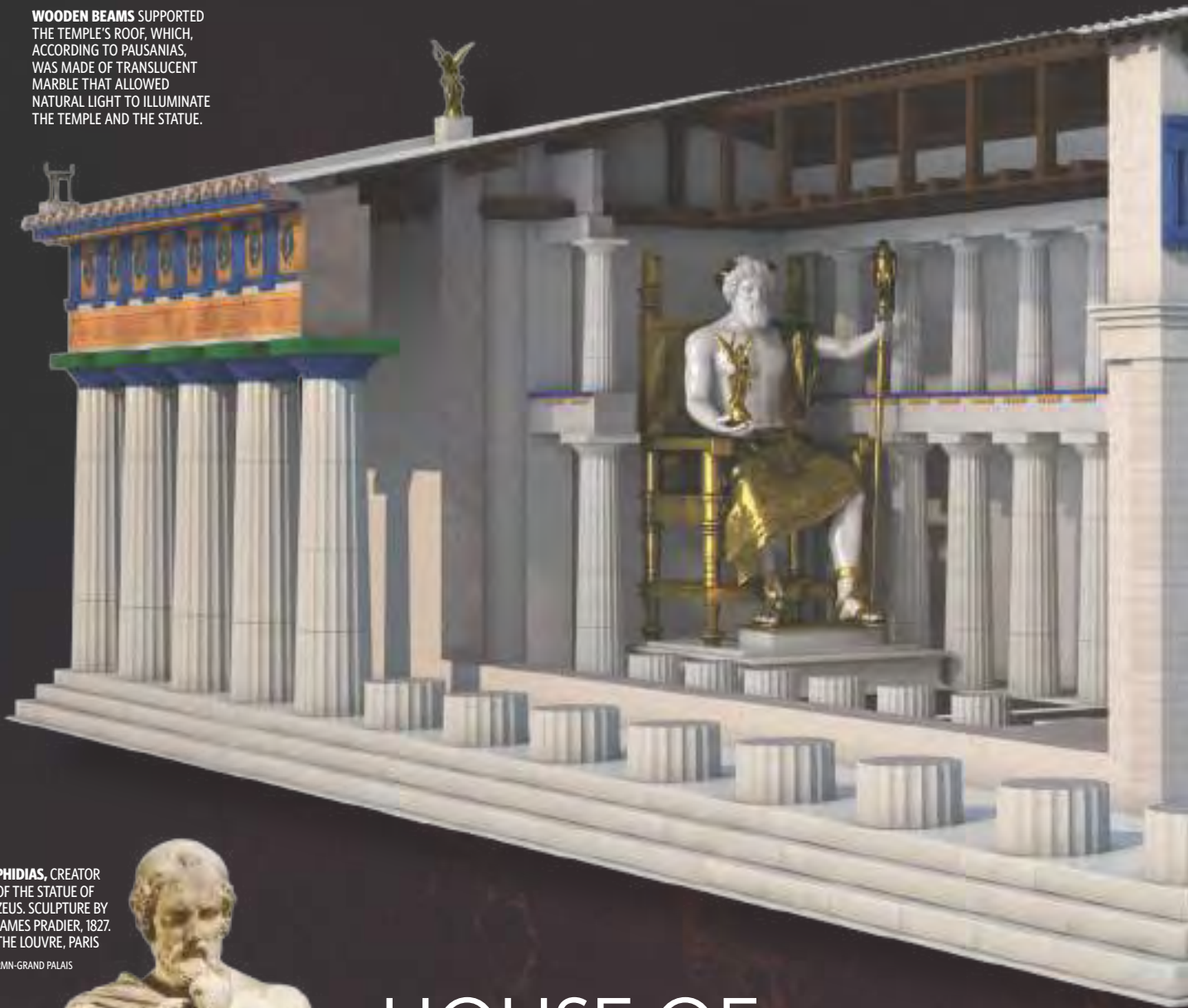


**DEDICATED TO ATHENA PARTHENOS**, the colossal gold-and-ivory sculpture of Athens's patron goddess was erected in the mid-fifth century B.C. in the Parthenon. It is Phidias's only sculpture of which there are ancient copies. The original reportedly stood about 40 feet tall, including the pedestal. A gold helmet crowned her head. In her right hand was a winged Victory, and in her left, as the Greek geographer Pausanias described, she held a spear, though other versions show her with an aegis, or shield.

ALAMY/CORDON PRESS



**WOODEN BEAMS** SUPPORTED THE TEMPLE'S ROOF, WHICH, ACCORDING TO PAUSANIAS, WAS MADE OF TRANSLUCENT MARBLE THAT ALLOWED NATURAL LIGHT TO ILLUMINATE THE TEMPLE AND THE STATUE.



**PHIDIAS**, CREATOR OF THE STATUE OF ZEUS, SCULPTURE BY JAMES PRADIER, 1827. THE LOUVRE, PARIS

RMN-GRAND PALAIS



## HOUSE OF THUNDER

**BUILT AS AN OFFERING** to celebrate a military victory, the Temple of Zeus became the central landmark in Olympia, visible to every part of the sanctuary. The architect Libon of Elis built a Doric temple, with six columns at the front and back and 13 along its sides. The cella, the interior space designed to house the enormous statue, measured some 42 feet wide by 94 feet long. Flanking it were two rows of seven columns, and the same number of superimposed columns supported the roof. A second level wrapped around the central nave.

ILLUSTRATIONS: RAIDEN STUDIO



**THE TEMPLE** MEASURED ROUGHLY 90 FEET WIDE BY 210 FEET LONG. IT WAS ACCESSED BY A LARGE RAMP AT WHICH THE ATHLETES STOPPED TO WORSHIP ZEUS ON THEIR PROCESSIONAL TO THE STADIUM.



**FIRE-BLACKENED**  
IVORY HEAD OF A  
GOD, LIKELY APOLLO,  
ADORNED WITH GOLD.  
MID-SIXTH CENTURY  
MUSEUM OF DELPHI  
DEA/ALBUM



## THE GLORY OF GOLD AND IVORY

**T**HE WORD “chryselephantine” comes from the Greek names for gold and ivory. Both materials have been highly valued since ancient times. Gold (*chrisós*) was one of the first metals worked by humans. Despite being very soft, gold has an incorruptibility, rarity, color, and versatility that gave it financial, aesthetic, and symbolic worth in ancient Greece. It was associated with divinity and was an emblem of social status. Ivory is one of the hardest organic materials to manipulate, and although it is usually obtained from the tusks of elephants (hence its name in Greek, *elefas*), it can also be sourced from hippopotamuses, sperm whales, and walrus. The chryselephantine technique uses gold for accentuating parts of the sculpture, including drapery and jewelry, while the rest is crafted in ivory.

### FACE OF A GOD?

A first-century B.C. ivory sculpture (below), found by tomb raiders in 1994, likely belonged to a chryselephantine statue, perhaps of Apollo. Museo Nazionale Romano

ALBUM



created at around the same time as the Zeus statue, was the towering sculpture dedicated to Athena in the Parthenon of Athens.

Greek artisans typically worked ivory on a small scale. Ivory is a difficult material to manipulate. Unrolling the different layers of dentin that compose an elephant’s tusk to mold the resulting material requires skill and expertise. Exactly which technique Phidias used to manipulate the ivory plates on such an ambitious scale is uncertain. Writing in the second century A.D. the Greek geographer Pausanias says that Phidias applied heat to the ivory to soften it. Other sources claim he moistened the ivory, perhaps with vinegar or beer, before working with it.

### Putting It Together

Phidias’s Olympia workshop, divided into three naves by two rows of columns, had the same dimensions as the cella in the Temple of Zeus, where the sculpture would be housed. In this way, the correct proportions were ensured.

Phidias meticulously sculpted the details of Zeus’s face, body, and other features, refining his expression, hair, beard, and drapery to bring the statue to life. Various materials, including

precious stones and colored glass, were used to enhance the statue. When it was complete, the statue would have been polished to a smooth and lustrous finish, allowing the gold and ivory to shine brilliantly.

While some details of construction were recorded, the statue’s exact height is unknown. Historical accounts, such as geographer Strabo’s in the first century B.C., recorded the statue’s hulking first impression. Strabo wrote: “If Zeus arose and stood erect, he would unroof the temple.” Modern scholars, based on archaeology and inference, believe it stood about 40 feet high. Its stone base, measuring some 20 by 32 feet, was made of black Eleusinian marble.

When it was finished, the statue was resplendent. Pausanias’s *Description of Greece* contains a glowing description:

*The god sits on a throne, and he is made of gold and ivory. On his head lies a garland which is a copy of olive shoots. In his right hand he carries a Victory, which, like the statue, is made of ivory and gold; she wears a ribbon and—on her head—a garland. In the left hand of the god is a scepter, ornamented*



**HEART OF THE SANCTUARY**

In 1883, French architect and artist Victor Laloux painted the Statue of Zeus, in all its glory, within the cella of his temple at Olympia. Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris

BEAUX-ARTS DE PARIS/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



## The Olympian Family Tree

Zeus, the king of the gods, ruled over Mount Olympus, where the gods lived. He won this prominent position by defeating his father, Cronus, with the help of his brothers, Hades and Poseidon. Zeus is the god of justice and order; his attributes are the thunderbolt and the aegis, or shield, and his symbols are the eagle and the oak tree. Below is the genealogy of Greek gods and to the left a bronze statue of Zeus found at Cape Artemision and preserved at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

MARIE MAUZY/SCALA, FLORENCE



### LORD OF OLYMPUS

This statuette of Jupiter (below), found in Hungary, was inspired by the Statue of Zeus at Olympia. In his right hand Jupiter holds a scepter, and in the left, a thunderbolt. First-second centuries A.D. British Museum, London.

SCALA, FLORENCE



*with every kind of metal, and the bird sitting on the scepter is the eagle. The god's sandals are also made of gold, as is his robe. On his robe are carved figures of animals and the flowers of the lily.*

Pausanias also reported how the statue was anointed with olive oil, which also served to protect the ivory exterior and the wooden interior. Around the base of the statue, a raised lip allowed the oil to collect around the base of the statue and form a pool. The statue's reflection in the liquid made it seem all the larger.

Pausanias's account reveals how impressive the Statue of Zeus might have been to behold in person, but scholars are still pondering how it was viewed inside the temple. The statue's white ivory and sparkling gold would hardly seem as magnificent in a darkened chamber. Symbolically a god's house, Greek temples were open spaces, but the interior needed light during the day. How was the room lit?

Countless solutions have been proposed to explain how the statue was illuminated. It is difficult to imagine artificial light, such as lamps, candles, or torches, as the main source,

since such an enormous number of them would have been necessary to light such a large space. It has also been suggested that open skylights might have graced the roof, but this solution would have left the interior exposed to weather and rain.

The Zeus statue presented another issue. Because of its size, the upper portion rose above the level of the entranceway, so direct light from the doorway could not shine upon Zeus's head. Moreover, light would have entered the door only at sunrise. By midday, the sun would have been too high for rays to directly light the cella.

Recent studies with ultraviolet lights and lasers of various colors have shown that thin translucent marble tiles on the roof, placed on a wooden frame, may have allowed dim but constant sunlight to enter throughout the day. This solution would have offered enough light to showcase the temple's interior and statue while still protecting them from the elements.

### Lost Wonder

With the completion of the temple and its magnificent statue, the previously small



## SCULPTOR'S WORKSHOP

In the fifth century A.D., a paleo-Christian basilica was built on the ruins of Phidias's workshop. The remains that can be seen today at the center of the ancient Olympian archaeological site derive from the basilica, but excavations have uncovered many tools that reveal more about how the

ancient Greeks worked with precious materials such as gold and ivory. Molds (both negative and positive) used to shape gold or clay have been found, as well as various tools and pieces of bronze, lead, and glass that are believed to be remnants of the artworks created here.



### PERSONAL PROPERTY

Archaeologists were able to identify Phidias's workshop thanks to the discovery of the black varnished cup shown above. Along its base the words "I belong to Phidias" are engraved in Greek.

GETTY IMAGES



**ALL SIDES NOW**  
PHIDIAS DESIGNED THE STATUE OF ZEUS TO BE APPRECIATED FROM ANY VANTAGE POINT IN THE TEMPLE.  
ALAMY/CORDON PRESS

## THE GOD'S GOLDEN CHAIR

**P**HIDIAS BUILT A THRONE as impressive as the god that sat upon it. Greek geographer Pausanias lists all the intricate details in his *Description of Greece*: “The throne is adorned with gold and with jewels, to say nothing of ebony and ivory. Upon it are painted figures and wrought images. There are four Victories, represented as dancing women ... On each of the two front feet are set Theban children ravished by Sphinxes, while under the Sphinxes Apollo and Artemis are shooting down the children of Niobe.” Across the back of the throne danced the Graces and the Seasons. The footstool featured golden lions and a relief of the Athenian hero Theseus fighting Amazons. Gold ornaments depicting Olympian divinities—including Zeus’s wife Hera and his children Hephaestus, Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, and Athena—decorated the magnificent pedestal of black Eleusinian marble.

### OLYMPIA TO ROME

The Statue of Zeus continued to be a popular image on coins and currency. As late as 317 A.D., Jupiter (the Roman version of Zeus) was still appearing on a gold aureus (below) minted by Licinius I. Lawrence University & Buerger Coin Collection, Wisconsin.

DEA/ALBUM



sanctuary at Elis became one of the most important religious centers in ancient Greece. Appearing on coins across the ancient world, the monumental Zeus reigned as one of the most famous statues in antiquity and became the main sculptural model for seated gods. (Artists working millennia later would continue to imitate Zeus’s pose and gestures in many works of art.)

Visitors from all over the ancient world came to Olympia for not only the games but also the craftsmanship and ambition embodied by the Statue of Zeus. Sometime between the second and first centuries B.C., writers began compiling lists of must-see sights around the Mediterranean. The Statue of Zeus at Olympia was one of these seven ancient wonders listed by writers such as Herodotus, Antipater of Sidon, and Philo of Byzantium.

The statue’s popularity continued well into Roman times. The spread of Christianity in the fourth century A.D. became its biggest threat. Roman emperor Theodosius I outlawed pagan cults in 391 A.D., ordering all ancient sanctuaries

to be abandoned—including Olympia’s. He also banned the Olympic Games, since it was a polytheistic festival. The sanctuary at Olympia fell into disuse and eventually into ruin.

The statue, however, met a different fate. A eunuch in Theodosius II’s court had it moved to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), then the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Statue of Zeus was kept in the collection of “pagan antiquities” in the Palace of Lausus.

From then, the statue’s ultimate fate is unknown. Conflicting reports say it was destroyed by fire or perhaps lost in an earthquake. But by the end of the fifth century, the Statue of Zeus was no more. After 800 years of existence, Phidias’s prodigious sculpture perished, but it has not been forgotten. ■

A SPECIALIST IN CLASSICAL STUDIES AND HISTORY, MIREIA MOVELLÁN LUIS IS A RESEARCHER AT VALENCIA UNIVERSITY, SPAIN.

### Learn more

*Olympia: A Cultural History*  
Judith M. Barringer  
Princeton University Press, 2021.



**ENDURING WORK OF ART**

The engraver Philips Galle's 1572 depiction of Phidias's Zeus statue, as painted by Maarten van Heemskerck. When the sculpture traveled from Olympia to Constantinople (Istanbul) in the fifth century, sources say it was displayed in an apse, similar to how it is shown here.

FINE ART IMAGES/AGE FOTOSTOCK

ALTER QVE SIGNAT ACHIVM PHIDIAVM QVE IOVEM OSTENTAT MIV  
INDIS MIRAVEM GEAVDIT QVALIS TÆSARTE AC NVTV CONCV 35

# THE SEAT OF POWER

**PHIDIAS'S** gigantic sculpture of Zeus might have been lost to history, but its archetype representing divinity and majesty has endured through the ages in political portraits. One of the earliest examples appeared in the first-century A.D. marble statue of Emperor Augustus as Jupiter (right), the Roman equivalent of Zeus. The Areobindus diptych, an ivory writing tablet from the sixth century A.D. (middle bottom), shows the seated consul presiding over animal fights in Constantinople. Areobindus would have presented these tablets to high-level officials to invite them to the sporting events as a way of celebrating his newly obtained rank. Fast-forward to the 19th century, when Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres painted Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte seated on his imperial throne in 1806 (middle top), directly referencing Phidias's work. The Statue of Zeus even inspired a monumental sculpture of George Washington. In 1832 Horatio Greenough was commissioned to create a statue honoring the first U.S. president on the centennial of his birthday for the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Debuting in 1840, the marble statue of a seated, robed Washington (far right) captures the essence of ancient Greece, home of the world's first democracy.



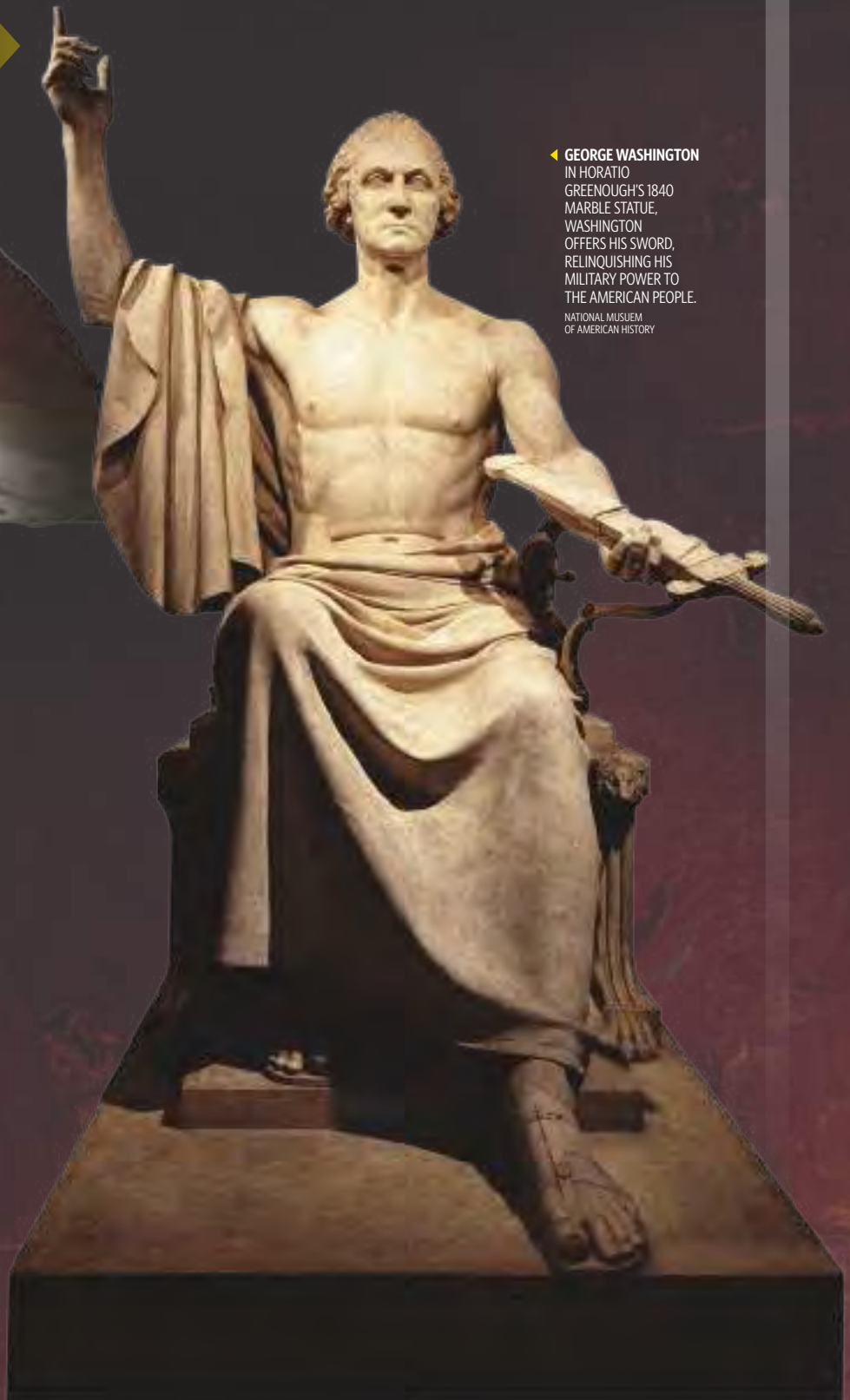
▲ **EMPEROR AUGUSTUS AS JUPITER**, THE ROMAN GOD OF THUNDER AND SKY. HE HOLDS THE WINGED VICTORY (OR NIKE) IN HIS RIGHT HAND AND THE SCEPTER IN HIS LEFT—NEITHER OF WHICH ARE ORIGINAL. FIRST CENTURY A.D. HERMITAGE MUSEUM, SAINT PETERSBURG

ALAMY/CORDON



▲ **EMPEROR NAPOLEON.** IN 1806 JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES PAINTED NAPOLEON BONAPARTE IN HIS CORONATION ROBES, ON THE IMPERIAL THRONE. THE COMPOSITION, WHICH PRESENTS THE NEW EMPEROR AS IF HE WERE A DIVINE RULER, IS A DIRECT REFERENCE TO PHIDIAS'S FAMOUS SCULPTURE OF ZEUS.

ALBUM



◀ **GEORGE WASHINGTON** IN HORATIO GREENOUGH'S 1840 MARBLE STATUE, WASHINGTON OFFERS HIS SWORD, RELINQUISHING HIS MILITARY POWER TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY



◀ **AREOBINDUS DIPTYCH.** IN THIS SIXTH-CENTURY A.D. WORK FROM CONSTANTINOPLE, THE CONSUL SITS ON HIS THRONE.

ALBUM



# MARCUS AURELIUS

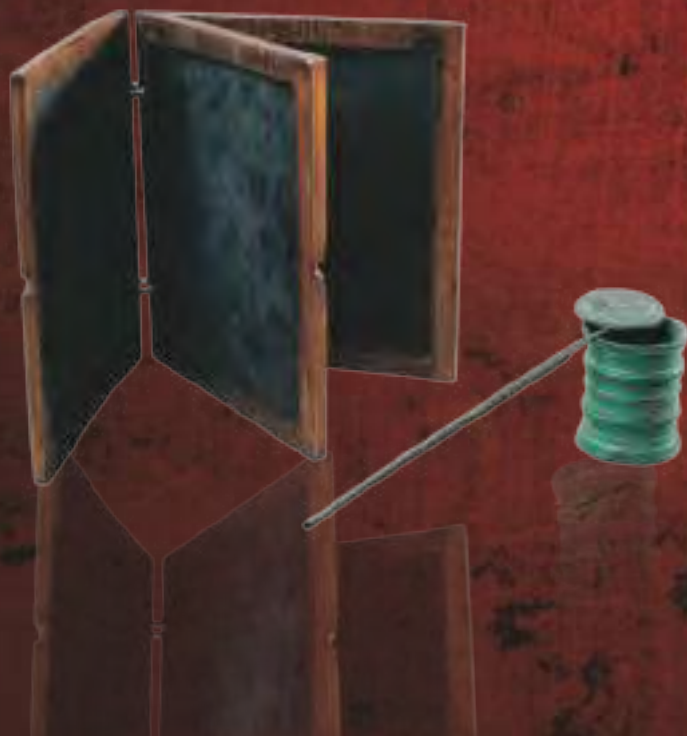
## PHILOSOPHY OF AN EMPEROR

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In the midst of brutal campaigns against the Germanic peoples of the Danube, Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote a series of reflections that placed him among the most influential thinkers of antiquity.

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JUAN PABLO SÁNCHEZ






**RULING RIDER**

The only surviving equestrian statue of a pagan emperor depicts Marcus Aurelius. The original is housed in the Capitoline Museums in Rome, but this copy sits in the piazza at the top of Capitoline Hill. Opposite: Roman writing implements from the first century A.D. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

STATUE: SHUTTERSTOCK; IMPLEMENTS: DEA/ALBUM



**ROMANS FIGHT WITH THE MARCOMANNI ON A SECOND-CENTURY SARCOPHAGUS OF A ROMAN GENERAL. NATIONAL ROMAN MUSEUM, ROME**

ANDREA JEMOLO/SCALA, FLORENCE

### EARLY LESSONS

In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius thanks his teacher Quintus Junius Rusticus for introducing him to the work of Epictetus (below), a Stoic who died around A.D. 135.

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

The second-century A.D. world of Emperor Marcus Aurelius was in shambles. A great plague ravaged western Europe, as he embarked on a long and bloody war against the Germanic tribes along the Danube frontier. Faced with these woes, along with old age and thoughts of death, the emperor sought comfort in philosophy.

Throughout his life, notably at odd moments during the military campaign, he jotted down his personal struggles, philosophical beliefs, and insights about being a better ruler and a person. Out of this sincere expression of introspection came 12 books contemplating life and the human condition. In total this collection is called *Meditations*.

## Philosopher Emperor

Born in A.D. 121 into an aristocratic family in Rome, Marcus Aurelius received an excellent education in rhetoric and philosophy. He studied Greek and quoted freely from Homer and Euripides. Perhaps that's why he wrote his *Meditations* in Greek rather than Latin, the Roman Empire's official language.

As a youth, he also became deeply interested in philosophy, particularly Stoicism, a school of thought that flourished in antiquity. One of its key tenets emphasizes the development of inner strength and the acceptance of things beyond one's control. Founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 300 B.C., Stoicism grew to become one of the leading philosophies of the ancient world.

It flourished in ancient Rome, counting Cicero among its leading scholars (and a good source of information on Stoicism in Rome). Epictetus, a formerly enslaved Greek, became a highly influential Stoic philosopher studied by Marcus Aurelius. In fact, *Meditations* bears some resemblance to Epictetus's collection of moral precepts, called *Enchiridion (Manual)*.

But Marcus Aurelius's work adds his own original voice to Stoicism's philosophical tradition. He gravitated to the school of thought and came to believe that perception is the basis of true knowledge. Happiness could be found through the practice of virtue and being guided at all times by reason in the face of life's vicissitudes.

It's believed Marcus Aurelius wrote *Meditations* as a form of introspection rather than for larger public consumption. The entries range from blunt maxims to cogent dissertations, and there is no definitive organization to the work—though some patterns have been identified, with themes organized around Stoic philosophy. Overall, it is generally agreed that *Meditations* gives a private window into what life was like for an imperial Roman individual to live as a Stoic.



## STYLUS AND THE SWORD

### A.D. 121

Marcus Aurelius is born on April 26 in Rome. His father belongs to a noble family from Ucubi, a city in Córdoba, Spain.

### 138

The future emperor Antoninus Pius adopts both Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius as his successors.



### THE IRON GATES

This dramatic gorge on the Danube separates Serbia and Romania. It was part of the Roman province of Dacia. Northwest of the Iron Gates, Marcus Aurelius waged war against the Quadi and Marcomanni.

STELIAN POROINICU/ALAMY/ACI

**161**

Emperor Antoninus Pius dies. Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus succeed him and rule jointly.

**169**

After Lucius Verus dies, Marcus Aurelius rules alone. He goes to the Danube to fight various Germanic peoples.

**178**

During the conflict with the Quadi and Marcomanni, Marcus Aurelius writes *Meditations*.

**180**

Marcus Aurelius dies of plague in Vindobona (Vienna). His son Commodus inherits the throne.

**RUINS OF CARNUNTUM**  
EMPEROR TRAJAN MADE THIS CITY THE CAPITAL OF UPPER PANNONIA. MARCUS AURELIUS LIVED THERE BETWEEN 171 AND 175.  
SHUTTERSTOCK



## REFLECTIONS FROM THE DANUBE

**M**EDITATIONS reveals the life of Marcus Aurelius and the general customs of his era. But there are few references to the specific circumstances under which he wrote it: in the midst of a military operation. One comes at the end of Book II, which cites Carnuntum as the place of writing. This military base on the Danube (near modern Vienna) was where Marcus Aurelius had established his headquarters. Another note at the end of Book I refers to “the River Gran, among the Quadi.” The River Gran (today’s Hron River) is a Danube tributary that runs through Slovakia. The fact that Marcus Aurelius was there shows he was not satisfied with directing operations from Carnuntum but instead crossed the Danube into barbarian territory to lead from the front. Even in battle, he made time to write.

### **CLEAN, CLOSE SHAVE**

Sculpted around A.D. 139, when he was about 18 years old, this marble sculpture of Marcus Aurelius is clean-shaven, unlike many of his more famous depictions. The Louvre, Paris

T. QUERREC/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



### **With Gratitude**

The work starts as a kind of reckoning in which Marcus Aurelius gives thanks to all those who positively influenced him throughout his life. For example, he credits his tutors for keeping him from superstition and vice and turning him toward a more austere and virtuous life. The most important of these tutors, he remembers, was Quintus Junius Rusticus, who corrected his impetuous character and introduced him to the Stoic philosophers.

Marcus Aurelius also reminisces about his life at the court in Rome, where he arrived at age 17. His adoptive father, then emperor Antoninus Pius, maintained a modest lifestyle, and so the young Marcus Aurelius was not thrust into a world of sumptuous clothes and luxurious living; he didn’t even have a personal guard. The future emperor admired the dedication with which his adoptive father managed the empire and his calm but decisive personality.

Marcus Aurelius ascended to the throne in A.D. 161, co-ruling with his adoptive

brother Lucius Verus until Lucius’s death, in 169. While Marcus Aurelius doesn’t reflect directly about his life as an emperor, he touches on important related topics, including the weight of his responsibilities and the need to uphold justice. He recognizes that he must make decisions in the best interest of the people he governs. He writes: “Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will, and selfishness ... None of these things can injure me, for nobody can implicate me in what is degrading.”

He recognizes that power can be a burden and a temptation, emphasizing the importance of avoiding arrogance and maintaining humility in the face of authority. He also offers insights on how to cope with difficult situations, maintain inner tranquility, and remain focused on one’s purpose in the face of obstacles.

Among his more personal observations are the things that seem to vex him. He acknowledges that he hates what most human beings seem to love. Gladiatorial games, for example, repulse him; sex is reduced to “a brief seizure.” And he does not understand why people are

**THE BATHS OF FAUSTINA**  
BUILT AT MILETUS (MODERN-DAY TURKEY) AROUND THE MIDDLE OF THE SECOND CENTURY, THIS THERMAL COMPLEX HONORS THE WIFE OF MARCUS AURELIUS.  
IMAGEBROKER.COM/ALAMY



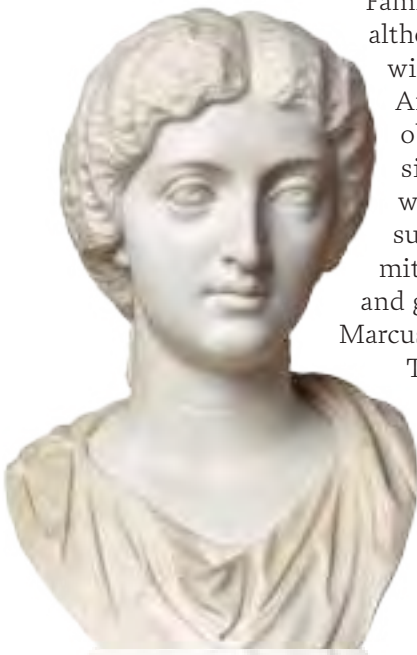
## AFFAIRS, RUMORS, AND SCANDALS

**M**ARCUS AURELIUS'S WIFE, Faustina the Younger, isn't remembered fondly by the written record. While her mother, Faustina the Elder, is celebrated for her virtues, many ancient writers, such as historian Cassius Dio, accused the younger woman of immoral behavior. They linked her to torrid affairs with soldiers, sailors, and gladiators. But Faustina's life does not seem to align with these accounts. She and her husband had a close relationship during their 30-year marriage. The Roman people, the Senate, and her husband granted her many public honors during her life. Records show she often traveled with Marcus Aurelius during his campaigns. Perhaps the strongest evidence for her good reputation can be found in the opening section of *Meditations*, where he writes glowing words of gratitude for his wife—a passage meant for his eyes only.

### FAUSTINA THE YOUNGER

A second-century marble bust of the Roman empress (below) is believed to have been made after her death in A.D. 175. The Louvre, Paris

LEWANDOWSKI/  
RMN-GRAND PALAIS



impressed by the purple robes worn by senators and emperors, when these are merely “sheep wool dyed with shellfish blood.”

He tries to remain calm at all times and not bother with what his neighbor will say or think about him. As he reminds himself: “It never ceases to amaze me: We all love ourselves more than other people but care more about their opinion than our own.”

Family plays a small part in his writings, although he is exceedingly grateful for his wife, Faustina the Younger, daughter of Antonius Pius. He describes her as “so obedient, and so affectionate, and so simple.” Other contemporary sources were not as kind to Faustina. Historians such as Cassius Dio accused her of committing adultery with handsome soldiers and gladiators. In his writings, however, Marcus Aurelius has only good words for her.

The two had 13 children together, but only six lived past childhood. When Faustina died, in 175, the emperor grieved the loss. He entombed his wife in the Mausoleum of Hadrian in Rome.

### War and Death

Writing night after night from his military encampment along the Danube, Marcus Aurelius turns to darker subjects, including the nature of war. At various points, he notates the gruesome reality of combat: “Have you ever seen a severed hand or foot, or a decapitated head, just lying somewhere far away from the body it belonged to...?”

But when day breaks, those ruminations fade and reality prevails. The philosopher by night must be a military leader by day. He acknowledges that it is not always easy. “At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: ‘I have to go to work—as a human being,’” even though it’s preferable “to huddle under the blankets.”

Throughout *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius reiterates, almost obsessively, the idea that everyone ultimately shares the same destiny in this short life: death. “Human lives are brief and trivial,” he writes. “Yesterday a blob of semen; tomorrow embalming fluid, ash.”

There are reflections on great generals of the past, such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Pompey, and how, despite their resounding

## POMPEII AND VESUVIUS

Regarding the ephemeral nature of life, Marcus Aurelius mentions in *Meditations* three lost cities: Pompeii (shown here) and Herculaneum, both buried by Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79; and Helike in Achaëa, Greece, which was engulfed by the sea in 373 B.C.

MASSIMO RIPANI/FOTOTECA 9X12





**ASHES OF THE EMPEROR**  
UPON HIS DEATH IN 180, MARCUS AURELIUS WAS CREMATED AND HIS REMAINS LAID TO REST IN ROME'S MAUSOLEUM OF HADRIAN.  
RILINDH/GETTY IMAGES

**IMPERIAL PORTRAIT**

A Roman gold coin minted in 153-154 (below) depicts a profile of the bearded emperor Marcus Aurelius. Art Institute of Chicago

PENTA SPRINGS LIMITED/ALAMY



triumphs, “they too departed this life.” Also mentioned are the anonymous inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum who suffocated under the ash of Mount Vesuvius.

Above all, the emperor’s greatest quest is to find peace of mind, as he muses how quickly life passes: “Existence flows past us like a river: The ‘what’ is in constant flux, the ‘why’ has a thousand variations.” In the light of this transience, he states the best course is to “do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life.”

And yet, death offers Marcus Aurelius a kind of liberation, a chance to detach from a world where many ignore the only values he recognizes—that of rational virtue and moral good. The true drama of the philosopher-emperor is that he tries to love his fellow human beings: “The things ordained for you—teach yourself to be at one with those. And the people who share them with you—treat them with love. With real love.”

All this Marcus Aurelius tells himself without anguish or despair. Even death must be accepted with gratitude:

“Don’t look down on death but welcome it.” Death is part of the natural scheme of things, he muses, comparing it with “an olive that ripens and falls. / Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on.” He says to accept death “in cheerfulness and truth, grateful to the gods from the bottom of your heart.”

When Marcus Aurelius died on March 17, 180, at age 58, a victim of the plague, he left behind an indelible mark. His writings have intrigued heads of state from Prussia’s Frederick the Great to U.S. president Bill Clinton. When Wen Jiabao, China’s premier between 2003 and 2013, claimed to have read *Meditations* more than a hundred times, the work became one of the country’s most published Greek classics. ■

JUAN PABLO SÁNCHEZ IS A SPECIALIST IN CLASSICAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE, AND A TRANSLATOR OF THE WORKS OF DIODORUS SICULUS AND PLUTARCH’S *PARALLEL LIVES*.

*Learn more*

*Meditations: A New Translation*, by Marcus Aurelius  
Gregory Hays, Translator. Random House, 2003

*Marcus Aurelius: A Life*  
Frank McClynn. Da Capo Press, 2009





**LAST MOMENTS**

On his deathbed, an ailing Marcus Aurelius takes the arm of his son and successor Commodus in this oil painting entitled "The Last Words of Marcus Aurelius," by Eugène Delacroix. 1844. Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon, France

RENÉ-GABRIEL OJÉDA/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

# PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Of the nearly 100 Roman emperors who reigned between 27 B.C. and A.D. 476, Marcus Aurelius is the only one who has been considered a true philosopher. Maxims from his work commonly known as *Meditations* remain popular with modern audiences.

## ALL WE HAVE IS NOW

[Y]ou cannot lose another life than the one you're living now, or live another one than the one you're losing. (II, 14)

Life is short. That's all there is to say. Get what you can from the present—thoughtfully, justly. (IV, 26)

Each of us lives only now, this brief instant. The rest has been lived already, or is impossible to see. The span we live is small—small as the corner of the earth in which we live it. (III, 10)

## WE ARE ONE

[T]ake into consideration: that rational beings exist for one another; that doing what's right sometimes requires patience; that no one does the wrong thing deliberately; and the number of people who have feuded and envied and hated and fought and died and been buried. (IV, 3)

To accept it without arrogance, to let it go with indifference. (VIII, 33)

People exist for one another. You can instruct or endure them. (VIII, 59)





**BUST OF MARCUS  
AURELIUS IN CARRARA  
MARBLE. PRINCETON  
UNIVERSITY ART  
MUSEUM, NEW JERSEY  
SCALA/FLORENCE**

#### BE KIND

Just pay attention, and resolve to live up to your own expectations. (VII, 58)

Dig deep; the water—goodness—is down there. And as long as you keep digging, it will keep bubbling up. (VII, 59)

[R]emain straightforward, upright, reverent, serious, unadorned, an ally of justice, pious, kind, affectionate, and doing your duty with a will... The only rewards of our existence here are an unstained character and unselfish acts. (VI, 30)

Never regard something as doing you good if it makes you betray a trust, or lose your sense of shame, or makes you show hatred, suspicion, ill will, or hypocrisy. (III, 7)

#### HOW TO BE

Never under compulsion, out of selfishness, without forethought, with misgivings...

Cheerfulness. Without requiring other people's help. Or serenity supplied by others. (III, 5)

Not to be driven this way and that, but always to behave with justice and see things as they are. (IV, 22)

Entrust everything willingly to the gods, and then make your way through life—no one's master and no one's slave. (IV, 31)

No carelessness in your actions. No confusion in your words. No imprecision in your thoughts. No retreating into your own soul, or trying to escape it. No overactivity. (VIII, 51)

**THE LAST SUPPER.** MINIATURE FROM THE GOSPEL OF THE GREAT FESTIVITIES, 13TH CENTURY, CAPITULARY LIBRARY OF VERCELLI, ITALY.

DEA/ALBUM



## REBELLION DEFEATED

To mark the Roman triumph over Jewish rebels, Emperor Vespasian in A.D. 71 struck coins (below) that read *Judea capta* ("Judea conquered"). Jerusalem was partly destroyed during this siege.

ALBUM / GRANGER, NYC



The Holy Grail has occupied a central place in the Western imagination for millennia, whether as a sacred relic, a lost treasure, or an object of unattainable perfection. But the Grail did not begin as any of those things. Rather it was a simple cup at the Last Supper. The earliest reference to it can be found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the basis of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Written around A.D. 53, Paul's words are heard every Sunday by many Christian worshippers around the world: "In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke also describe how the soon-to-be crucified Jesus bids his disciples to drink wine from a cup as a communal ritual. (The Gospel of John makes no mention of it.) The oldest Gospel account of the Last Supper is that of Mark, written sometime after Paul's epistle but before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70. The later Gospels of Matthew

and Luke also present the key elements of Mark's account.

As Christianity grew and spread, the miraculous process by which bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ developed into the doctrine of transubstantiation. This belief was widespread in Christian Europe by the 12th century, and the vessels that were part of these Holy Communion ceremonies became venerated themselves. It was around this time that the original cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper began to appear in literature. Dubbed the Holy Grail, the cup's whereabouts, protectors, and powers were a favorite topic of medieval authors. The search for the Grail and the contest to possess it became the basis for a rich tradition of literature and storytelling that would last for centuries.

## Rise of Relics

The fate of the original chalice from the Last Supper is unknown, but relics associated with Jesus began to surface shortly after the Roman emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity. His mother, Helena, was a Christian herself and believed to be



#### SPOILS OF WAR

Reliefs on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum show soldiers carrying loot from the assault on the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

JUANMA DIAZ/ALAMY/AC

## SEEKING THE GRAIL

### First century

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and three of the four Gospels mention the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper.

### 1155

In his *Roman de Brut*, the poet Wace provides one of the earliest accounts of King Arthur. The Grail does not yet feature in the tales.

### 1180

In Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romance, the Grail appears in the castle of the Fisher King. It is not yet associated with Christ.

### 1190

Robert de Boron links the Grail with the Last Supper chalice, connecting the Arthurian legend with Christian faith.

### 1210

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem *Parzival*, the elusive Grail is won by the knight Percival, who is crowned Grail King.

### 1220

Poems in the Lancelot-Grail cycle establish the conventions of the Grail quest, including the knight Lancelot's moral flaws.

### 1470

*Le Morte D'Arthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory, marks the high point of the Arthurian tradition. The winner of the Grail is now Galahad.



**ONE OF MANY?**

Believed to be the Holy Lance that pierced Jesus' side, the relic (above) is held at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. It likely dates to the eighth century and is one of several such artifacts found across Europe.

ALAMY/ACI

instrumental in her son's conversion. Around the year 325, shortly after the religion was recognized by the Roman Empire, Helena (later canonized as a saint) made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in search of early Christian relics and sacred sites.

Among the stops on her tour was Jerusalem, but the city no longer resembled the one when Jesus lived. Roman legions had razed the city in A.D. 70 following the brutal suppression of a rebellion in Judea. Decades later, this time under the leadership of Hadrian, they again ravaged the city in 135 to crush a new revolt led by Bar Kokhba.

Helena was undeterred in her identification and mapping of holy sites. She had the invaluable help of Eusebius of Caesarea, a bishop and historian from Palestine whose *Ecclesiastical History* laid the foundations for the official history of Christianity. As a result of their "archaeological" investigations, specific places began to be associated with events surrounding the life and death of Jesus as described in the Bible.

Helena is credited with finding several relics, most notably the True Cross on which Jesus was crucified. Other items associated with her pilgrimage were a nail from the Crucifixion and the seamless robe Jesus wore on the cross. Helena also identified the tomb where Jesus was buried, the future site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on Roman orders.

From that point on, relics would play a fundamental role in Christian worship, especially those related to the Passion, such as the Crown of Thorns, the Holy Lance that pierced Jesus' side, and the Holy Sponge used to moisten Jesus' lips during his suffering. Of all the objects associated with Christ, the chalice used at the Last Supper would prove the most elusive.

**Chalice Contenders**

The first mention of the existence of an actual Grail relic comes in 570 in the form of an anonymous travelogue to the Holy Land, written by a man scholars call the pilgrim of Piacenza. In Jerusalem he saw "the sponge and the reed, about which we read in the Gospel; we drank water from this sponge. There is also the onyx cup which He blessed at the [last] supper, and many other wonders." Over the next few centuries, references to the chalice



**St. Helena's actions led to the emergence of various relics and places of the Passion.**

**ST. HELENA AND EMPEROR CONSTANTINE AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS.** CARVED IVORY, SIXTH CENTURY. NATIONAL LIBRARY, PARIS  
ERICH LESSING/ALBUM



**THE SPANISH CUP**

Claimed by some to be the Holy Grail, the Chalice of Valencia sits in an elaborate reliquary above an altar in the Valencia Cathedral in the eastern Spanish city.

ACI/EDITORIAL

THIS 12TH-CENTURY ARCHIVOLT IN NORTHERN ITALY'S MODENA CATHEDRAL IS THE OLDEST SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATION OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND. IT IS BELIEVED TO DEPICT THE ABDUCTION OF GUINEVERE BY AN ENEMY KING.

MARIO BONOTTO/SCALA, FLORENCE



### LADY OF LETTERS

The Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France, depicted below in a 13th-century miniature, worked in the court of King Henry II of England. She was among the first writers to incorporate Arthur into her poems.

AKG/ALBUM



Genoa following the First Crusade in the 12th century. Studies conducted centuries later put the bowl's creation after the time of Christ, although scholars still debate the exact date.

### Royal Quest

Around the same time that these chalices began drawing attention, literature also began focusing on the vessel and centering epic stories around it. The Holy Grail, as it would become known, was taking its place as one of the most precious and desired objects in all of Christendom.

The word "grail" itself is pregnant with meaning and mystery, with deep Christian connotations. Two etymologies are cited for the word. Its most likely origin is the medieval Latin *gradalis*, meaning "dish." But an alternative explanation is that it derives from the Old French *sang real*, meaning "royal blood." In the course of the following centuries, Grail motifs and the quest to find the relic were woven into various stories, most notably those surrounding a legendary sixth-century leader who lived very far away

from the Holy Land: Arthur, King of the Britons.

Arthur's story had been around in Welsh and English folklore for centuries, but his narrative began to solidify in 1136 when English bishop Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote an almost entirely fictional chronicle called *History of the Kings of Britain*. In it he expanded the early Arthurian legends. Back in the ninth century, Welsh historian Nennius had written, or at least compiled, a history of the Britons that included Arthur, but it was Geoffrey who first styled Arthur as the archetypal hero.

Wace, an Anglo-Norman poet in the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, wrote a verse chronicle, *Roman de Brut*—*Romance of Brutus*, in 1155, based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's text. Wace described how Arthur came to power thanks to the magical sword Excalibur and founded the Knights of the Round Table. In the years that followed, the splendid court of Aquitaine, a kingdom in what is now France, provided fertile ground for troubadours and scribes to compose works featuring King Arthur, his knights, and the Holy Grail.

The vessel becomes even more central in the late 12th century. Marie de France, a French



### GREEN GRAIL

The Sacro Catino (Sacred Dish)—a carved emerald-colored vessel, believed by some to be the Holy Grail—is housed in the Treasury of San Lorenzo Cathedral in Genoa, Italy

ALBUM

poet at the English court, wrote poems about Arthur and the Grail. Chrétien de Troyes penned five Arthurian romances, including *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*. In this work, in which Perceval the knight is tested in various ways, the Grail is depicted as a mysterious serving dish. It is neither holy nor yet the object of a quest, but it does have supernatural value and healing power. Perceval plays a main role in German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Written around 1300, this romance recounts how the knight is eventually crowned Grail King after many adventures.

By 1220 an array of Arthurian conventions had been established in the Old French poems modern scholars collectively refer to as the Lancelot-Grail cycle. The educated readership came to know the dramatic settings of Arthur's world: Avalon, the enchanted island; Camelot, home of King Arthur and his knights; and Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, where Arthur was said to have been conceived. This rich world formed the backdrop for the many adventures of the knights of the Round Table.

The quest for the Grail was also by then one of the principal story lines in the Arthurian tradition. Others include the troubled love triangle between Arthur; his wife, Guinevere; and the knight Lancelot. These story lines came to inform one another. Lancelot's erotic entanglements, for example, complicate matters as to whether he was sufficiently worthy to receive the Grail.

Another celebrated object of the Arthurian romance was the Round Table. The scene of Arthur and his knights gathered around this table symbolically recalls the Last Supper. In a deeply Christian age, such powerful imagery infused Arthurian texts and Grail legends with a sense of holy purpose, as well as with redemption and healing.

Only the knight who resists all temptations, like Jesus did, will be worthy of finding the chalice.

THE DEVIL TEMPTS JESUS. 12TH-CENTURY CAPITAL FROM SAINT ANDOCHE BASILICA, SAULIEU, EASTERN FRANCE

AKG/ALBUM





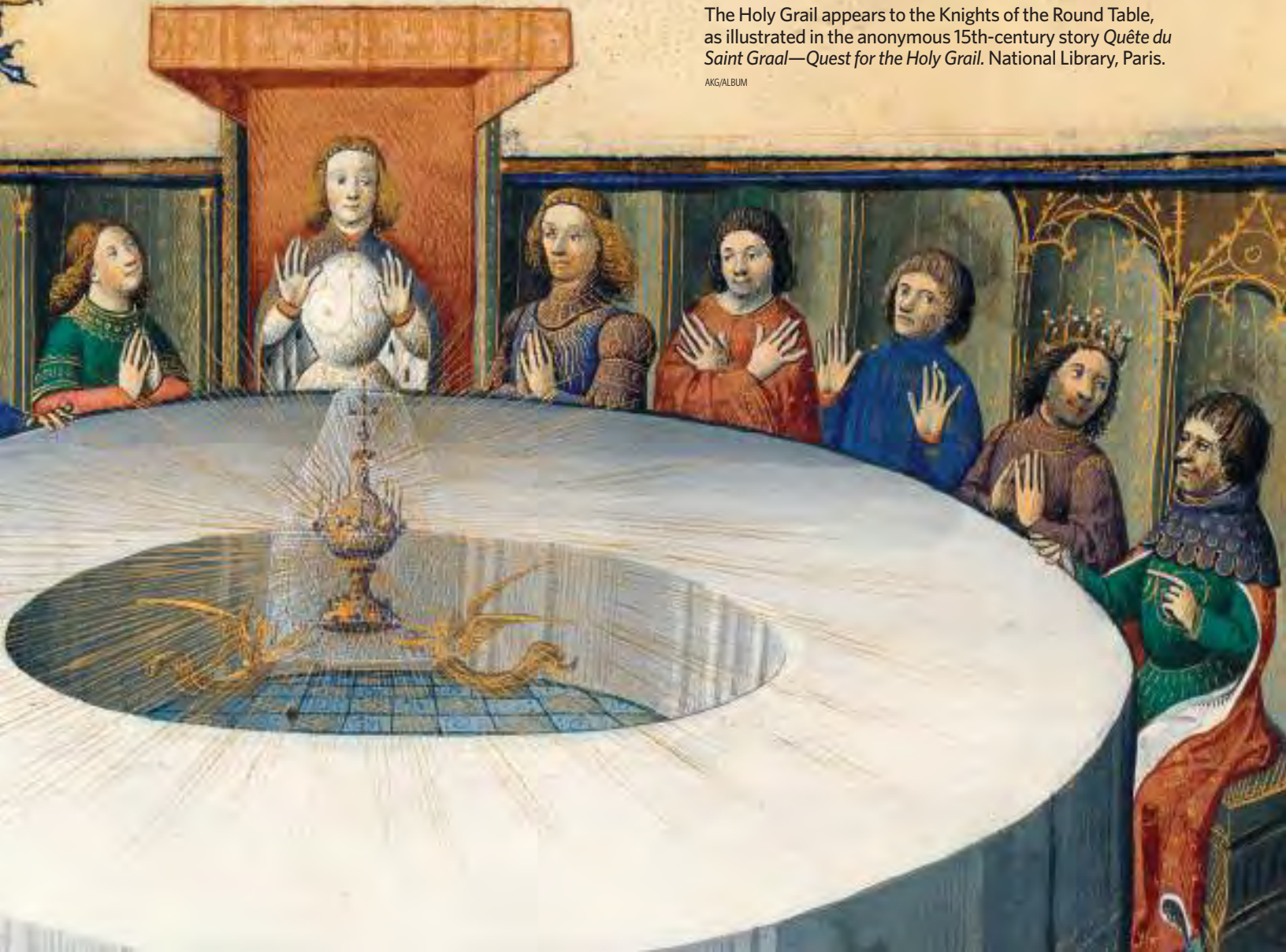
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### THE ROUND TABLE

The Holy Grail appears to the Knights of the Round Table, as illustrated in the anonymous 15th-century story *Quête du Saint Graal*—*Quest for the Holy Grail*. National Library, Paris.

AKG/ALBUM



the wizard Merlin and the enchantress known as the Lady of the Lake.

In 1200 the poet Robert de Boron worked the Arthurian legends into a Christian framework by introducing the figure of Joseph of Arimathea. In the Gospels, Joseph arranges for Jesus' burial following the Crucifixion. According to de Boron, he secretly keeps the Grail from the Last Supper and uses it to collect the blood spilled when Jesus' body was pierced on the cross. Joseph's family later traveled to England with the precious object, explaining how the Grail came to Britain.

Another key figure is the mysterious Fisher King. He first appears in Chrétien de Troyes's version of the Perceval tale in the late 1100s and likely has deep roots in much older Welsh

## A SEAT AT THE ROUND TABLE

**IN THE MID-12TH CENTURY**, the poet Wace wrote *Roman de Brut*—*Romance of Brutus*, verses that traced British history back to its earliest kings, including Arthur. In this work a now iconic Arthurian element makes its debut: the Round Table, whose circular seating arrangement had an egalitarian purpose. When King Arthur and his men were seated together at the table, no one could claim superiority over the other. More details about the Round Table emerged in the coming centuries as new works were written. In 1200 French poet Robert de Boron wrote *Merlin* and describes how the wizard created the Round Table for Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon. Merlin's design recalls the table of the Last Supper and stipulates that only 12 people may sit at the table. The 13th seat is reserved for the knight who will secure the Holy Grail.



### KNIGHT AND POET

Wolfram von Eschenbach appears as a knight in this miniature from the 14th-century *Codex Manesse*, held in Heidelberg University Library. His epic poem *Parzival*, written around 1210, heavily features the Holy Grail.

AKG/ALBUM

literature. Iterations of the Fisher King appear in later Arthurian texts in which he plays various roles. Despite some differences, there are recurring characteristics: He is a ruler, he is wounded or maimed in some way (sometimes in the groin or thighs), and he awaits a figure who can heal or redeem him. In some works he is the keeper and protector of the Grail.

From the first Arthurian texts of the 12th and 13th centuries to *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written in the 15th century, the Grail stories caught the spirit of the age. In part this was because of their dense spiritual symbolism, but they also hinged on an exciting plot device still used by cinema and fiction today: the hero's journey.

### Quest for the Cup

After 1210, when the stories in the Lancelot-Grail cycle were written, a common theme of the sacred quest began to take shape. While the chalice itself was understood to be a physical object, its search had a profoundly spiritual underpinning. Knights in pursuit of the Grail represented a desire for individual improvement, the seeking of an unattainable end as part of the spiritual path toward perfection.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was produced toward the end of the Arthurian heyday in the 15th century. The text was built on a tradition in which only one knight would be able to resist all the temptations thrown in his path, as Jesus had done when he resisted the devil.

In Malory's telling, the quest begins after Galahad pulls a sword from a magic stone in Arthur's court, proving he is a knight of exceptional virtue. Together with Gawain, Percival, Bors, and Lancelot (his father), Galahad goes searching for the Grail. After many adventures, the knights discover that their various moral failings (in the case of Lancelot, his impure thoughts for Guinevere) will keep them from the Grail—all except for Galahad, who reaches the Grail Castle, heals the Maimed King (the Fisher King), and finally sees the holy vessel.

On his return, Galahad is imprisoned in a "dark hole" by an evil king, but the Grail saves him by producing food and drink. On arriving

home with the Grail, Galahad is crowned king. The full mysteries of the Grail are then revealed to him by the spirit of Joseph of Arimathea:

*... the Lord has sent me hither to bear you fellowship. I was chosen because you resemble me in two things: You have witnessed the marvel of the Holy Grail, and you are a virgin—as I was, and am.*

As the Arthurian tradition shows, however, the Grail does not have to physically exist to fire the imagination. One variant of the lost Grail story has Mary Magdalene bringing the cup to southern France. This account underpins the 1982 book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, a best seller regarded by historians as pseudohistory. Some of the book's central ideas, in turn, inspired Dan Brown's 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Quest stories about the mysteries of the Grail can become literary blockbusters in the 21st century as easily as they did in the 13th.

Tales of the Grail's power—and the lengths to which people will go to acquire it—are often as ornate as the purported object itself, usually of high-value craftsmanship. Ironically, Christ's humility would suggest the opposite. "That's the cup of a carpenter," Indiana Jones states in the 1989 movie about a 20th-century quest for the Grail, set against the backdrop of World War II. He wisely selects the most modest-looking chalice from the dazzling selection. The fictional archaeologist is on firm theological ground. As the fourth-century Early Church Father John Chrysostom wrote: "The chalice was not of gold in which Christ gave His blood to His disciples to drink, and yet everything there was precious and truly fit to inspire awe." ■

### Learn more

**The Grail Legend**  
Anna Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz  
Princeton University Press, 1998.

**The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief**  
Richard Barber  
Harvard University Press, 2005



THE ORIGINAL STONE MONASTERY OF SAN JUAN DE LA PEÑA STANDS AT THE BOTTOM OF A CRATER IN ARAGON, SPAIN. THE NEWER COMPLEX IN THE BACKGROUND WAS BUILT IN THE 17TH CENTURY.

ANTONIO GARCÍA OMEDES

## THE IBERIAN GRAIL

# THE MYSTERIOUS CHALICE OF VALENCIA

THE LAST SUPPER, REPRESENTED IN A CAPITAL AT THE CLOISTER OF SAN JUAN DE LA PEÑA IN ARAGON. CARVED IN THE 12TH CENTURY.

ROSA FERNÁNDEZ/  
AGE FOTOSTOCK



Seeking the Grail is the quest of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, but where could have the sacred vessel been hidden? Wolfram von Eschenbach believed it was in Spain. In his early-13th-century epic poem *Parzival*, the medieval knight-poet identifies the "Templars" as the custodians of the Grail. He had learned about the sacred chalice from a teacher named Kyot, who in Toledo found an Arabic manuscript written by a pagan sage named Flegetanis. Eschenbach

says that the Grail is to be found in a castle called "Munsalwäsche" (in Old German), in the mountains of northern Spain. The castle is in the land of Salwäsche (Salvation), where there is an octagonal church.

Countless attempts, including Nazi expeditions in the 20th century, have been made to pin down the Grail's whereabouts. Several possible locations have been identified in Spain, but one stands out among the rest: Valencia. A chalice there had been kept in the monastery of San Juan de la Peña in Aragon until 1399, before being moved

to the Valencia Cathedral where it's on display today.

The Chalice of Valenica is made up of three discrete parts: a solid red agate cup from the first century; a base, also made of agate; and a silver-gilt frame, adorned with jewels and precious gems from the early 12th century, that joins the pieces together. Pilgrims still travel to Valencia to see the chalice.

One intriguing feature is an inscription on the base in Kufic Arabic. In his poem *Parzival*, Eschenbach recounts: "On the stone [the Grail], around the edge, appear letters inscribed, giving the name and lineage of each one, maid or boy, who is to take this blessed journey. No one needs to rub out the inscription, for once he has read the name, it fades away before his eyes."

If viewed from a certain angle, the Chalice of Valencia's inscription does indeed seem to disappear. One tradition maintains that it was St. Lawrence in Rome who kept the chalice from the Last Supper. To prevent it from falling into pagan hands during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Valerian in 258, he sent it to his family in Huesca, in northern Spain, for safekeeping. According to this tradition, the chalice ended up in the monastery of San Juan de la Peña in the 11th century. By the end of that century, the existence of a stone chalice had been documented there.

In 1104, Alfonso I, later known as the Battler, took the throne as the king of Aragon, a northern kingdom of Spain. He had been educated at the monastery of San Juan de la Peña and spent long periods there during his reign. Around a century later, *Parzival* features the character of the Fisher King. His

name is Anfortas, and he guards the Grail in a castle in the Spanish mountains. This king, writes Eschenbach, had won great glory with arms, fought many battles for the Grail, and claimed that wealth and women were foreign to his heart.

During his reign, Alfonso minted a coin bearing the inscription "Anfus Rex." Could this have been misread as Anfortas? Although he married Urraca I of León in 1109, the union was annulled in 1114, and there is evidence he may have been homosexual. During Alfonso's reign, hundreds of knights, minstrels, and troubadours came from the French kingdom of Aquitaine to fight at his side. This included William IX, a renowned troubadour and grandfather of Eleanor, the queen of Aquitaine at whose court the Grail legends would later be written.

According to most literary accounts, Anfortas had two brothers who were also royal leaders: King Pelles and another known as the Maimed King; all three were born to King Frimutel. Similarly, Alfonso also had two brothers who became kings: Pedro I and Ramiro II. Their father, King Sancho Ramírez, founded the monastery of San Juan de la Peña. Recent forensic analysis has revealed that Ramiro II suffered from acute sclerosis, so he was in a sense "maimed." And then there is the curious title given to Anfortas: the Fisher King. Between 1125 and 1126, Alfonso made an expedition to Andalusia in which he visited the beaches near Granada. There, the chronicles say, he took symbolic possession of the sea by catching a fish. ■

THE HOLY CHALICE, DONATED TO THE VALENCIA CATHEDRAL IN THE 15TH CENTURY BY ALFONSO V (THE MAGNANIMOUS), KING OF ARAGON  
ORNOZ/ALBUM



COIN MINTED BY ALFONSO I, KING OF ARAGON AND PAMPLONA, WITH THE INSCRIPTION "ANFUS REX." NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART OF CATALONIA, BARCELONA  
MNAC

ALFONSO I (THE BATTLER), KING OF ARAGON. OIL PAINTING BY FRANCISCO PRADILLA, 1879. CITY HALL OF ZARAGOZA, SPAIN  
ALBUM







# Harald Bluetooth

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UNITING  
THE VIKINGS

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Bold and ruthless,  
King Harald Gormsson, better  
known today as Bluetooth, fought  
his neighbors and introduced  
Christianity to Scandinavia.

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INÉS GARCÍA LÓPEZ

#### SHINING RELICS

**Opposite:** A brooch from the Hiddensee treasure dates to the reign of Harald Bluetooth in the late 10th century A.D. Stralsund Museum. **Above:** Harald proclaims his Christian faith on a gilt bronze relief from Tamdrup. National Museum of Denmark

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 an heta þinn þyrnir heib þyrnir lepa hriode vidblam  
 omij þi kenja þinnin. kalla þi ymus haus z erpið z byrk  
 þyri hriam auferu vestra næfza supra. þi solar z vngl  
 z þinnigla va. þa e. vefza. hialr. h. loptz z varpar.  
 epi ero noen þundana. auld. æþum  
 allid þyr longu. opstori. uo. sumir haust var manode vika  
 þar nor. megin apcaij. qld arla. Snema sipla. Iþij þyr dag  
 nete: get. æðeriel. þi eð heta nætrijar. oluis malung  
 þe heta m. n. nota helio. kallud er gema m. gupū. Oldag  
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 þengre. kela. þeyndir þvalgr þranir.  
 þol euga ærupull eygla anskip þym þag hvel lino stan  
 ælun. þeja ælþrupull. þung þi kenja þol kalla þa þer  
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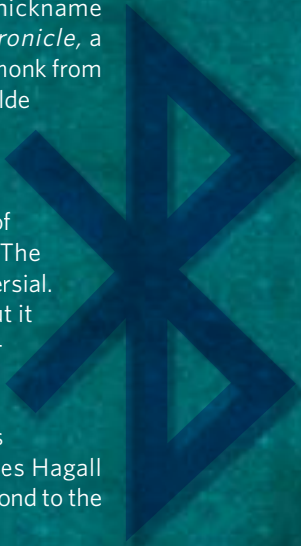
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# CONNECTING TO BLUETOOTH

**THE FIRST TIME** King Harald was given the nickname Blåtand (Bluetooth) in the *Roskilde Chronicle*, a 12th-century Latin text probably written by a monk from eastern Denmark. Bluetooth had chosen Roskilde as his new capital (replacing Jelling) and built a church there, the precursor to a later cathedral. The *Roskilde Chronicle* covers events in Denmark from the ninth century to the time of the manuscript's composition, around 1143. The translation of Blåtand as Bluetooth is controversial. In Old Norse, the term *blár* can mean blue, but it also denotes a dark color, like blue-black. Tradition says that one of Harald's teeth appeared darker than normal. Not only was Bluetooth technology's name inspired by the famous Viking, its distinctive logo combines the runes Hagall (hail) ✖ and Bjarkan (birch) B, which correspond to the initials of Harald Bluetooth.



## READING THE RUNES

The Bluetooth logo (left) combines the *H* and *B* runes from the Younger Futhark runic system, used in the Viking age.

## LIVING COLOR

Vibrant hues adorn a depiction of Christ (right) on a replica of a Jelling Stone, appearing as they would have when Bluetooth first erected it. National Museum of Denmark

HEINER MÜLLER-ELSNER/LAIF/  
CORDON PRESS

The Bluetooth moniker comes from Blåtand, which in Old Norse means “blue tooth” or “dark tooth.” Tradition says that the nickname came from the king’s having a darkened, or bad, tooth, but hard evidence of his dentition does not exist.

Bluetooth had another name: Harald Gormsson, or Gorm’s son. Exactly how his father Gorm rose to power is uncertain. He seems to have been a native Jutlander. In

A.D. 936, Gorm took control of northern Jutland from the Swedes, creating a kingdom centered on the town of Jelling.

Gorm’s efforts to keep and pass on this realm to his heir reflects a general trend in 10th-century Scandinavia. Viking kingdoms had emerged in previous centuries thanks to wealth

amassed through plunder around the North Sea. Later in the 900s, they started to develop into centralized monarchies. What Gorm began in Jelling, Bluetooth and his heirs consolidated. This Jelling dynasty was also shaped by another key transformation of the 10th century: the Christianization of Scandinavia.

## The Bluetooth Saga

Two famous rune stones at Jelling were impressive monuments to a new, stable style of rule. The older and smaller of the pair was inscribed by the pagan Gorm to commemorate Thyra, his wife and the mother of Bluetooth. The larger stone was raised by Bluetooth. On one side, it bears an engraving of Christ hanging from a tree, the earliest visual depiction of Jesus in Denmark. On another face is a runic inscription that would, centuries later, inspire the creator of Bluetooth technology: *Sá Harald es sér vann Danmork alla auk Norveg auk*



The Bluetooth moniker comes from Blåtand, which is an Old Norse term meaning “blue tooth” or “dark tooth.”

KING HARALD BLUETOOTH. PORTRAIT AT ROSKILDE CATHEDRAL WHERE HE IS BELIEVED TO BE BURIED  
GETTY IMAGES





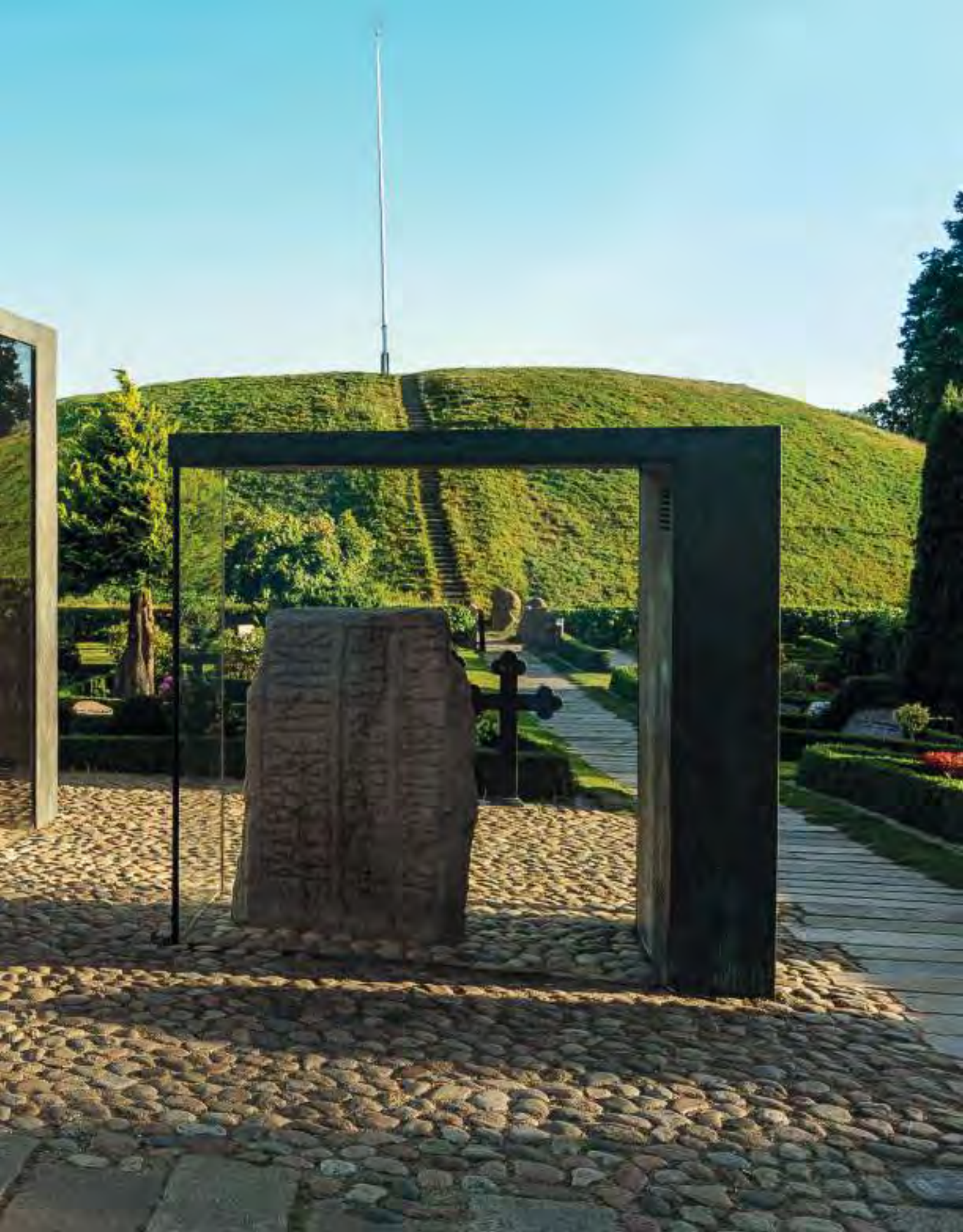




### PRECIOUS STONES

Described as “Denmark’s birth certificate,” the two stones at Jelling, Denmark, are today protected from the elements to preserve their delicate rune-inscribed surfaces. The smaller stone to the right was raised by Bluetooth’s father, Gorm. During his reign, Bluetooth erected the larger stone, inscribed with Denmark’s first visual depiction of Christ.

WOJCIECH STRÓZYK/ALAMY





### THE EMPEROR STRIKES BACK

In 973, Bluetooth attacked the lands of Holy Roman Emperor Otto II, depicted in a 10th-century miniature (left) from the *Registrum Gregorii*. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France

PRISMA/ALBUM

*dani gærði kristna* (“Harald won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian).”

The claims inscribed on the Jelling Stones, are, of course, propagandist. For a more nuanced picture of Bluetooth’s achievements and failures, historians consult a variety of medieval sources. One key document is a saga written in Iceland in the 13th century by Óláfr Þórðarson, the nephew of Snorri Sturluson, another famous chronicler of the Vikings. Entitled the *Knyttlinga Saga*, Óláfr’s account begins with Bluetooth’s accession: “He was a strong ruler, and a great leader in war.”

The saga then describes how Bluetooth set his sights on the kingdom of Norway, where his nephew Harald Gráfeldr (Graycloak) reigned.

The chronicle suggests that Bluetooth conspired against Gráfeldr, who was invited to Denmark and assassinated there. After the Norwegian king’s death, Bluetooth invaded Norway with his army; appointed a vassal king, Håkon Jarl; and then forced the entire country to pay him tribute.

### Converting the King

To the south, Denmark bordered a state far more powerful than the Viking kingdoms: the Holy Roman Empire. The emperors had been battling the Germanic and Slavic peoples for many decades under the pretext that these were pagans who needed to be converted to Christianity. This was also the justification used by Emperor Otto II when he counter-attacked Bluetooth in 974, a year after Bluetooth set upon his lands in Saxony.

According to the *Knyttlinga Saga*, Otto “attacked the king of Denmark and tried to convert the Danes to Christianity, but the Danish king had no intention of embracing the Christian faith, and faced him [Otto] with his army.” With support from Norwegian reinforcements, Bluetooth not only staved off Otto’s offensive, but he also managed to seize territory south of the border. After the Norwegians withdrew,



VIKING AXE DISCOVERED IN MAMMEN, NORTHERN JUTLAND, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK, COPENHAGEN  
ROBERTO FORTUNA & KIRA URSEM/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK

# The Viking Treasure of Hiddensee

From 1872 to 1874, storms exposed 16 pieces of gold jewelry from the Viking era (circa 793-1066) on the beach of Hiddensee, a small German island in the Baltic Sea. The find consists of a neck ring, a disc-shaped brooch, and 14 pendants, of which 10 are in the shape of a cross. Although the style is fairly typical of 10th-century Viking metalwork, the use of pure gold is exceptional. What is most striking is the combination of Christian and non-Christian motifs in the decoration of the pieces. The top part of the cross-shaped pendant (below), for example, bears a bird's head with protruding eyes.

Such an elaborate set of golden jewelry must have belonged to a person of very high rank. The style suggests that they were made for a woman. The hoard has been dated to the reign of Harald Bluetooth, and many theories have been put forward as to how it ended up on Hiddensee, at some distance from the Viking lands where it was likely made. One theory proposes it was buried there by a Slavic pirate who operated along this coast.



## INTERTWINED

Each of the cross-shaped pendants is formed by woven cords of gold filigree creating three additional crosses on the arms. The clasp is decorated with a carved bird's head. The set of pendants would have been used as amulets.

JUTTA GRUDZIECKI/STRALSUND MUSEUM



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# Jelling: Mounds, Burials, Runic Stones, and a Giant Longship

**JELLING** was the focal point of Harald Bluetooth's early reign in Denmark. The site is dominated by two large hills. ① The southern mound is almost 28 feet tall, while ② the mound to the north is higher, around 36 feet. Between them lies ③ a church. Built around A.D. 1100, it stands above three earlier church structures. Under the northern mound is an impressive burial chamber, dated to 958. Now empty, it likely once held the body of Bluetooth's father, Gorm, who died around

that year. In the 1970s, a burial with evidence of rich attire was found beneath the church. Some believe this burial may belong to Gorm, who was perhaps disinterred by Bluetooth and given a Christian burial. On the southern side of the church are ④ the rune-inscribed Jelling Stones. Around the mounds, ⑤ hundreds of stones were arranged in an outline of a longship spanning some 1,150 feet. Their position is now marked by modern replicas that are visible from the air.

HEINER MÜLLER-ELSNER/LAIF/CORDON PRESS

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# THE THRONE AND THE CROSS

**THE CREATION** of centralized monarchies in Scandinavia went hand-in-hand with the establishment of Christianity. However, as the example of Norway shows, this process often came with violent invasion by neighboring monarchies, including that of Harald Bluetooth and his heirs. Unification first took place in Norway at the end of the ninth century under Harald Fairhair, but a strong state was achieved at a cost: In the Icelandic sagas, Harald Fairhair is depicted as a tyrant. About a century later, in 970, Bluetooth briefly took control of Norway and tried to impose Christianity, as he had done in Denmark, but without much success. From 1015, Olaf II completed Norway's Christianization, uniting the country under his rule, only to lose control of Norway to Bluetooth's grandson Canute. In the 12th century, Olaf was made a saint.



## A SAINTLY KING

A century after his death in 1030, Olaf II of Norway was canonized. He is shown here in a detail from the 14th-century altar frontal in Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim, Norway.

INTERFOTO/AGE FOTOSTOCK

however, Otto regained lost ground and even moved north of the Danewirk, a defensive line of walls and trenches that had been the border between Christian and pagan lands.

The saga sows confusion as to when Bluetooth converted and whether there were religious motives for Otto's offensive. It is likely that conversion happened in 965, some years before Otto's attack. The most detailed extant account is found in *Res gestae Saxonicae* (*Deeds of the Saxons*), written in the late 10th century by Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey, a monk from northern Germany.

Widukind states that even before Bluetooth's conversion, the Danes had accepted Christ as a god while still worshipping their own deities, who they believed were more powerful. According to Widukind, Bluetooth received a priest called Poppo who had traveled from Cologne and spoke to the king about faith:

*Poppo declared that there is one true God, the father, together with his only-begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; and the [Danish gods] were verily demons, not gods. King Harald, quick to listen and slow to speak, asks if Poppo wishes bodily to demonstrate this faith. Unhesitatingly Poppo affirms his willingness. The... king orders a piece of iron to be heated, and demands that it shall be carried by Poppo. Now the confessor of Christ unhesitatingly carries the iron as far as the King orders. The priest then shows everyone his unharmed hand... At this, the King decrees that Christ is to be worshiped as the only God. He orders all of his subjects to renounce the idols and honor the priests and servants of God.*

## Resistance to Religion

The transition to Christianity was not a smooth one, however. The *Knýtlinga Saga* recounts that Bluetooth forced the Norwegian vassal king, Håkon Jarl, and his men, who were at the Danish court, to be baptized. He then sent Håkon Jarl, along with priests, into Norway with a mission to baptize all Norwegians.

But Håkon Jarl remained unswayed by the new religion. After leaving the Danish court,



**VIKING SWORD.** LATE EIGHTH TO EARLY NINTH CENTURY, FOUND ON ZEALAND ISLAND, DENMARK NATIONAL MUSEUM  
ARNOLD MIKKELSEN/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK







## Bluetooth's Royal Baptism

**THIS GILT COPPER** relief shows the priest Poppo baptizing King Harald Bluetooth, as recounted by the medieval Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey. The piece is part of a series of 13th-century reliefs that decorated the altar of the church in Tamdrup, Denmark,

northeast of Jellin. The panels may once have formed part of a reliquary's decoration. Two other reliefs depict the red-hot iron test by which Poppo convinced Bluetooth of the truth of Christianity. The reliefs are preserved in the National Museum of Denmark.

DEA/GETTY IMAGES



#### **VIKING CEMETERY**

Lindholm Høje, found in the northern Jutland peninsula, was a Viking town abandoned in the 13th century. Archaeologists have uncovered a necropolis there with about 700 burials, many of them under mounds. Around the mounds, stones have been laid to create the outline of ships to carry the deceased to the afterlife.

HEINER MÜLLER-ELSNER/LAIF/CORDON PRESS





**TWILIGHT OF THE GODS**  
A RUNE STONE FROM THE SWEDISH ISLAND OF GOTLAND DEPICTS THE NORSE GODS ODIN, THOR, AND FREYR. THESE PAGAN DEITIES WOULD SOON BE DISPLACED BY THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE VIKING WORLD. CIRCA A.D. 400-1100. SWEDISH HISTORY MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM

ALBUM

he renounced the Christian faith and returned to Norway, where he set about offering lavish sacrifices to the Norse gods. Bluetooth was furious and led an attack that devastated the Norwegian coast. However, when Bluetooth's forces returned to Denmark, Håkon Jarl regained control over Norway.

The road to Christianization was not smooth. Another episode in the *Knýtlinga Saga* shows how, despite his Christian zeal, Bluetooth himself hadn't entirely abandoned his old beliefs. In mulling over whether to attack Iceland, he did not pray to his Christian god for guidance but rather "bade a sorcerer to journey to Iceland and find out what he could tell him." When the sorcerer returned with news that the island was too far away and in any case inhabited by all manner of monstrous creatures, Bluetooth shelved his plans for invasion.

### Civil War in Denmark

Bluetooth was well known for his security measures to protect his lands. Following the threats posed by the incursions of the Holy

Roman Emperor, Bluetooth had numerous circular fortifications built. These are now known as Viking Age Ring Fortresses, or Trelleborg-style forts. Building defensive structures on such a large scale required labor from warriors who normally formed the retinue of the *jarls* (noblemen, and the root of the English word "earl").

Unhappy at losing their men, the jarls became discontented with Bluetooth, who, they believed, was abusing his power. This set the stage for the end of Harald Bluetooth's reign. When Bluetooth's son Sweyn was still young, he had claimed a share of the kingdom, but his father refused to give it to him. According to the *Knýtlinga Saga*, "since he [Sweyn] was the son of a concubine, his father had no great affection for him and refused to give him any land to rule over." When Sweyn reached adulthood, he decided to act as the Vikings had always done and, after gathering a few ships and a strong band of supporters, likely recruited from his father's opponents, he launched raiding expeditions in Denmark and abroad.

**Bluetooth's fort-building program took laborers away from his nobles, stoking discontent and heralding the end of his reign.**

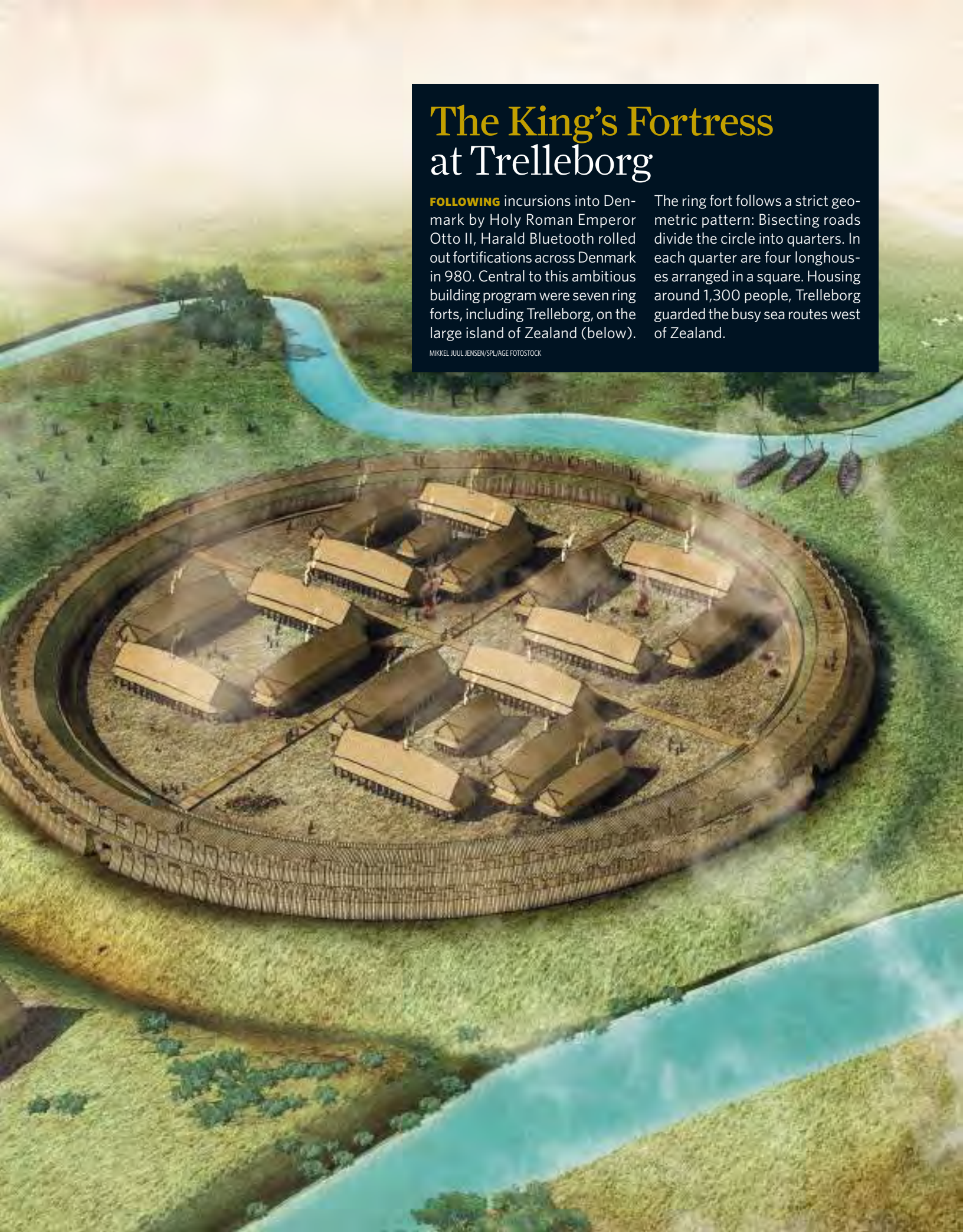


# The King's Fortress at Trelleborg

**FOLLOWING** incursions into Denmark by Holy Roman Emperor Otto II, Harald Bluetooth rolled out fortifications across Denmark in 980. Central to this ambitious building program were seven ring forts, including Trelleborg, on the large island of Zealand (below).

The ring fort follows a strict geometric pattern: Bisecting roads divide the circle into quarters. In each quarter are four longhouses arranged in a square. Housing around 1,300 people, Trelleborg guarded the busy sea routes west of Zealand.

MIKKEL JUUL JENSEN/SPL/AGE FOTOSTOCK





### MULTITASKER

Reflecting the transition from pagan to Christian, this 10th-century soapstone mold produced both Thor's hammers and crucifixes. National Museum of Denmark

HEINER MÜLLER-ELSNER / LAIF / CORDON PRESS

Bluetooth raised an army and attacked his son's forces. Several battles ensued, and the situation escalated into civil war. In one fight, Bluetooth's troops finally defeated Sweyn's, but in the fray Harald had been wounded. He died a short time later, in November 987, and is believed to have been buried at the church of Roskilde. If so, he was the first Danish king to be interred in consecrated ground.

### Bluetooth's Long Legacy

On his accession as Sweyn I, the feuds with the jarls subsided. In the period of relative peace that followed, Bluetooth's fortresses were abandoned because they were costly to maintain. A fierce warrior king, Sweyn Forkbeard dedicated much of his reign to raids against England.

The world that Harald Bluetooth had helped forge continued to take shape during the dominion of Sweyn I, whose fellow monarchs in Norway and Sweden were all, by then, Christian kings. The Nordic world—including Iceland, which converted to Christianity around the year 1000—was being integrated into the spiritual map of Europe.

Estrid, Bluetooth's granddaughter, gave her name to the Estridsen dynasty that ruled Denmark into the 15th century, and whose

line of descent can be traced to Margrethe II, the current queen of Denmark. The exploits of Bluetooth's descendant, Knútr inn ríki—better known as Canute—would have far-reaching consequences for English history.

The raids on England carried out by Canute's father, Sweyn I, had forced King Ethelred the Unready to flee in 1013. This allowed Sweyn a clear path to the throne as a short-lived King of the English. Following his father's death in 1014, Canute was duly proclaimed King of the English, before being forced to retreat to Denmark by a returning Ethelred. Having assembled a fleet, Canute and his forces returned to England, defeating Ethelred's son and successor, Edmund Ironside, in 1016.

As England's new king, Canute stopped Viking raids, and ushered in a two-decade period of stability and prosperity. Two years later, he succeeded his brother as king of Denmark and expanded his territory. By 1028, the Jelling dynasty, consolidated by Harald Bluetooth, stretched from the southwest of England to the far northeast of Norway. ■

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**RESTING PLACE**

In 960, Bluetooth made Roskilde, a city northeast of Zealand, the new Danish capital. Its great Gothic cathedral was erected around 1200 over a church where, according to tradition, Bluetooth had been buried.

NIELS MELANDER/ALAMY/ACI

### YULETIDE CHEER

Across Europe, holiday campaigns collected and distributed Christmas gifts to soldiers at the front. British soldiers were sent a brass tin embossed with the profile of Princess Mary containing chocolate, tobacco, and a note from the King and Queen reading: "May God protect you and bring you safely home." German forces received gifts from Kaiser Wilhelm II: Soldiers got pipes, and officers, packs of cigarettes. A few days before Christmas, French president Raymond Poincaré (at far left) visited the Paris warehouse where gifts for French soldiers were being amassed. "A large number of packages are ready to be transported to the front; wine producers have provided 1,200 bottles," the Paris daily *Le Temps* reported on December 22, 1914.

ROGER VIOLETT/AURIMAGES





# THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914

When World War I broke out in July 1914, many Europeans thought the fighting would be over by Christmas. It wasn't, and nearly six months after the war began, hundreds of thousands of soldiers celebrated the holiday as best they could in the freezing trenches of western Europe.



### MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS

Hospital staff made sure that the holiday didn't pass without a little celebration for the wounded. An American volunteer with the British Red Cross, Mary Dexter wrote letters that detailed holiday preparations: "[T]he day after tomorrow is Christmas... We are busy, in odd minutes, making gauze stockings for our 200 men—each one will contain fruit, jam, tobacco." In a Berlin hospital (shown here), nurses handed out treats and decorated small Christmas trees. Louie Johnson, an English nurse, remembered how people gave her simple gifts, such as a pack of cigarettes or a scarf, to pass on to soldiers. German nurse Anna von Mildeburg said this of Christmas 1914: "The image will remain with us forever, how we all stood among the soldiers, hands folded fervently. And by the flickering of the Christmas tree candles, in the fir tree scent of the glittering tree, we sang softly the beloved old song, sending it up as an ardent prayer, a heartfelt plea: Peace to men on Earth."

ALAMY/CORDON PRESS





### THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS DAY

The spontaneous truces that arose along the western front, especially those between British and German forces, are among the most famous events of December 1914. On Christmas Eve, German soldiers in some locations decorated the trenches with Tannenbäume, or fir trees (shown here), and sang carols. Wafting across no-man's-land came a British serenade of Christmas music back to them. The next morning the men spent time together outside the trenches, exchanging greetings and gifts of rum and cigars. The London Rifle Brigade (top right) and Saxon soldiers met in the Ploegsteert forest in Belgium. British noncommissioned officers (bottom right) display helmets they received from German soldiers.

THIS PAGE: PICTORIAL PRESS LTD/ALAMY. TOP RIGHT: POPPERFOTO/GETTY  
BOTTOM RIGHT: MARY EVANS/AGE FOTOSTOCK







## FOOTBALL IN THE FIRING LINES

### THETFORD CORPORAL AMONG THE PLAYERS.

The strange Christmas scenes which occurred in the British and German firing lines are described in a letter written by Corporal A. Wyatt to his parents a short while ago. He regards it as the most historic day ever spent on the battlefield. He says that when "A" Company, 1st Norfolk, to which he belongs, arrived in the trenches on the 24th December they found everything quiet. There was no rifle firing. They had been in the trenches a short time when they heard someone singing Christmas hymns. Then all at once there were shouts of "Three cheers for the English." To their surprise the voices came from the German trenches. "Then both our men and the Germans," Corporal Wyatt proceeds, "started singing hymns together. The same thing carried on nearly all night, and there was a sharp frost to make things look better. On Christmas morning it was very thick, and we could not see far in front of us till about midday. Then we heard the Germans shouting, 'Come over here, we will not fire!' They got out of their trenches and started walking about on the top. Our chaps, seeing them, did the same. Then all at once came the surprise. The Germans started walking towards our trenches, and two or three of our chaps went out to meet them. When they met, the Germans, speaking in English, wished them a Merry Christmas. Then came the fun. Everybody on each side walked out to the middle of the two firing lines, and shaking hands wished each other a Merry Christmas. To our surprise we found we were fighting men old enough to be our fathers, and they told us they had had enough of the war, as they were nearly all married men. We finished up in the same old way, kicking a football about between the two firing lines. So football in the firing line between the British and Germans is the truth, as I was one that played." It will be remembered that Corporal Wyatt was wounded by shrapnel during the great retreat, and spent a few days at home before returning to the front.

## MAKING MERRY

Perhaps the truce's most uplifting story has been the hardest to document: soccer games played on Christmas Day (top left). Second- and thirdhand accounts appeared in newspapers and letters, but firsthand testimonies, either of witnessing a soccer (football) game or playing in one, were rare. One "kickabout" was verified by two letters written by British soldiers Corporal Albert Wyatt and Sergeant Frank Naden describing play in Wulvergem, Belgium. Wyatt's account was published in a newspaper article (above right) describing "kicking a ball between the two firing lines." Using similar methods, historians confirmed another match occurred in Frélinghien, France. Even though the games were smaller and fewer than originally believed, it did not stop commemorations on the truce's hundredth anniversary, in 2014. In Liverpool, England, the sculpture "All Together Now" (right) was unveiled and then traveled to several locations around Europe. In Saint-Yvon, Belgium, a steel soccer ball atop an exploded shell (above) was presented to honor the Christmas games.





### CHRISTMASSES YET TO COME

The truce of 1914 did not last, and fighting soon picked up along the western front. While newspaper accounts of the holiday observance might have charmed people at home, military commanders were horrified. In the three Christmases that followed, they handed down orders that would prevent any further fraternization between the fighting forces. World War I's unyielding savagery might have made them unnecessary. In December 1914, the war was still young, but as hostilities dragged on, battle-scarred soldiers were hardened after years of horror in the trenches. A photograph from 1916 reveals a different attitude toward "gift exchanges": Canadian artillerymen on the river Somme front-load a bomb with a macabre message for the Germans: "A busting time this Christmas, 1916."





# Sebasteion Surprise: Honoring Rome Through Art

A 1979 discovery in Aphrodisias revealed how an ancient acropolis cultivated its devotion to Roman emperors and their patron goddess.

Imagine passing through a monumental gate, or propylon. A broad, paved avenue stretches roughly 300 feet ahead and leads to a temple raised on a tall platform. On both sides porticoed buildings stand 40 feet high, with 200 multicolored life-size marble reliefs depicting Roman emperors and empresses alongside epic heroes and powerful deities. The reliefs are framed by columnar architecture, giving the facades the look of an art gallery.

Such a view is what residents of classical antiquity might have experienced upon arrival at the Sebasteion, a grand complex that once stood tall in the ancient city of Aphrodisias in southwestern Turkey. Built in the early first century A.D., the Sebasteion was a place of veneration for the imperial



Roman dynasty. One of the most important archaeological sites in Asia Minor, it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2017. Much of the ancient city still has to be unearthed.

Given the fame of other classical sites in the eastern Mediterranean, it is perhaps surprising that the Sebasteion is not more widely known. To R.R.R. Smith, a professor of classical archaeology at the University of Oxford and the director of New York University's

Aphrodisias excavations since 1991, the Sebasteion is a monument with much to say and more secrets yet to reveal. According to Smith, "It is our largest and best preserved example of an imperial-cult complex ... Most cities had some kind of installation for emperor worship, but none had one as extravagant as that found at Aphrodisias."

## Earthquake Zone

Named in honor of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love and beauty), the site of Aphrodisias is located about 125 miles inland from the port of Izmir. After the Englishman William Sherard recorded inscriptions he found in 1705, almost two centuries would pass before archaeologists returned to excavate in 1904. After them, an Italian mission

resumed work during the interwar period.

But these modern scholars were thwarted by the fact that the settlement of Geyre had spread over much of the



## TURKISH DELIGHTS

### 1961

Archaeologist Kenan T. Erim begins 30 years of excavations in Aphrodisias with spectacular results.

### 1956

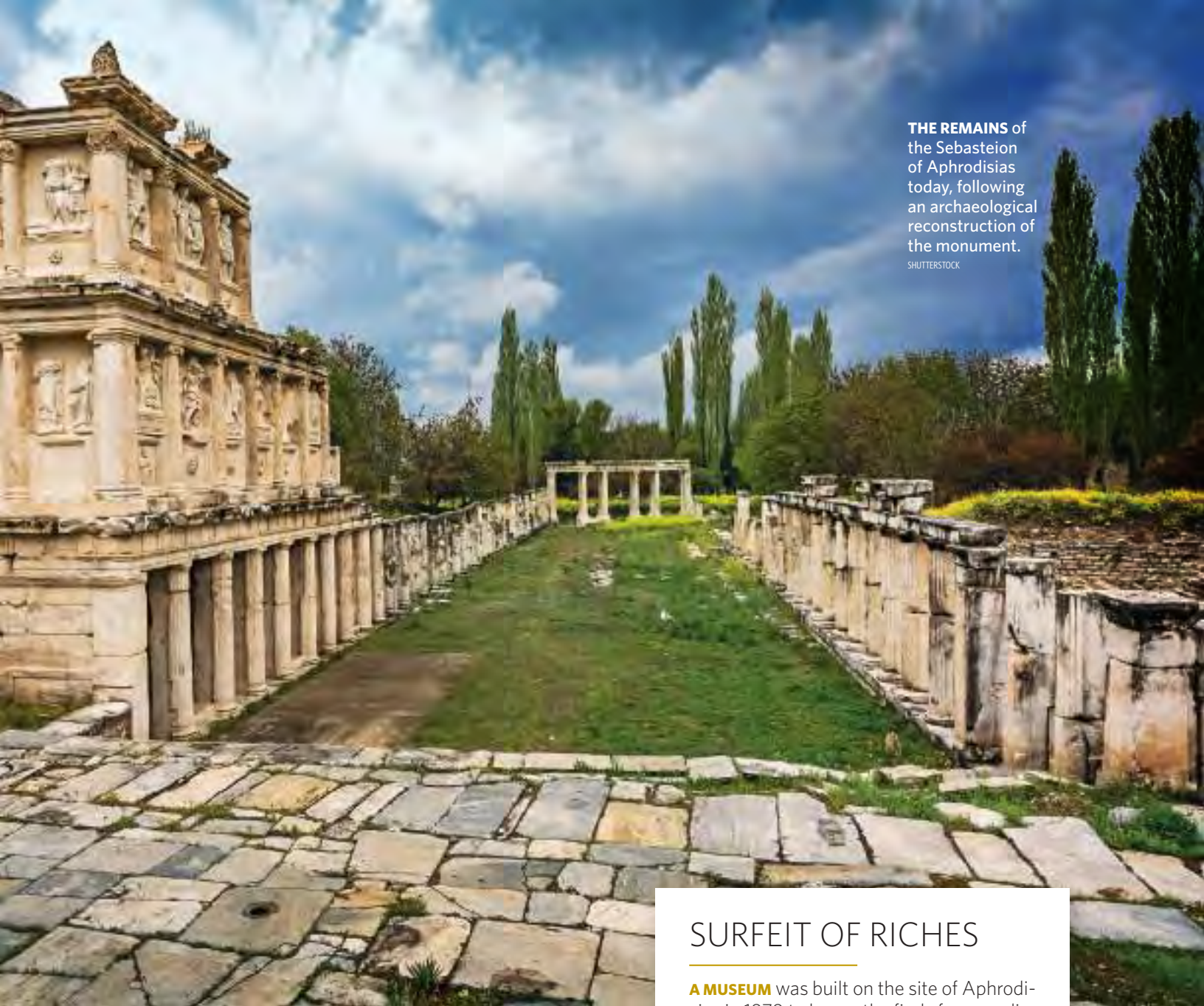
An earthquake strikes the region. Evacuation efforts open up access to the site beneath.

### 1979

Archaeologists stumble on a haul of exquisite sculpture: the marble reliefs of the Sebasteion.

### 2006-2012

The Sebasteion is reconstructed. The original reliefs are housed in the Aphrodisias Museum.



**THE REMAINS** of the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias today, following an archaeological reconstruction of the monument.

SHUTTERSTOCK

ancient site. Then, in 1956, an earthquake caused part of the village to be evacuated, and in the early 1970s Turkish authorities decided to demolish almost all the remaining houses. The population was moved to a new village, and researchers gained access to the entire site.

In 1979, beneath one of the old houses, a sensational discovery would transform historians' knowledge of the relationship between the site and imperial Rome: a treasure

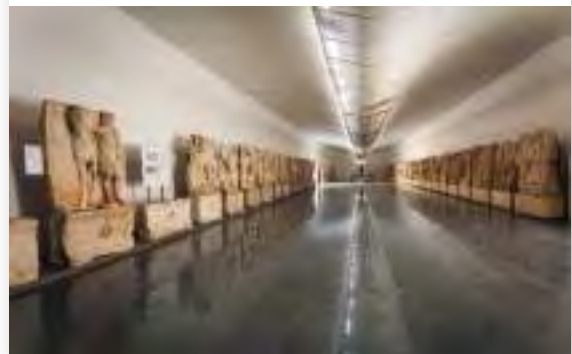
trove of marble columns and capitals, friezes, cornices, and, most interesting, dozens of reliefs. The reliefs depict mythological scenes and members of the Julio-Claudian family, imperial Rome's first dynasty who ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 68.

The find confirmed that Aphrodisias was dedicated to the Roman imperial dynasty. The monument itself was known in the east of the empire as the Sebasteion, from the Hellenic term *sebastos*, or

## SURFEIT OF RICHES

**A MUSEUM** was built on the site of Aphrodisias in 1979 to house the finds from earlier excavations. By 2008, so many treasures had been recovered that a new wing was erected to display the 80 reliefs from the Sebasteion. Another project is under way to make space for the most recent discoveries.

**RELIEFS FROM THE SEBASTEION.** APHRODISIAS MUSEUM, ALAMY/AGI



# Emperors, Goddesses, and Heroes

**FIRST-CENTURY A.D. RELIEFS** from the Sebasteion depict members of the Roman imperial family alongside scenes of the Trojan War. The placement strengthened the connection between Rome's Julio-Claudian emperors and the goddess Aphrodite through her son Aeneas. The reliefs also offered thanks to the emperors for freedom from Roman taxation and the autonomy granted to Aphrodisias. The reliefs are displayed in the Aphrodisias Museum in Geyre, Turkey.

▶ The female personification of Rome stands triumphant over a bound enemy.

AGE FOTOSTOCK



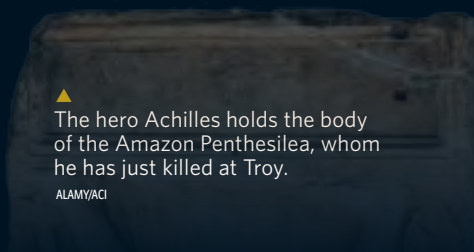
▶ Aeneas flees Troy with his father, Anchises, on his back, along with his son Julius, all protected by the goddess Aphrodite.

ALAMY/ACI



▶ The hero Achilles holds the body of the Amazon Penthesilea, whom he has just killed at Troy.

ALAMY/ACI





▲ Anchises and Aphrodite have an amorous encounter on Mount Ida, from which the hero Aeneas is born.

AGE FOTOSTOCK



▲ Nero is crowned by his mother, Agrippina, depicted as Fortuna, goddess of abundance.

AYHAN ALTUN/AGE FOTOSTOCK



▲ A royal hero consults Apollo and his oracle through the medium of his priestess.

ALAMY/ACI

▶ Gaius and Lucius were their grandfather Augustus's heirs, before their untimely deaths at ages 23 and 18.

AGE FOTOSTOCK



## CITY MAP

### THE WALLED ENCLOSURE

of Aphrodisias covered an area of some 180 acres. In addition to the Sebasteion, public buildings were in the center: ① a basilica, ② a theater, ③ the agora, ④ Hadrian's Baths, and ⑤ the Temple of Aphrodite. In front of the temple there is a road flanked by porticoed buildings that was entered through a monumental door, ⑥ the tetrapylon. Outside the center, the city also had ⑦ a stadium.

APHRODISIAS IN THE SECOND CENTURY A.D.  
ILLUSTRATION: 4D NEWS

“venerable,” equivalent to the Latin title of Augustus.

The lion's share of discoveries at the site was made by the Turkish archaeologist Kenan T. Erim, under the

auspices of New York University, until his death in 1990. The excavations led by Erim focused on the city's central monuments, with fantastic results: the Temple of Aphrodite, the theater, the south agora, the council house, the basilica, and the Sebasteion itself.

The most important finds from the 1979

excavations were put on display in the Aphrodisias Museum, built on the site that same year.

The wealth of Aphrodisias came from nearby white and blue-gray marble quarries and the superlative art produced by its sculptors, some of whom traveled to create artwork across the empire. The city owed its status to

more than its artistic heritage, however. Aphrodisias had made a point of demonstrating its loyalty to Rome, and no link proved more influential than the city's cult of Aphrodite, which had great significance to Julius Caesar and the Julian family in Rome, who claimed direct descent from the goddess's Roman equivalent, Venus.



## Julius Caesar and his family claimed direct descent from Aphrodite's Roman equivalent, Venus.

APHRODITE. MARBLE HEAD FROM HADRIAN'S BATHS, APHRODISIAS. SECOND CENTURY A.D.  
MARSHALL IKONOGRAPHY/AGE FOTOSTOCK

### The Trojan Link

According to mythology, Aphrodite seduced the Trojan shepherd Anchises on Mount Ida, from which union Aeneas was born. Aeneas fled from the sack of Troy with his father and his young son Iulus,



**3D DIGITAL** visualization of the entrance (propylon) to the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, looking east through the gateway to the temple at the far end. The north building (left) and south building flank the central avenue.

COURTESY OF PROFESSOR R.R.R. SMITH, DIRECTOR, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY EXCAVATIONS AT APHRODISIAS

from whom the Julian family claimed descent.

Under Caesar's adopted son and heir, the emperor Augustus, Aphrodisias maintained its favored position and in 39 B.C., the city was granted autonomy and exemption from taxes paid to Rome—rare privileges that assured its prosperity.

The 200 marble reliefs produced for the Sebasteion featured mythological characters, famous scenes from tales such as the Trojan War, and allegories of the Julio-Claudian emperors from Augustus to Claudius and Nero. About 80 of the 203 reliefs from the two porticoed

buildings have been excavated and restored. Although the buildings are not strictly symmetrical, both have three levels adorned with the three architectural orders of ancient Greek architecture: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

### **New Olympians**

The north building has been heavily damaged by earthquakes. But some 80 percent of the reliefs from the south building survive. The emperors seen there are often depicted as warriors victorious over the barbarians, but they are represented in a Hellenistic heroic style, as if they were new members of the

traditional Olympian pantheon. One of the building inscriptions calls them Theoi Sebastoi Olympioi, or Olympian Emperor Gods.

The north building contained reliefs depicting the places and people conquered by Augustus, believed to have been inspired by a monument in Rome.

During the excavations, archaeologists meticulously recorded the position of each fragment. Later, between 2006 and 2012, they would carry out a reconstruction process called anastylosis, an accurate, stone-for-stone restoration. The remaining structure was consolidated,

and fragments of its marble facade were reassembled in their ancient positions.

This systematic process resulted in a kind of immense puzzle of thousands of marble pieces. The reliefs set in the monument are copies. The originals are conserved and displayed in a new wing of the Aphrodisias Museum, the Sevgi Gönül Hall, completed in 2008. Five years later, the reliefs were published in a monograph. An anastylosis of part of the south building was completed in 2011 and of the propylon in 2015.

—*Ángel Carlos Aguayo & Braden Phillips*