HISTORY

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ROYAL SUMMIT IN JERUSALEM

MYSTERY PLAGUE EPIDEMIC IN ANCIENT ATHENS

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CHARIOT RACING IN ROME

PLUS:
Death of Napoleon
The 200th Anniversary
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No matter the time or place, sports fans love to debate. When the question popped up recently about who is the greatest athlete of all time, people’s arguments came fast and furious as they scanned the past for their favorites. Some said Serena Williams, the American tennis champ with a record-setting 23 Grand Slam titles. Others put forth American swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated modern Olympian with 28 Olympic medals (23 of them gold).

There’s just one problem. They and many other popular candidates (like Michael Jordan, Simone Biles, Usain Bolt, and Pelé to name a few) all come from the very recent past. What about the athletes from the very distant past? If the question is sincere about “of all time,” then taking a longer view is necessary.

Take these two star athletes from 2,000 years ago: the charioteers Flavius Scorpus and Gaius Appuleius Diocles. Some quick stats: In his 10-year career, Scorpus racked up more than 2,000 victories before dying at age 27. After a 24-year racing career, Diocles retired at age 42 with more than 35 million sesterces in winnings, a sum that historian Peter Struck estimates could be worth as much as $15 billion. Scorpus and Diocles are just two of history’s many champions, and many more are waiting to be discovered.
6 PROFILES
In the 13th century Rabban Bar Sauma made an epic journey from China to Persia to Europe, an odyssey some liken to Marco Polo’s, in reverse.

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Qin Shi Huangdi, China’s first emperor, died in 210 B.C., but his magnificent funerary complex—complete with a fighting force of thousands of life-size terra-cotta warriors—stayed hidden until 1974.

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Francis Drake’s audacious attacks on Spanish lands in Europe and around the world made him England’s unflappable hero, but his storied career had a darker side, including links to the early slave trade.

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FRANCIS DRAKE, 1581 MINIATURE
BY NICHOLAS HILLIARD
A CHARMING TUDOR-STYLE MUSEUM (above) stands today on the site of what was once one of the grandest Roman villas in Britain. The earliest sections of the Chedworth villa in Gloucestershire in western England date to the second century A.D. The complex expanded to 35 rooms by its heyday in the fourth century. A series of Roman-era mosaics from the bathhouse and dining room runs along the rear of the grounds and is covered by the protective structure that can be seen in the image above. The 2017 discoveries, including the fifth-century mosaic, were found in areas along the boundary walls.

NATIONAL TRUST/JAMES DOBSON

AFTER THE EMPIRE

Mosaic Discovery Rewrites Rome’s Legacy in Britain

A fifth-century mosaic recently found at a Roman villa in England suggests the end of imperial rule did not end prosperity in the region.

ROME may have fallen in A.D. 476, but its influence continued to be felt across Europe far later than some historians had come to believe. An elaborate mosaic from a Roman villa in England’s rolling Cotswold Hills is rewriting the accepted narrative of the collapse of Roman rule in Britain.

In Britain there are more than 2,000 known Roman mosaics made during imperial rule. Rome’s control of Britain ended in A.D. 410, and many historians believed that Roman artistry disappeared around the same time. By the late fourth century, most Roman troops were gone. In the early fifth century, Britain ceased to be part of the empire, and the economy was disrupted. Without wealthy patrons, the art form disappeared.

Changing the Date

In 2017 a mosaic discovered at the Chedworth Roman Villa in Gloucestershire, England, upended this idea. First discovered in 1864, Chedworth’s
least another 50 years longer than expected,” Papworth said. There is no evidence at Chedworth to indicate who the owners were. “They could have been dignitaries, people with money, influence, and friends in high places,” said Papworth.

**A New Script**
According to the traditional narrative, Britons abandoned their Roman villas and turned to subsistence farming to survive when the Roman imperial administrative system ended. Local fiefdoms filled the void. Papworth speculates that Chedworth’s geography in the Cotswolds shielded it from social turmoil, including raids from Celtic, Pictish, and Scottish tribes. This safety allowed the area to maintain a higher standard of living years after other regions had been abandoned. Documentation and archaeological evidence in general from fifth-century Britain is scarce, which makes this discovery all the more promising.

Stephen Cosh, an expert on Britain’s Roman mosaics, said the discovery could be the first step in a wider investigation: “It will be important to research further sites in the region to see whether we can demonstrate similar refurbishment at other villas still occupied in the fifth century.”

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**MYSTERY OF THE BROKEN GLASS**

The occupants of the Chedworth Roman Villa enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle, as evidenced by the kinds of artifacts found throughout the site. Many were easily identified, but archaeologists needed two years to decipher a fragment of colored glass found in 2017 (top image below). Nothing else had been found like it in England. Experts were able to date the glass to around A.D. 200, and eventually they matched it to fragments held at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, New York. The shard, adorned with an overlapping fish-scale design, was once part of the tail end of a rare hand-blown bottle shaped like a fish, with its open mouth forming the aperture of the vessel. This striking item likely originated in what is now Ukraine and may have held perfume.

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**FLOWERS AND KNOTS ARE REVEALED BY THE EXCAVATION OF THE ELABORATE FIFTH-CENTURY MOSAIC FOUND AT CHEDWORTH ROMAN VILLA IN WESTERN ENGLAND.**

**A SHARD OF BLUE-GREEN GLASS (UPPER) FOUND IN 2017 AT THE CHEDWORTH ROMAN VILLA IS BELIEVED TO HAVE COME FROM A RARE FISH-SHAPED PERFUME BOTTLE (LOWER).**

**UPPER: NATIONAL TRUST/ROD KIRKPATRICK/F STOP PRESS  LOWER: MAGGIE FOOTTIT**

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**THE O**
Rabban Bar Sauma: From China to Europe

In 1287 a Mongolian khan sent a Chinese monk as his ambassador to the rulers of Europe. To the joy of historians, Rabban Bar Sauma left a detailed account of his incredible travels.

Two travelers from the 13th century made remarkable journeys. The man who headed east, from Europe to Asia, became a household name, thanks to his travelogue, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The name of the other man is less well known, but his accomplishments are just as remarkable. Rabban Bar Sauma left China in 1275, followed the Silk Road, and made his way to Baghdad, Constantinople, and France, meeting khans, kings, and a pope.

The remarkable Bar Sauma was born in Zhongdu, China, in 1220. His ancestors were descendants of the Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group from Central Asia. Bar Sauma was brought up in the Nestorian faith, a Christian denomination that originated in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) when it broke away from the church in the fifth century. Nestorianism took root in Persia and then spread east to China.

“Rabban” is an honorific: In the Semitic Syriac language in which the Nestorian liturgy is written, it means “master.” At age 23 Bar Sauma became a monk, and he spent most of his adult life as a teacher.

Unlike Marco Polo, who embarked on his famous journey when he was just 17, Bar Sauma did not begin his traveling until middle age. At age 55, he decided to visit the holy sites where his religion was founded. In the course of his extraordinary travels, Bar Sauma would later form an unlikely Mongol-Christian alliance to seek Europe’s help against Muslim armies.

Silk Road Trip

Bar Sauma’s initial objective, however, was simply to walk in the Holy Land lying in the far west. His pupil Rabban Marcos would travel with him. Before leaving their homeland, the two sold all of their belongings and set out.

Like Polo, they benefited from Genghis Khan’s unification of the territories surrounding the Silk Road. They traveled during a period of stability historians call Pax Mongolica, but it did not mean the journey was without perils: The two pilgrims often went through deserts to avoid unsavory encounters on the standard route. At one stage, they crossed the Taklimakan Desert, where they had to scale 60-foot dunes and find shelter from turbulent sandstorms.

Like his father, Arghun Khan was sympathetic to Christianity, and he saw in Bar Sauma an ideal ambassador to Europe.
From there, the pair reached the oasis of Hotan in western China, after which they lay Afghanistan’s mountains, and then a long slog west through the Iranian desert. After two years they reached Baghdad, seat of the catholics, or patriarch, of the Nestorian Church. Bar Sauma and Marcos were intent on reaching Jerusalem, but conflict in the Holy Land made that impossible. Instead, the two traveled to Armenia and stayed in monasteries there before being recalled to Baghdad by the Nestorian catholics, Denha I.

Founded in the eighth century by the Abbasid Muslims, Baghdad had been conquered in 1258 by the Mongols and become part of the Mongol Empire. The Ilkhanate, as the region was called, was ruled by an ilkhan, a deputy to the Great Khan in China. On Bar Sauma’s arrival the ilkhan was Abagha, a descendant of Genghis Khan. The Mongols had a fearsome military reputation, but their rule in this period was marked by religious tolerance. Abagha, a Buddhist, was sympathetic to the Nestorians.

The catholics Denha decided to send Bar Sauma and his disciple to meet Abagha and receive the khan’s secular blessing for his ordination as patriarch. During the trip, Denha appointed Marcos to his first senior position in the Nestorian Church. Denha planned to send the pair back to China, but in 1281 he died. A replacement was sought, and Marcos was chosen as the new Nestorian patriarch. Marcos assumed his new role under the name Mar Yahballaha III, and his former master would continue his travels.

The little knowledge scholars possessed about Rabban Bar Sauma was drawn from a few documents in Europe that record his visit there. Then in 1887 a manuscript in a monastery in present-day Iran was found, which turned out to be a dream discovery: a translation into Syriac of Bar Sauma’s own account of his travels from China to Europe, written in Persian in the last years of his life. By linking the account with other manuscripts held in London and the Vatican that mention Bar Sauma, historians were able to form a much better picture of the experiences of this remarkable traveler.

**THE LOST MANUSCRIPT**

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**SERMON OF A NESTORIAN PRIEST ON PALM SUNDAY. WALL PAINTING IN GAOCHANG (XINJIANG), 7TH-8TH CENTURIES. AKG/ALBUM**
Abagha died in 1282, was briefly succeeded by his brother, and then, by his son, Arghun in 1284. In this period, the Egyptian Mamluk Muslims had gained control of the Holy Land and were posing a military threat to the khanate. The ilkhan elected Bar Sauma as head of a delegation to Europe to convince its leaders to join a military campaign against their common enemy. Then in his 60s, Bar Sauma began traveling west in 1287 on a new journey, with Constantinople as his first destination among many.

Monk on a Mission

The Byzantine capital made a colossal impact on Bar Sauma. It was his first time in an entirely Christian city—and what a city it was—with its blend of Roman and Byzantine splendor. The Nestorian pilgrim was dazzled by the magnificent sight of Hagia Sophia, built seven centuries earlier by Emperor Justinian I.

From Constantinople he traveled to Italy in June 1287. His first stop was Rome, where he hoped to convince the pope to declare a new crusade to take the Holy Land from the Mamluks. Pope Honorius IV, however, had just died and his successor had not yet been chosen. Bar Sauma’s message would have to wait, so he made the most of his time waiting by visiting Rome’s basilicas and the relics of the holy figures he had so venerated in
ORIGINS OF NESTORIANISM

RABBAN BAR SAUMA belonged to the Christian denomination known as Nestorianism. The faith is named for Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople in the fifth century who believed that the mortal and divine natures of Christ were separate from each other. His doctrine was rejected at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and Nestorius’ supporters broke away to form their own church. Nestorianism grew popular in Syria and Persia before spreading eastward to China. In 635 the emperor Taizong received a Nestorian monk, an encounter recorded on the eighth-century stela of Xi’an.

Bar Sauma completed his round of royal visits by presenting himself to Edward I of England, then residing in Bordeaux. Edward promised him economic and military aid that would never materialize. Even so, the encounter impacted Edward: In 1291 he sent an envoy, Geoffrey of Langley, on a diplomatic mission to the Ilkhanate.

In February 1288 a new pope, Nicholas IV, was elected, and Bar Sauma immediately set about petitioning him. The pontiff entrusted the traveler with a letter for Arghun Khan, a copy of which is kept in the Vatican archives. In it, the pope declined the alliance owing to the fragility of the internal situation in Europe and exhorted the ilkhan to convert to Christianity. However, Bar Sauma had piqued his curiosity, and the Chinese diplomat was allowed to celebrate Mass according to Nestorian customs. Nicholas IV noted that, apart from the language, the Mass celebrated by the “ambassador of the Mongols” resembled those celebrated in the West.

Rabban Bar Sauma’s long journey had come to an end. He headed back east and would die in Baghdad in 1294, a guest of the patriarch Mar Yahballaha III, his former novice who had left China with him 20 years earlier. As the first known traveler from China to Europe, Bar Sauma must have appreciated the momentousness of what he had seen. To the eternal gratitude of historians, he spent his last days in Baghdad recording his impressions, and a copy of this extraordinary account was discovered centuries later.

—Giorgio Pirazzini
The Tulsa Race Massacre: One Hundred Years Later

A white mob destroyed a vibrant Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in spring 1921. Nearly erased from history, the massacre is attracting new attention as the United States reckons with one of the worst incidents of racial violence in its history.

Oil was booming in the United States in the 1900s, and so was Tulsa, Oklahoma. The city grew as both the petroleum industry and its residents—Black and white—flourished.

After Oklahoma officially became a state in 1907, the legislature soon enacted Jim Crow laws and segregation policies; despite these obstacles, Tulsa became home to a vibrant 35-square-block neighborhood of Black Americans called Greenwood, also known as Black Wall Street. Greenwood was an economic haven for African Americans, but this community was shattered between May 31 and June 1, 1921, when a white mob attacked the district in a horrific event known as the Tulsa race massacre.

Black Boomtown
Following the Civil War, waves of African Americans left the South to relocate to other parts of the United States. In 1889 Congress made lands available in Oklahoma for settlement, and many Black people saw this as a major opportunity. One of the main architects in securing land for Black citizens in Oklahoma was O.W. Gurley.

An entrepreneur and educator who grew up in Arkansas, Gurley first moved to Oklahoma in 1893 and made his fortune in the town of Perry. The oil boom then drew him in 1905 to Tulsa, where
he acquired 40 acres of land in a part of town that would be sold to “coloreds only.” In this neighborhood surrounding Greenwood Avenue and Archer Street, Gurley would open several businesses, the first of which was a boardinghouse that catered to the African Americans moving to Tulsa. He expanded his holdings to three brick apartment buildings and five town houses, a grocery store, and the Gurley Hotel. He started a Masonic Lodge and opened an employment agency. As Greenwood’s premier entrepreneur, Gurley built a relationship with white Tulsa residents and was eventually made sheriff’s deputy, charged with policing the Black population. All told, Gurley’s fortune was valued at more than $150,000, an amount estimated to be worth between $2 to 5 million today.

Between 1910 and 1920, Tulsa’s population grew from roughly 18,000 to 72,000 people, and the Black population swelled from 2,000 to more than 9,000 residents in that same time. Gurley’s entrepreneurial spirit influenced many other Greenwood residents to start their own businesses within the community, whose financial success earned it the name “Black Wall Street.”

John Williams and his wife, Loula, built a confectionary store and established the very popular Dreamland Theater. Simon Berry built a private transportation network composed of Model T Fords and buses that took people all over Greenwood and to downtown Tulsa. Berry soon began chartering planes for Tulsa’s increasingly wealthy oilmen.

One of the wealthiest men in Greenwood (and the entire country) at the time was J.B. Stradford. His largest enterprise was the Stradford Hotel, which was the largest Black-owned hotel in the United States at the time. It housed 54 suites, a gambling hall, dining room, saloon, pool hall, and barbershop. Stradford had built his hotel to be equal in luxury to the finer hotels in white Tulsa, and it stood as the monument to Greenwood’s rising success,
valued at $75,000, or about $2.5 million today. All of this prosperity would be wiped out in what is believed to be the worst incident of racial violence in American history.

Violence and Devastation
In spring 1921 racial tensions were running high in the highly segregated city. On May 30, a 19-year-old Black man named Dick Rowland entered an elevator in the Drexel Building, located on South Main Street in downtown Tulsa. The young white elevator operator, Sarah Page, screamed for reasons unknown (the most common explanation is that he stepped on her foot or tripped). Rowland fled the scene.

The next day, the Tulsa Tribune published an article titled “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator” and an editorial, “To Lynch Negro Tonight.” Rowland was arrested and taken to the courthouse to be tried. That evening, an incensed mob of white people assembled where Rowland was being held.

Rumors of lynching began to circulate throughout town and made their way to Greenwood. A group of Black men, including World War I veterans, went to the jail to protect Rowland. A struggle broke out as a white man tried to disarm one of them. A shot was fired, and chaos broke out.

Over the next several hours, white Tulsans, some armed by city officials and law enforcement, committed numerous acts of violence against Tulsa’s Black residents. Buildings were set ablaze, and unarmed people were shot at in
the streets. The mob’s bloodlust grew stronger through the night as rumors grew that Blacks were organizing a counterattack, with reinforcements recruited from nearby towns with large African American populations.

As dawn broke on June 1, thousands of whites poured into the Greenwood District, looting and burning homes and businesses over the entire 35-block area. Firefighters and law enforcement who arrived to help put out fires later testified that the mob had threatened them with guns and forced them to leave. Witnesses reported seeing airplanes flying overhead and dropping kerosene bombs from above.

According to Red Cross estimates, some 1,256 houses were burned; 215 others were looted. Two newspapers, a school, a library, a hospital, churches, hotels, stores, and many other Black-owned businesses were destroyed or damaged in the violence. More than 300 people died (some estimates claim more), while over 10,000 Greenwood residents had lost their homes.

By the time the National Guard arrived and Governor J.B.A. Robertson had declared martial law, shortly before noon on June 1, the violence was effectively over. Guardsmen put out fires and detained many Black Tulsans; by June 2, some 6,000 people were under armed guard at the local fairgrounds.

In the aftermath, insurance companies refused to pay Black citizens for the damages caused by the mob’s events. Law enforcement outlawed funerals at the time, so most who died in the violence were not given proper burials.

Gurley was not protected by his status that night. His hotel, businesses, and other properties were reduced to rubble. Rumored to have died in the massacre, he was later reported to have abandoned Greenwood after losing his fortune and relocated to Los Angeles.

Finding a Lost Legacy
Reports of the Tulsa massacre were intentionally omitted from American history until its hundredth anniversary neared. Stories of what happened in Tulsa during those 18 hours in 1921 began to resurface and generate interest in both the successes of Black Wall Street and the grief at its destruction.

In 2018 Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum began an investigation into locating the remains of the massacre victims (as of this writing, 12 people have been found; work is ongoing). As family members and descendants reckon with the painful anniversary, perhaps the work to uncover the true story can help bring a sense of closure, even 100 years after the massacre.

—Tucker Toole
The Death of Napoleon

Painted years after Bonaparte’s death, Charles de Steuben’s deathbed scene painstakingly re-creates the moment when both a man’s life and his tumultuous era drew to a close.

Napoleon Bonaparte died on May 5, 1821, on the remote South Atlantic island of St. Helena. To the British, Dutch, and Prussian coalition who had exiled him there in 1815, he was a despot, but to France, he was seen as a devotee of the Enlightenment.

In the decade following his demise, Napoleon’s image underwent a transformation in France. The monarchy had been restored, but by the late 1820s, it was growing unpopular. King Charles X was seen as a threat to the civil liberties established during the Napoleonic era. This mistrust revived Napoleon’s reputation and put him in a more heroic light.

Fascination with the French leader’s death led Charles de Steuben, a German-born Romantic painter living in Paris, to immortalize the event. Steuben’s painting depicts the moment of Napoleon’s death and seeks to capture the sense of awe in the room at the death of a man whose legendary career had begun in the French Revolution.

Napoleon declared himself France’s First Consul in 1799 and then emperor in 1804. For the next decade, he led France against a series of European coalitions during the Napoleonic Wars and expanded his empire throughout much of continental Europe before his defeat in 1814. He was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba, but he escaped and briefly reasserted control over France before a crushing final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Napoleon’s military prowess earned him the fear of his enemies, but his civil reforms in France brought him the respect of his people. The Napoleonic Code, introduced in 1804, replaced the existing patchwork of French laws with a unified national system built on the principles of the Enlightenment: universal male suffrage, property rights, equality (for men), and religious freedom.

Even in his final exile on St. Helena, Napoleon proved a magnetic presence. Passengers of ships docked to resupply would hurry to meet the great general.

He developed strong personal bonds with the coterie who had accompanied him into exile. Although some speculate that he was murdered, most agree that Napoleon’s death in 1821, at the age of 51, was the result of stomach cancer.

Hushed Grief

The son of an army officer, Charles de Steuben was born in 1788, his youth and artistic training coinciding with Napoleon’s rise to power. The portrayal of key moments in Napoleon’s dramatic military career would feature among some of Steuben’s best known works.

Using his high-level contacts among figures in Napoleon’s circle, Steuben

LONGWOOD HOUSE ON ST. HELENA WAS NAPOLEON’S RESIDENCE FROM 1815 UNTIL HIS DEATH ON MAY 5, 1821.
MARK PHILLIPS/ALAMY

THE DEATH OF NAPOLEON
PAINTED BY CHARLES DE STEUBEN.
THE NAPOLEON MUSEUM, ARENENBERG PALACE, SWITZERLAND

W O R K  O F  A R T
interviewed and sketched many of the people who had been present when Napoleon died at Longwood House on St. Helena. Painstakingly researching the room’s furniture and layout, he painted a carefully composed scene of hushed grief. Notable among the figures are Gen. Henri Bertrand, who loyally followed Napoleon into exile; Bertrand’s wife, Fanny; and their children, of whom Napoleon had become very fond.

The best known version of “The Death of Napoleon” was completed in 1828. French writer Stendhal considered it “a masterpiece of expression.” In 1830 the installation of a more liberal monarchy in France further boosted admiration of Napoleon, who suddenly became a wildly popular figure in theater, art, and music. This fervor led to the diffusion of Steuben’s deathbed scene in the form of engravings throughout Europe in the 1830s.

The French author François-René de Chateaubriand wrote that Napoleon possessed “the mightiest breath of life to ever animate human clay,” a grandeur of vision that permeates Steuben’s masterpiece of historical reconstruction. It hangs today in the Napoleon Museum at the Arenenberg Palace in Switzerland, the former residence of Napoleon’s stepdaughter, Hortense.

—Toby Saul

**HOLDING VIGIL**

Depicted at Napoleon’s bedside during his final moments are François Carlo Antommarchi, who served as Napoleon’s physician; Henri-Gratien Bertrand, one of Napoleon’s most loyal generals, who was with him during his first exile; Bertrand’s wife, Fanny; and their children, Hortense and Henry, while the Bertrands’ youngest child Arthur (born on St. Helena, and a favorite of Napoleon) peeks over the far side of the bed; Jacques Chandelier, Napoleon’s chef, bows his head at the bedside; Charles Tristan, marquis de Monthonlon, one of Napoleon’s generals who followed him into exile; and Capt. William Crokat, the British officer who formally transmitted news of the event to Europe.
The Wedding Cake: A Royal Tradition

Although baked goods had been part of nuptial feasts for centuries, Queen Victoria’s snow-white cake for her 1840 wedding took the ceremony to new heights, inspiring a sweet new custom for future brides and grooms.

Layers of cake, each one ornately decorated with piped icing and stacked atop each other, is a staple of many modern weddings. The moment when the newlyweds cut their first slice of wedding cake is a popular photo op, a tradition that goes back to British royalty. By the 19th century cake at wedding celebrations was nothing new; it had been a part of the marriage ceremony since ancient times. The Romans crumbled a cereal cake over the bride’s head, and in medieval England the bride and groom would kiss over a confection made of small, stacked buns.

The 1840 wedding of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha took this old tradition and turned it into something new. Their cake was big: three tiers of English plum cake that stood 14 inches tall, measured nearly 10 feet across, and weighed 300 pounds.

Standing Tall

The height of Queen Victoria’s cake was a novelty: Most traditional English cakes were one layer at that time. Food historians believe that the queen wanted her cake to reflect a French influence, which had become popular in England. The origins of the high-rise cake go back to prerevolutionary France, when chefs began cooking ever more ornamentally and vertically. After the revolution, fancy confectioners and pâtissiers left France for England, where they and their craft were embraced by the British upper classes.

Some have speculated that these taller cakes were made in the early 18th century by a London baker, inspired to re-create the steeple of St. Bride’s Church designed by the architect Christopher Wren. In his book Wedding Cakes and Cultural History, Simon R. Charsley casts doubt on that idea: “It Anglicizes the history of the vertical cake, placing its origin . . . before the influx of continental confectioners at the end of the 18th century.”

Adding to the spectacle (and height) was one of the world’s first cake toppers. Victoria and Albert’s cake featured several miniature statues, including Britannia, a female personification of Great Britain, on top, blessing the royal couple clad in Roman costume. It soon became popular for small figurines of a bride and groom to appear on top of commoners’ cakes.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Victoria’s wedding cake was the use of pure white royal icing to cover the entire confection. Refined white sugar, which is used to create the iconic look, was very expensive in the 1840s, making the wedding cake a true statement piece. The cake caused a sensation. A detailed print of it reportedly hung in windows around London before the ceremony. Newspapers published images of Victoria’s cake—and every royal wedding cake thereafter—giving everyone a glimpse into the feast.

By the late 19th century, however,
thanks to the drop in sugar prices, tiered cakes with royal icing caught on among a middle class eager to emulate royal splendor on a humbler scale.

**Growing Big**

If commoners were marrying with tiered cakes, royal wedding cakes had to get taller if they were still to convey authority and prestige. Pastry chefs set new royal standards when Queen Victoria’s eldest child, Princess Victoria, married Prince Frederick William of Prussia in 1858. They created a triple-layer columned cake that stood more than six feet tall. When Prince George (later King George V) married in 1893, his wedding cake also featured columns, but supported three tiers and reached a height of seven feet. Not to be outdone, Lady Elizabeth (bride of the future King George VI) had a 10-foot-tall, nine-tiered cake.

Cakes have continued to be a popular part of a royal wedding’s spectacle, but the trend spread to the masses, making it more than a central prop in a dramatic celebration of the monarchy and state power.

—Inés Antón
SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN

JERUSALEM MEETS SHEBA
The story of King Solomon meeting the Queen of Sheba inspired a rich literary tradition across Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts. The geographic origins of the story still puzzle scholars to this day.
The story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba appears in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles: An unnamed queen from Sheba travels to Jerusalem bearing gold, jewels, and spices. A seeker of knowledge, the queen has a special interest in the reputedly wise Solomon and tests him with some “hard questions.” Solomon meets the challenge and lavishes hospitality on the queen, who reciprocates with gifts.

“Never again were so many spices brought in as those the Queen of Sheba gave to Solomon.” Later, she tells him: “In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard” (1 Kings 10:7).

This biblical encounter has had an enormous impact on the popular imagination, projecting themes of beauty, wealth, power, exoticism, intrigue, magic, and love. The queen has inspired Turkish and Persian miniatures, European painting and music, and the 1959 Hollywood epic Solomon and Sheba, with Yul Brynner as the wise king and Gina Lollobrigida as his match.

These works had plenty of material to work with since a rich literary tradition grew out of the original biblical story. An account of the encounter is tantalizingly referenced by the Roman Jewish author Flavius Josephus in the first century A.D. Composed in the seventh century, the Quran features a more elaborate
Searching for Sheba

TWO BOOKS IN THE BIBLE (Kings and Chronicles) feature a story about the Queen of Sheba traveling to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon. Archaeologists agree on where ancient Jerusalem was, but the location of Sheba has yet to be determined. Efforts have focused on the ancient kingdoms of Saba in southern Arabia (modern Yemen) and Aksum (modern Ethiopia) in the Horn of Africa. Lying at the crossroads of trading routes between Egypt, Arabia, and Persia, the Sabaean culture flourished until the fourth century B.C., when the Ma'in, Qataban, and Nabataean peoples emerged as competing powers. The Aksum theory is supported by the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus’ reference to the Queen of Sheba as the ‘Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia.’ The problem that both theories pose to historians, however, is that the heyday of both of these kingdoms does not align with the 10th-century B.C. reign of King Solomon.

THE ANTIQUITIES
The Antiquities of the Jews by Flavius Josephus was written in A.D. 93. It refers to the queen as a ruler with African origins.

QURAN
Composed in the seventh century, Islam's sacred scripture incorporates new elements into the meeting of Solomon and the queen.

TARGUM SHENI
The seventh- to eighth-century Jewish account of the meeting is similar to the Quran. Scholars are unsure which influenced which.

KEBRA NAGAST
The 14th-century text recounts how the queen is Ethiopian. Her son with Solomon founds Ethiopia’s Solomonic dynasty.
version of the story, as does Jewish rabbinic literature. The Kebra Nagast, a 14th-century Ethiopian Christian epic, connects the Queen of Sheba with the founding of Ethiopia itself. According to this text, ancient Sheba is in Ethiopia. The queen and Solomon have a son who founds a dynasty that would rule Ethiopia until its last descendant, Haile Selassie, died in 1975.

To date no archaeological evidence has been found to indicate definitively who the queen was and from where she came. She could be a composite of historical figures or entirely legendary. Even the location of Sheba itself is hotly debated among scholars. Some place it in Ethiopia, while others place it in the ancient kingdom of Saba in present-day Yemen.

Riches and Riddles
In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba is depicted as smart, independent, challenging, and respectful. Flavius Josephus, author of the first-century A.D. history The Antiquities of the Jews, described Sheba as “inquisitive into philosophy and on that and on other accounts also was to be admired.”

By the time the story was retold in the Targum Sheni, a seventh- to eighth-century A.D. Jewish text, the story had amassed more details. The details of the meeting are similar, but the story begins with a talking hoopoe, a crested bird native to the region. The bird informs Solomon that the land of Sheba is the only one on Earth not subject to his power. Solomon sends the hoopoe to Sheba with a letter urging the queen to submit to him. She responds by sending back a fleet “with all the ships of the sea” loaded with precious gifts, including 6,000 young men—all the same height, all dressed in purple, and all born at the same time on the same day. They deliver a message from the queen announcing that she will travel to Jerusalem. On arrival, the queen presents Solomon with three riddles, which he promptly solves. This exchange reveals her knowledge and diplomatic skill as the riddles are more than a game to her. They are a way for her to size up Solomon.

Some scholars argue the Quran’s version of the story borrows from the Targum Sheni. However, there is historical uncertainty as to exactly when the Targum Sheni was written.
MUCH OF THE BIBLICAL Book of Kings celebrates the ways in which Solomon serves the god of Israel. Perhaps the best known is his construction of the First Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. In the Bible, Solomon says: “Because of the wars waged against my father David... he could not build a temple for the name of the Lord his God until the Lord put his enemies under his feet” (1 Kings 5:3). Solomon begins work on the temple in the fourth year of his reign. Passages in the Book of Kings go into great detail about the structure’s design and dimensions, as well as its building materials: cedar and cypress timber from Lebanon, quarried stone from the hills surrounding Jerusalem, and gold to adorn the inner sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant would rest. To date, no convincing archaeological evidence has been found of Solomon’s Temple, sacked and then destroyed by the Babylonians around 587 B.C. The Second Temple, built circa 515 B.C. after the Hebrews returned from exile in Babylon, was a modest structure, but more than four centuries later, Judaean king Herod the Great would entirely rebuild and enlarge the temple. It stood until 70 B.C., when it was destroyed during the Roman siege of Jerusalem.
It may, in fact, postdate the seventh-century composition of the Quran, in which case the Islamic text could have influenced the Jewish text, and not the other way around.

In the Quran, the queen is unnamed, but contemporary Arabic sources call her Bilqis. In the Islamic version, Suleiman (Solomon) believes in Allah, is known for his wisdom, and can understand the language of the trees and animals. Suleiman also controls an army of “jinn (magical spirits) and men and birds.” Like the Jewish text, the story begins with a bird, which brings news to Suleiman from the far off land of Sheba, where the powerful Bilqis rules and people worship the sun. The bird says: “I found her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of Allah,” prompting Suleiman to send a letter in which he urges the queen to convert to Islam. In this version of the story, Suleiman rejects the queen’s emissaries and rich gifts. In contrast to the Bible and the Targum Sheni, it is Suleiman who tests the queen’s intellect. While she is traveling to visit him, the king sends a jinn to steal her throne and bring it to Jerusalem. There he disguises the throne in order to see if the queen will realize it is hers. She does, so Suleiman welcomes her to his impressive palace.

Suleiman shows the queen a floor made of glass. When she sees it, she thinks it is a pool of water, so she lifts her skirts to avoid getting them wet. Her legs are revealed, and she does not shave them. Modern feminist commentators have interpreted this attribute as a sign that power has made her unfeminine. This episode also appears in the Targum Sheni: “Your beauty is the beauty of women, but your hair is the hair of men,” Solomon tells her.

In Jewish literature, the Queen of Sheba is also identified with Lilith, an ancient demonic figure. Likewise, in the Quranic text, a jinn warns Suleiman about the queen’s demonic side, fearing the king might be tempted by her beauty. Instead, the queen submits to Solomon and commits herself to “Allah, the Lord of all worlds.”

Mother of a Nation
In the 14th century, in the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa—present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti—the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba took on a new meaning. In this version of the tale, the queen has a name: Makeda. This new version melded a wealth of literary and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions to create something new.

Christianity became the religion of the kingdom of Aksum (located in modern Ethiopia) in the mid-500s A.D. It arrived, along with Jewish influences, by way of migration and trade with northern people, including the Coptic Christians of Egypt. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba emerged in writing in 1321 in the Kebra Nagast, or Glory of the Kings, of Ethiopia. Attributed to Is’haq Neburä -Id, the work is divided into 117 chapters, described by Ethiopian scholar Edward Ullendorff as “a gigantic conflation of legendary cycles.” It would be the text that unified Ethiopian culture for centuries.

The Kebra Nagast cites references to the Queen of Sheba in the New Testament, notably the Gospel of Matthew: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon
ARCHAEOLOGY has been searching for evidence to complement the descriptions of King Solomon’s building campaigns as described in the Book of Kings. One place scholars have looked is in northern Israel. Tel Megiddo’s age makes it a good candidate. It is an ancient site whose earliest levels date to the Bronze Age (ca 3300-1200 B.C.) when Megiddo was an important city-state well positioned on trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. A passage in the Book of Kings refers to Solomon accumulating “fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem” (1 Kings 10:26). In 1924 British archaeologist P.L.O. Guy found evidence of stables at Tel Megiddo and telegraphed: “Believe have found Solomon’s stables.” More recent analysis puts the stables about a century after Solomon, most likely during the reign of Ahab, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel in the ninth century B.C. Megiddo is at the center of many traditions: In the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, it is called “Armageddon,” the place where the apocalypse will begin.

A TUNNEL (RIGHT) BUILT IN THE NINTH CENTURY B.C. LEADS FROM INSIDE MEGIDDO TO A SPRING OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS.
FIT FOR A QUEEN?
The circa 6th-century A.D. ruins of Dongar Palace, located within the lands of the ancient kingdom of Aksum in northern Ethiopia, are known popularly as the Queen of Sheba’s Palace.
is here” (Matthew 12:42). The epic goes on to relate how a wealthy merchant called Tamrin returns to Ethiopia having met King Solomon in Jerusalem. Tamrin tells Queen Makeda in great detail of Solomon’s prodigious wisdom and wealth. Intrigued by the merchant’s tale, Makeda travels to Jerusalem to meet the king herself. There, she discovers “how perfect he was in composure, and wise in understanding, and pleasant in graciousness, and commanding in stature.”

In turn, Solomon is captivated by Makeda’s beauty and tries to make her stay. He serves her a sumptuous banquet and swears not to make advances on her as long as she takes nothing from his house. When a thirsty Makeda wakes in the night and drinks some water, Solomon declares the oath broken and seduces her. Makeda returns to Ethiopia pregnant with Solomon’s child, a boy she names Menelik, meaning “son of the wise.” At age 20, he travels to Jerusalem to meet his father, who anoints him king of Ethiopia. This origin story became the foundation for the ruling Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia, which was founded around 1270 and ruled for more than seven centuries.

The author of the *Kebranagast*, according to Ullendorff, was the “redactor and interpreter of material which had long been known, but had not until then found a coordinating hand, an expository mind, and a great national need.” The result, he added, is “one of the most powerful and influential national sagas anywhere in the world.”

The *Kebranagast* offers a more positive portrayal of the queen than in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts. No mention is made of her demonic nature or hairy legs. The epic also claims that Menelik returned to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant, which Ethiopian tradition claims is stored in the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Aksum.

**Searching for Sheba**

The realm of Sheba remains lost to history. The two leading locations are the kingdom of Saba in modern Yemen and the ancient kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia. After more than a century of excavations by a host of archaeologists to find physical evidence of the existence of the queen, none yet has been found. One of the complicating factors is that the chronology...
DESERT RICHES
In the Yemeni desert rise the remains of ancient Marib, the site of the capital of the ancient kingdom of Saba. Flourishing in the eighth century B.C., Saba is believed by some to be the homeland of the Queen of Sheba.
attributed to Solomon, which most place around the 10th century B.C., does not line up with the prime of either Saba or Aksum.

Most Jewish sources and the Quran mention sites that clearly associate Sheba with Saba. The ancient city’s existence is amply supported by evidence. Assyrian texts speak about Arabian queens from the period of Saba’s greatness. The Sabaeans also sent ambassadors and gifts to the Assyrian court on diplomatic and commercial missions.

The kingdom grew rich off successful water management and trade in frankincense and myrrh, but it emerged as an international power only in the eighth century B.C., long after Solomon’s reign. Although the Book of Kings was written in the sixth century B.C., after the decline of Assyria, the Solomon story may represent an older story that reflects the geopolitical realities of the centuries before. With this in mind, the biblical archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, of Tel Aviv University, interprets the Solomon and Queen of Sheba story as support for Judah’s participation in Assyrian trade, against those who viewed it as a rash undertaking that would lead to idolatry. By inflating Solomon’s status as a great merchant blessed by God who is sought out by a powerful Arabian queen in the 10th century, the story’s authors wanted to legitimize “the participation of Judah as a vassal in the Assyrian economy.”

The Ethiopian theory has strong support in the form of first-century A.D. historian Flavius Josephus. He described Solomon’s guest as the “Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia,” which suggests an African origin. Historical links have been established between Ethiopia and Saba—the two kingdoms are just across the Red Sea from each other. In ancient times, southern Arabian traders, including those from Saba, made the short trip across the Red Sea to set up small settlements in the Ethiopian highlands. Intriguing though this association is, it does not resolve the chronology problem. Aksum was a flourishing Ethiopian kingdom from 100 B.C. to A.D. 700, many years after Solomon’s reign.

New scholarship about the queen and her origins are still emerging. Wendy Laura Belcher, professor of African literature at Princeton University, proposed that the queen might be from another culture entirely: the pre-Aksumite Ethiopian culture of Punt. Mentioned in Egyptian sources as early as the 15th century B.C., Punt provided Egypt with incense, spices, and gold—all commodities associated with the queen and her visit with Solomon.

Historians are divided as to the exact location of Punt but generally place it southeast of Egypt and north of the Horn of Africa. Finds of Egyptian goods in northern Ethiopia confirm the long-standing trade relationship between them, which would have provided Punt with considerable wealth—enough to attract the attention of a king like Solomon. As Belcher wrote, “if any queen was going to travel north to Israel in the tenth century, it would have been an African queen.”

Learn more

From Eden to Exile: Unraveling Mysteries of the Bible

Archaeology of the Bible: The Greatest Discoveries From Genesis to the Roman Era
Toward the end of his life, 19th-century French painter James Tissot painted numerous works on biblical themes, including the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.
SEARCHING IN SABA

In 1950 explorer Wendell Phillips led one of the first American expeditions to the lands of ancient Saba, that were then called the Aden Protectorate and are now Yemen. Searching for signs of the Queen of Sheba, Phillips’s team first excavated sites around the ancient city of Timna. They found exquisite alabaster objects and stelae but no sign of Sheba. Next Phillips negotiated access to the site of Marib, the capital of ancient Saba and its glorious Awwam Temple, a complex dedicated to the Sabaean moon god, Almaqah, but found no evidence of the elusive queen.

**Lions and Bulls**

Wendell Phillips (far left) poses with his most important discovery at Awwam, a votive bronze statue honoring the Sabaean lunar god, Almaqah. The figure is dressed in an animal skin (perhaps a lion), whose paws are visible here draped around the shoulders and hips. Other votive offerings found at the site were in the form of animals, including bulls, which were sacred to the moon god.
Words and Images

In his journal (left), Wendell Phillips made careful sketches and took detailed notes on Sabean inscriptions found in the Temple of Awwam. Phillips’s dig added hugely to historians’ understanding of pre-Islamic Yemen. Subsequent digs at Awwam have yielded hundreds of inscriptions in what is now known to be the earliest, and largest, temple in Arabia.

SAUL LOEB/GETTY IMAGES
AFS/M/GETTY IMAGES
AKG/ALBUM
In the second year of the Peloponnesian War, an epidemic ripped through Athens, killing tens of thousands and ending the city’s Golden Age.

CÉSAR SIERRA MARTÍN
PLAGUE IN ANTIQUITY

This oil painting (ca 1652) by Michael Sweerts is called “Plague in an Ancient City,” and some scholars interpret it as a depiction of the Athenian plague that broke out in 430 B.C. Others, however, think it is a more general representation.

CHRISTIE'S IMAGES/SCALA, FLORENCE
Two of the most powerful city-states in ancient Greece—Sparta and Athens—went to war in 431 B.C. Tensions between the two had been simmering for decades before boiling over into war. Occupying the lands of the Peloponnese (mainland Greece’s southernmost peninsula), Sparta enacted a land-based strategy, relying on their disciplined hoplites to defeat the Athenians in the open field. When Spartan troops would invade Attica (the peninsula where Athens and its allies were located), Athenians responded with naval attacks on politically sensitive points in the Peloponnese. Rural populations in Attica would be forced to take refuge within Athens’s city walls when Sparta invaded.

The Peloponnesian War would end by fundamentally shifting power in the Mediterranean, but neither Athens’s navy nor Sparta’s soldiers could claim to be the determining factor of the conflict. That honor belongs to an event that nobody could have predicted or planned for: the plague of Athens, which broke out in the war’s second year. A medical mystery to this day, this ancient epidemic would be the most influential factor to shape the war and decide which city-state would be the final victor.
429 B.C.
The plague continues to rage, and the Athenian leader Pericles and members of his family are infected. He dies that fall.

426 B.C.
The epidemic’s final wave breaks out in Athens. After nearly five years, up to a third of Athens’s population has died because of the plague.

CA 421 B.C.
Athens and Sparta strike a truce. Neither side is satisfied by the agreement, and hostilities will break out again in 418.

404 B.C.
The Peloponnesian War ends. Thucydides’ account of the conflict contains the most detailed historical record of the plague of Athens.

SACRED PERCH
Dedicated to Athena, patron goddess of Athens, the Parthenon overlooks the city from its perch on the Acropolis. The temple was finished in 432 B.C., shortly before the start of the Peloponnesian War.

HERMES IMAGES/AGE FOTOSTOCK
Outbreak
In spring 430 B.C. locals in Piraeus, the port area of Athens, began to fall ill with a disease no one had seen before. The malady spread quickly. Reports circulated of similar outbreaks on the island of Lemnos, in the north Aegean, and other locations.

In Piraeus, rumors spread that when the Spartans had arrived they had poisoned the wells there so that Athenians were sickened by drinking contaminated water. In a matter of weeks, the disease had spread to the heart of the city and was affecting people of all ages and backgrounds and in unprecedented proportions. The strategy of the Athenian leader Pericles to bring people from rural Attica into the walled city of Athens, only increased the rate of contagion. The illness, whatever it was, did not affect the Spartans to the same degree as the Athenians. In total, it is estimated that between 25 and 35 percent of the population of Athens would perish as a result of the plague when it ended five years later.

The main source of information about the epidemic comes from the historian Thucydides, who not only witnessed the events firsthand but survived the disease himself. In his History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides believes the plague originated in eastern Africa, in the lands of ancient Ethiopia (present-day Sudan). From there, the sickness traveled north to Egypt and Libya and east to the Persian Empire before reaching Greece.

Early in his account, Thucydides writes: “I shall give a statement of what it was like, which people can study in case it should ever attack again.” His descriptions chart how the disease progressed in its victims, from the first symptoms: “[P]eople in good health were all of a sudden attacked by heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath.”

Symptoms included “sneezing and hoarseness” before the disease attacked the chest, causing “a hard cough,” and then the stomach, where it triggered “discharges of bile,” “ineffectual retching,” and “violent spasms.” By this point the victim was in “very great distress.”

Thucydides describes the appearance of the patient’s skin: “reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers.” Sufferers...
CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

The Temple of Hephaestus was a pet project of Pericles. Building began around 450 B.C., but it would be more than 30 years before completion—partly due to the disruption of the Peloponnesian War.
powerless against the epidemic. “No remedy was found that could be used as a specific,” writes Thucydides, “for what did good in one case, did harm in another.” Regardless of the treatment given, he writes, “strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away.”

The contagious disease took a toll on those who cared for the sick. Physicians were badly hit early on. Indeed, anyone who nursed their sick loved ones paid a high price: “[I]f they ventured to do so, death was the consequence.” If they did not, the patients “perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse.” Thucydides notes that “it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience.”

Infection seems to have brought with it some immunity: “The same man was never attacked twice—never at least fatally.” Those who had been infected but had come through might experience a brief, euphoric feeling that they could survive anything. Even so, the plague, whatever it was, could leave those who recovered with severe aftereffects. Some people were “seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.” Many survivors suffered lasting damage to their fingers and toes, genitals, and eyes.

As well as its impact on health, the epidemic caused radical disruption to everyday life for Athenians. According to Thucydides, “the bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets.” Corpses piled up and, given the urgency of the situation, there was no time to perform even the most elementary rites when burying the dead. Several bodies would be cremated at the same time on the same pyre.

**Civil Unrest**
The plague had a radical effect on Athenian society. Traditional hierarchies were turned upside down: Wealthy citizens might see their livelihoods destroyed from one day to the next, while poor ones might get rich by appropriating a dead man’s assets. Thucydides describes how moral conventions were abandoned and people tended to live each day as if it were their last: “[A]s the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane.” Nobody feared justice, as death by...
YOUNG LIFE LOST

During construction work at Kerameikos metro station in Athens in 1994, archaeologists discovered a mass grave. Analysis revealed that the occupants were victims of the plague that devastated Athens between 430 and 425 B.C. Among the remains was the skull of an 11-year-old girl. Manolis J. Papagrigorakis, an orthodontic specialist, worked with a team of Swedish experts on sculpting a forensic reconstruction of her appearance. They named the girl Myrtis and gave her a hairstyle and clothing typical of that period in Greek history.

Myrtis appeared as part of an exhibition held in 2010 at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

A reconstruction of the face of an 11-year-old girl, (left) was based on a skull found in a mass grave (right). Buried Myrtis by a team of scholars, she probably died of plague in 430 B.C.

Left and Right: Argiris
plague seemed more imminent than any pending court case.

Spiritual concerns loomed large as well. Many believed something had angered the gods, who unleashed the disease as punishment. According to Thucydides, the elders spoke of an ancient oracle that had predicted a great epidemic would ensue after a “Dorian war”; the Spartans were Dorians, descendants of an ancient people who had settled in the Peloponnesian. It was also rumored that the Spartans had consulted the oracle at Delphi about the outcome of the war; through prophecy, the god Apollo had promised his support to Sparta. The Athenians themselves sought counsel of the gods and sent emissaries to Delphi and other sanctuaries for divine guidance on the epidemic.

Overwhelmed by the impact of the plague on their loved ones and on their way of life, Athenians began to turn against their leader, Pericles. While the move may have seemed practical at the time, with hindsight, his war strategy of encouraging the population to shelter from Sparta’s attacks within Athens’s city walls had worsened the sanitary conditions in the city. As Thucydides records:

An aggravation of the existing calamity was the influx from the country into the city, and this was especially felt by the new arrivals. As there were no houses to receive them, they had to be lodged at the hot season of the year in stifling cabins, where the mortality raged without restraint.

Pericles’ political rivals went further, accusing him of calling down the misfortune upon them through his determined support for the war. After more than a decade of often adoring support, Athens turned against Pericles: A heavy fine was levied against him, and he was not reelected as official strategist.

Having been thrown out of office for mishandling the epidemic, Pericles would then suffer the ravages of the disease firsthand. According to the historian Plutarch, Pericles’ eldest son, Xanthippus, who had a rocky relationship with his father, succumbed to the plague, as did Pericles’ sister shortly after. His second son, Paralus, also fell ill and died, a tragedy that ended up breaking the legendary self-control of Pericles, who died from the plague himself in fall 429 B.C.
DIVINE WISDOM
As an epidemic ravaged the city, Athens looked to the gods for help and sent delegations to the oracle in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The colonnade standing at the site today dates to the fourth century B.C.
The epidemic greatly weakened Athens and brought an end to its Golden Age. By the time the plague ended around 425 B.C., it is estimated that nearly a third of the city’s people died, with between 75,000 to 100,000 lives lost. Sparta and Athens would strike a truce around 421 B.C. Sparta would ultimately win the Peloponnesian War, destroying the Athenian fleet at sea in 405.

Mystery Malady

Historians have still not identified the epidemic’s exact source. Because of Thucydides’ use of the word “plague,” some have hypothesized that it was an outbreak of the bubonic plague, cause of the Black Death in the 14th century. However, close reading of Thucydides shows no mention of the Black Death’s most notorious symptoms: the “buboes,” the swollen lymph nodes that blackened and sometimes burst.

Over time, scholars have proposed several culprits, bacterial and viral, including typhus, cholera, influenza, smallpox, and measles. As research tools have become more sophisticated, new theories have emerged.

In 1994 a mass grave dating to 430-420 B.C. was identified. Within it were 150 bodies that appeared to have been hastily buried. A team of researchers led by Manolis J. Papagrigorakis analyzed DNA from the dental pulp of three individuals. Publishing their results in 2006, they found the presence of a pathogen with a 93 percent similarity to typhoid fever. Other scholars, however, have challenged the theory that the plague was caused by that illness because typhoid was common at the time. Thucydides’ account is of an ailment the likes of which had never been seen before in ancient Greece, a so-called virgin soil epidemic.

Many of Thucydides’ symptoms match those of Ebola. Unlike illnesses of bacterial origin (like typhoid or bubonic plague), finding genetic evidence of viruses like Ebola or measles is more challenging. To identify them, geneticists must study RNA, which is more unstable than DNA and degrades more easily over time. Finding a viable sample from fifth-century B.C. Athens is very unlikely, so if the plague of Athens was caused by a virus, its precise identity will remain a mystery for now.

CÉSAR SIERRA MARTÍN TEACHES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA, SPAIN.
FATHER'S GRIEF
Pericles turns away from the sight of his son, a victim of the plague of Athens, in this 19th-century painting by François-Nicolas Chiffliart. National School of Fine Arts, Paris

ENSBA/RMN-GRAND PALAIS
BATTLE READY

Thousands of life-size terra-cotta soldiers stand in Pit 1, the largest repository of figurines at the third-century B.C. funerary complex of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, near Xi’an, China. Discovered in the 1970s, the terra-cotta army was created 2,200 years ago to protect China’s first emperor in the afterlife.

OLEKSIY MAKSYMENKO/ALAMY/CORDON PRESS
The first emperor of China ordered the construction of a monumental mausoleum, guarded by a giant underground army formed by thousands of soldiers.

MARCOS MARTINÓN-TORRES
The land belonging to farmer Yang Zhifa in eastern China was covered by fruitful orchards of persimmon and pomegranate trees. In 1974, while digging a well, his spade struck something unexpected in the soil: a man’s head.

On closer inspection, Yang saw that the object was clay, not bone. He alerted the local authorities, and over the months that followed, Chinese archaeologists made an astonishing discovery. Under Yang’s peaceful orchards lay a man-made army: thousands of life-size terra-cotta soldiers and hundreds of sculpted horses, along with bronze carriages and weapons.

The figures were unearthed less than a mile to the east of the third-century B.C. resting place of Qin Shi Huangdi, China’s first emperor and one of the most important figures in its history. Today a UNESCO World Heritage site that attracts millions of visitors every year, the complex—including not only the vast terra-cotta army but also the tombs of real people—is regarded as the biggest funerary complex in the world, extending more than 25 square miles.

Four pits have so far been excavated: The first pit—by far the biggest—contains the infantry; the second pit contains archers, chariots, and cavalry, and perhaps represents an encampment. The third pit, much smaller, contains high-ranking officials, and the fourth one is empty (some think the emperor died before its contents were completed).

More than 2,000 warriors have been recovered to date, but that’s just a fraction of the army. The total number is believed to be around 8,000, and archaeologists suspect more pits still lie undiscovered. Once painted in vivid colors, the figures represent numerous military occupations and ranks and display a variety of different facial features and costumes. The vast resources and manual labor required to manufacture them 2,200 years ago has made them a global icon of the military and artistic achievement of the Qin dynasty.

Unity and Tyranny
The future emperor was born Zhao Zheng in 259 B.C. At age 13 he became king of the province of Qin. By 221 B.C. he had conquered several other provinces and proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huangdi (“the First August Emperor of Qin”). His short reign was marked by major advances in centralizing power as well as acts of tyranny. He standardized writing, weights and measures, and monetary and legal systems. During his reign, building the Great Wall began. The first emperor also won notoriety for burning books and persecuting intellectuals.

### The Brief Qin Dynasty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>221 B.C.</td>
<td>Qin Shi Huangdi becomes the first emperor of China after defeating rival kingdoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>215 B.C.</td>
<td>A wall is begun, linking northern defensive fortresses, the origin of the Great Wall of China.</td>
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<tr>
<td>213 B.C.</td>
<td>The emperor orders the burning of classical books and has Confucian scholars executed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>210 B.C.</td>
<td>Qin Shi Huangdi dies and is buried in the Xi'an mausoleum near the underground terra-cotta army.</td>
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<tr>
<td>206 B.C.</td>
<td>Beset with internal crises, the Qin dynasty collapses. The new Han dynasty desecrates the Xi'an monument.</td>
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BURNED AND BURIED
An 18th-century painted album leaf depicts events chronicled by second-century B.C. historian Sima Qian, in which Qin Shi Huangdi burned Confucian texts and hurled scholars into a pit. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

GRANGER/AURIMAGES
The enormous mausoleum he built for himself near Xi’an speaks of the resources at his disposal: Sources say Qin Shi Huangdi employed hundreds of thousands to build the complex and its contents. He also altered the landscape for his funerary complex: Courses of rivers had to be altered. Digging the pits for the figures would have required an army of laborers to carry away the displaced soil.

The production of the figurines is a marvel of both logistics and artistry: Many warriors stand as tall as six feet and weigh about 450 pounds. Their beauty becomes more impressive up close, revealing the details of their hairstyles, their facial features, the realistic folds of their clothing, and the remnants of the pigments once used in their coloring. Scholars have long debated as to the methods behind their creation and have done hands-on experiments to try to reverse engineer the process.

The feat is even more impressive in the context of Qin Shi Huangdi’s reign. Even assuming that he had ordered its construction before unifying China and proclaiming himself emperor in 221 B.C., there were only a few years to complete the work before his death, in 210 B.C. During his reign, China was a mosaic of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. The idea of a centralized and authoritarian political power giving orders from a remote capital through civil servants was still alien and highly difficult to communicate and implement.

Seeking Immortality
The first emperor regarded himself as the ruler of an immense territory and a monarch who unified the world of the spirits. The written sources explain that Qin Shi Huangdi sought potions to extend his life and dispatched envoys to look for such elixirs. His great tomb is a testament to the quest of immortality, in that this great monument would remind future generations of his greatness.

Archaeologists have yet to excavate the emperor’s burial mound itself. To create it, workers excavated to a depth of 100 feet, then constructed a sepulchre before covering it with a pyramid-shaped mound standing more than 165 feet high. Much speculation surrounds what might be inside. China’s second-century B.C. historian Sima Qian recorded that the emperor’s remains might be protected by rivers of mercury and traps to stop intruders.

Both the mausoleum’s design and the materials used reveal the intention of surrounding himself with what he needed in the afterlife. Its construction was intended to reinforce his power while alive, an extraordinary display of the supremacy of a new sovereign, capable of mobilizing all the materials, workers, and knowledge needed to create something on an unparalleled scale and splendor.

News about this ostentatious project probably resonated all the way to the outer limits of Qin China. It contributed to the mystic aura of an emperor so rich and powerful he could create a life-size model army, drawn up and ready for all eternity, facing east toward the territories that he had so spectacularly conquered.
Since the 1974 discovery of the funerary complex of Qin Shi Huangdi, excavation has continued through the present day. Site worker Yang Jingyi (above) cleans away mud from a terra-cotta warrior. Bright colors (below) can still be seen on a soldier in the ground. Exposure to the air damages these pigments, so archaeologists are working to conserve the 2,200-year-old hues.
METHODS OF MASS PRODUCTION

HOW WAS IT POSSIBLE to bring together the raw materials, the technical know-how, and the labor to build thousands of life-size soldiers in the third century B.C.? Producing the terra-cotta army required a standardized mass-production system, along with highly efficient project management. Reverse engineering studies carried out by a team of archaeologists (including the author of this article) have attempted to re-create how these artifacts were made, based on their scientific analysis. They have proposed that the labor force was organized in relatively small teams, working in parallel to produce separate pieces.

The warriors were not produced and assembled in one workshop; instead, separate groups of artisans, each headed by a master, assembled the warriors one by one, which, once painted, would be taken down to the pits. Likewise, the weapons that the figures originally held were likely made in different armories, collected, and then “assigned” to their figure. The setting up and coordinating of numerous workshops requires huge investment, but it is better placed to face any unexpected complications: If there is a setback, a new team could be activated to resolve the issue.

1 KNEADING ▲
The terra-cotta warriors were made from earth sourced around the burial sight. First, workers would knead the clay until it was soft and pliable.

2 SHAPING ▼
Once the clay was ready, it was proportioned and shaped for use in molds.

3 CASTING ▲
Shaped clay was placed in molds to make the warriors’ arms, legs, and feet. Precise proportions kept the structures uniform.
4 SCULPTING THE BODY
Clay coils formed the foundation of the torso, which was placed on a pair of legs. Details on the torso, such as armor and clothing, were then sculpted, and the arms added.

5 FORMING THE HEAD
The warriors’ heads were made using molds, and individual elements were added after casting. Artists would create the mouth, ears, eyebrows, facial hair, and headdresses (which varied according to the figure’s rank).

6 FIRING
The body and head were then fired separately in big kilns. It is possible that loess caves, common in this region of China, were used for this process.

7 ASSEMBLING
After firing, the pieces were put together to form a complete warrior, who would then receive a weapon: a crossbow, bow, spear, or sword.

8 LACQUERING
The entire figure was then covered with a layer of lacquer to protect the statue and its weapons.

9 PAINTING
Vibrant colors were added in the last step. Lacquer would only remain visible in the shoes, armor, and hair.
Pit 1 is the largest repository of figurines in Qin Shi Huangdi’s mausoleum. Since their discovery in 1974, the figures at the front have been restored, while the toppled figures to the rear await their turn. So far, only a fraction of the vast funerary complex has been excavated, and researchers believe many other unexcavated pits remain.
IT IS OFTEN SAID of Qin Shi Huangdi’s terra-cotta army that no two figures are exactly the same. While it is perhaps difficult to believe that the thousands of warriors are all portraits of individuals, it is clear that great effort was expended in giving the figures unique features. Some investigators believe that the producers worked with a set range of different appearances, which, when mixed together, combined to give an impression of individuality. Although millions of tourists who visit annually see these thousands of faces ranged before them as an unforgettable spectacle, these figures were not created for the eyes of the living. They are warriors for the afterlife. The modern visitor’s visual experience, overlooking endless rows of soldiers, is a privilege that even the

NOT MEANT FOR THE SIGHT OF MORTALS

HAIR MAKES THE MAN
The warriors provide detailed information about the composition of the Chinese army in the third century B.C. Headdresses and hairstyles help to distinguish them. Above, 1 a low-ranking soldier wears his hair tied in a topknot; 2 a heavy infantry soldier has slicked down hair, parted in the middle; 3 a cavalryman wears a helmet; and 4 a general’s high status is reflected in his elaborate headdress.
emperor himself might not have experienced. After placing the groups of figures in their formations, these passages were covered with large wooden beams, sealed with reed mats, and buried under tons of soil. Despite Qin Shi Huangdi’s desire for immortality, the monumental complex faced danger from the outset. Shortly after the emperor’s death, the Qin dynasty fell apart, to be replaced by the Han. In the turmoil of that transition, there is evidence that the pits were damaged by flooding and fire.
WORTH THEIR METTLE

Not all the forces of Qin Shi Huangdi's third-century B.C. army were made entirely of clay. Under a bronze umbrella, a driver steers this magnificent wooden and bronze open chariot, drawn by four bronze horses. It is one of two carriage sculptures unearthed in 1980 near the emperor's burial mound.

PANORAMA MEDIA/AGE FOTOSTOCK
The Need

Chariot racing enthralled crowds across the Roman Empire,

Chariot Racing in Rome

The Need

Chariot racing enthralled crowds across the Roman Empire,
who's peoples became obsessed with the fastest sport on two wheels.

THE INSIDE TRACK
The thrill and danger of a chariot race in Rome’s Circus Maximus is captured here in Alexander von Wagner’s 1882 painting. Manchester Art Gallery, England

DAVID ÁLVAREZ
FOR SPEED

whose peoples became obsessed with the fastest sport on two wheels.
Race Through Time

366 B.C.
The Ludi Romani (Roman Games), comprising chariot racing and other activities, become an annual event sponsored by the state.

ca 50 B.C.
Julius Caesar builds Rome’s Circus Maximus, further boosting the popularity of chariot racing in the city.

ca A.D. 68-95
The charioteer Scorpus rises to wealth and fame with thousands of victories on the racecourse before dying at age 27.

98-117
The Circus Maximus is renovated in stone and enlarged as part of Emperor Trajan’s massive rebuilding program in Rome.

324
Emperor Constantine I begins his building program in Constantinople, including a renovation of the city’s third-century hippodrome.

532
Mass rioting by chariot fans in Constantinople leads to a bloody crackdown by Justinian I. The passion for races begins to decline.

549
The last official chariot race is held at the Circus Maximus in Rome, which is now under the rule of the Germanic Ostrogoth kings.

T
hundering hooves, spinning wheels, a cheering crowd: Envisioning an ancient Roman chariot race is easy, but many 21st-century notions of the sport come from the writings of the 19th. Adapted several times for the big screen (the 1959 film is perhaps the best known), the 1880 novel Ben-Hur climaxes with a thrilling chariot race. American author Lew Wallace meticulously researched classic texts to make his book as authentic as possible, but his passion for chariot racing comes shining through:

Can we accept the saying, then these latter days, so tame in pastime and dull in sports, have scarcely anything to compare to the spectacle . . . Let the reader try to fancy it; let him first look down upon the arena, and see it glistening . . . let him then, in this perfect field, see the chariots, light of wheel, very graceful, and ornate . . . let him see the drivers—in their right hands goads . . . in their left hands held in careful separation, and high . . . the reins . . . let him see the fours, chosen for beauty as well as speed . . .
ONE OF ROME’S VIOLENT founding myths, recounted by first-century historian Livy, centers on how Rome’s legendary founder, Romulus, came up with a plan to increase the city’s female population by abducting women from a neighboring tribe, the Sabines. Romulus invited the Sabine people to attend a festival, in which chariot racing would be part of the festivities. The lure worked, and dozens of women were seized by the Romans.

Wallace adored chariot racing, but ancient Rome’s relationship to it was more complicated. The spectacle, as described by Wallace centuries later, was indeed intoxicating, but some Roman elites looked upon racing with disapproval. These same elites funded the construction of massive venues for racing, such as the Circus Maximus in Rome and the Hippodrome in Constantinople. Chariot racing’s popularity only grew as the Roman Empire expanded. New stadiums were built in other cities, and racing became an obsession there.

Games for the Gods
In the first century B.C., the poet Ovid, famous in his time for writing scandalous verse, used the racecourse as an arena for passion as well as sport. Book 3 of Ovid’s Amores (16 B.C.), describes an incident at the races, where a young woman is waiting for the race to start. The narrator explains to her his motive for being there: “You are looking at the race, I am looking at you; we’ll both see what delights us, and both feast our eyes.” Ovid’s verse, set in Rome’s Circus Maximus, compares the passions excited by racing with those aroused by the opposite sex. In Ovid’s time, competitive charioteering was popular and profane.

Chariot racing’s historic roots, however, tap deep into the sacred beliefs of ancient Greece, whose games—such as the Olympic and the Pythian events—were not considered entertainment. They were holy activities and part of solemn religious rites. The purpose of these events, which included chariot racing, was to please the gods, either through sacrifice or in presenting bodily skill as an offering in itself. Homer’s epic The Iliad features chariot races as part of the funeral games ordered by the mourning Achilles in honor of his fallen
companion, Patroclus. The word “hippodrome” also comes from the Greek, with hippo meaning “horses” and dromos meaning “path.”

Games likewise formed an important religious role in the emerging power of Rome. Chariot racing was incorporated into the early Ludi Romani, the games held in honor of the chief Roman god, Jupiter Optimus Maximus. In 366 B.C., the Ludi Romani became an annual event, sponsored by the state. As Rome’s military influence grew, generals began dedicating portions of their war booty to sponsor chariot races and other games. Arguably, it is at this stage that the spirit of chariot racing began to evolve into entertainment. Sponsorship by generals boosted the popularity of racing and other sports, so by the first century B.C., the games were associated with mass culture, power, and populism.

By the mid-first century B.C., racing had become a major Roman spectacle. Julius Caesar commissioned a magnificent new hippodrome, the Circus Maximus, in the valley below Rome’s Palatine Hill, an area that had long been used to stage horse races. Built around 50 B.C., this venue featured a track measuring about 1,700 by 260 feet, 12 starting gates (carceres) for chariots, a decorated barrier (spina) dividing the track, turning posts (metae) at each end, and lap markers in the shape of eggs and dolphins. Each marker would be turned when a section of a race was completed. Caesar’s circus could seat as many as 150,000 spectators, but when the venue was later expanded by Rome’s emperors, it could hold as many as 250,000.

**Team Colors**

Chariot racing was not the only athletic entertainment in ancient Rome. The *venationes* (killing of wild animals), gladiatorial fights, and mock naval battles were all popular attractions, for both the skill of the participants and the spectacle of the events. What seemed to set chariot racing apart from those other attractions was a strong sense of loyalty to a favorite team of charioteers.

Much like sports leagues today, Roman chariot racing had teams with legions of
devoted fans. The four factions—Red (Russata), White (Albata), Blue (Venata), and Green (Prasina)—existed during the republic and continued well into the empire. Third-century A.D. writer Tertullian recorded that the rivalry between Whites and Reds was the oldest. Their supporters would reinforce the sense of enmity between the two by associating White with winter and Red with summer. Teams could also be associated with divinities: White with the wind god Zephyr and Red with the war god Mars.

Roman chariot races were thrilling and short, but occasionally brutal. The race would begin with the dropping of a white handkerchief (mappa). In a standard race at the Circus Maximus, each team could enter three chariots, so when the mappa fell to the ground, a total of 12 horse-drawn vehicles might shoot out from the traps (carceres) in clouds of dust. There were variations in the equine makeup of a chariot team, some featured as many as seven horses, some as few as two (the biga). The quadriga, composed of four horses, was the most common configuration.

The aurigae, or drivers, would careen on their two-wheeled chariots to make the death-defying turn round the ends of the spina. The usual course was seven laps, run counterclockwise around the arena. Races lasted anywhere between 10 and 12 minutes. As many as 24 races could be run in a day, to the delight of fans. Their devotion to their team could even lead to cheating: There are accounts of spectators trying to sabotage the race by throwing tablets studded with nails onto the track.

Drivers and Horses
Charioteers and even their horses became superstars with devoted loyal followings. Perhaps

PASSIONATE FANS
Passionate fans tried to sabotage races by throwing tablets studded with nails onto the track.
A LASTING IMPRESSION

This aerial view of the site of the Circus Maximus at the foot of Palatine Hill in Rome shows that the spina that once divided the track is still clearly visible. Virtually no trace of the structure remains today.
the best known and wealthiest of his time was Scorpus, who drove for the Green faction in the first century A.D. Sources say he won more than 2,000 races before his death at age 27, most likely in one of the spectacular pileups that the Romans called *naufragia*, which means “shipwrecks.” A former slave, Scorpus purchased his freedom with his earnings.

When Scorpus died, the Roman poet Martial penned his eulogy:

> Oh! sad misfortune! that you, Scorpus, should be cut off in the flower of your youth, and be called so prematurely to harness the dusky steeds of Pluto. The chariot race was always shortened by your rapid driving; but O why should your own race have been so speedily run?

Pliny the Elder documented the deep grief felt by fans at the deaths of their favorite drivers. In his *Natural History*, Pliny wrote how “at the funeral of Felix the charioteer of the Reds one of his backers threw himself upon the pyre—a pitiful story.”

Horses also gained fame and adoration. In addition to celebrating Scorpus, Martial mentions the horses: “I am that Martial known to all nations and people ... I am not better known than the horse Andraemon.” Dedicated fans would know each horse’s lineage. The most successful would be honorably retired when the moment came, so that they could live out their last years in peace and procreate to continue their pedigree. Some even had funerary monuments dedicated to them, such as that raised to Spendidusa: “[F]ast as the wind, incomparable in your life, you now . . . dwell in the realm of Lethe.”

**Bread and Circuses**

A great deal of money and power was at stake in chariot racing. Senior public figures pumped money into the games in the hope it would increase their political standing. A central figure in the booming business aspect of the races by the first century A.D. was the *dominus factionum*, the entrepreneur in charge of a faction.
Chariot racing at the foot of Palatine Hill has a long tradition in Rome. Although no structural elements remain today, the great U-shaped circus dominated the city. Over a third of a mile long and nearly 500 feet wide, it was the Roman Empire’s biggest venue at the end of the fourth century A.D.

1 The carceres (traps)
Before each race began, the charioteers and their horses would take their places in one of these 12 boxes, which were arranged on either side of the main gate.

2 The spina (thorn)
This stone barrier ran longitudinally down the center of the arena and was decorated with fountains, shrines, columns, obelisks, and statues.

3 The cavea (stands)
The capacity of the Circus Maximus is unclear. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (late first century B.C.) wrote that it could hold 150,000, while Pliny the Elder (first century A.D.) claimed it held as many as 250,000.

4 The pulvinar (imperial box)
The imperial family and their guests sat here in a complex structure, built to resemble a temple. It was connected to Palatine Hill, where the emperor had his official residence.

5 The metae (pillars)
These three conical pillars stood at each end of the spina. Next to them, seven stone eggs were moved as lap-counters. Later, a parallel system was employed using seven bronze dolphins.
The huge sums of money could spark bitter, state-level disputes. In the early first century, a high-ranking official was accused of trying to delay payment of the cash prizes, which could range between 15,000 and 60,000 sesterces. His name was Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, whose son, Emperor Nero, would develop a singular passion for chariot racing and actually participate in races. On one occasion, Nero himself tried to pilot a chariot pulled by 10 horses. This was too much for him to handle. He was thrown, and severely injured, but managed to survive.

For all its popularity, chariot racing did have its critics. Long before Christian polemicists like Tertullian singled out the immorality of the racecourse, pre-Christian Romans expressed discomfort with the games in general. In a letter written in the early second century, Pliny the Younger writes of the fans at chariot races:

*There might be some reason for their enthusiasm if it was the speed of the horses or the skill of the drivers that was the attraction, but it is the racing-colors which they favour . . . Such is the influence and authority vested in one cheap tunic.*

For all the distaste they felt, influential Romans also knew that the races, and games in general, were interwoven into Roman state power. On taking the office of aedile in 69 B.C., the orator Cicero had to swear to uphold the games for the people of Rome. Later, in his treatise On Moral Duties (44 B.C.), however, he argued that the practice whereby rich rulers buy public favor through lavish entertainment is imprudent:

“gratifying to boys, and weak women, and slaves, and to free men who bear the nearest resemblance to slaves.”

The idea that the races, and games, were a tool for social control was most memorably expressed by the early second-century author Juvenal. In one of his satires, he writes about how easy it was for politicians to buy influence with voters, who “anxiously hope for just two things: bread and circuses.”

**1 Eros victorious**

A mosaic from Thugga (present-day Dougga, Tunisia) celebrates the winning charioteer Eros and his horses, whose names are recorded. Fourth century A.D. National Bardo Museum, Tunis

**2 The Blues triumph**

A charioteer dressed in blue holds the victory palm; to his right is the hortator, and in front of the horses the sparsor holds an amphora of water. Third century A.D. National Archaeological Museum, Madrid
Christianity and Chariots

As the Roman Empire grew larger, chariot racing expanded throughout its provinces. Hippodromes were built in the major urban centers across the empire, including Antioch and Constantinople (Turkey), Caesarea (Israel), Alexandria and Oxyrhynchus (Egypt), Thugga (Tunisia), Toledo and Cordoba (Spain), Lyon (France), and Vienna (Austria). As part of his Romanizing program, the client king of Judaea, Herod the Great, had instituted chariot racing as part of formal games in 28 B.C. Sources record a hippodrome built in Jerusalem some time after, but its location has not yet been identified.

By the fourth century, the factional system of color-based racing teams was firmly established, especially in Constantinople, which had become the capital city of the Roman Empire in A.D. 330. Constantine the Great rebuilt the city’s hippodrome and expanded its capacity to seat as many as 100,000 people. The Circus Maximus was still bigger, but the Hippodrome became the center of life in the new Roman capital. The Reds and the Whites would eventually disappear, but the Blues and the Greens grew stronger and emerged as the leading factions.

Also by the fourth century, a tradition had established itself linking certain charioteers with sorcery. Historian Ammianus Marcellinus recounts the execution of a fourth-century charioteer in Rome for this crime, perhaps reflecting the widespread belief that charioteers lived beyond the bounds of respectable society. Chariot racing was both fantastically popular and morally suspect—negative associations that also fed into the growing Christian antipathy to the sport.

St. John Chrysostom became Archbishop of Constantinople in A.D. 398, fewer than 20 years after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as

“The People . . . anxiously hope for just two things: bread and circuses.”
—Juvenal (Satire 10)
POSTERITY FOR PORPHYRIUS

Recovered from the Hippodrome of Constantine, a surviving base of one of several sixth-century statues celebrates the city’s superstar charioteer, Porphyrius.
its state religion. In a fiery homily, the furious archbishop reported that Christian believers had left the fold, “deserting us for the spectacle of horse racing.”

He ended with an ultimatum: Anyone attending the races would be excommunicated. His warnings were in vain. By the fifth century, chariot racing in Constantinople underwent an evolution: As Christianity stabilized, the controversies of the new state faith were absorbed into the local charioteering rivalries.

Historians differ on the extent to which Christianity drove the intense hostility between the Blue and the Greens in Constantinople. As a general rule the Blues were associated with the establishment and orthodox Christian beliefs, while the Greens styled themselves as closer to the people. It was in this setting that the so-called Nika riots engulfed Constantinople. Factional tension was intensified by the emperor Justinian’s allegiance to the Blues, and the fact that his wife, Theodora, belonged to a family of circus performers, formerly Greens, who had switched their allegiance to the Blues.

Tension over taxation attached itself to the Green-Blue enmity, and in A.D. 532 Justinian had people from both factions killed. Greens and Blues found common cause, and they turned the exhortatory hippodrome cry of “Nika, Nika!—Win, Win!” against the emperor himself. As disorder spread, Theodora boldly took the initiative and sent in mercenaries to slaughter Greens and Blues indiscriminately. The Nika riots left as many as 30,000 dead and effectively broke the power of the factions. Amid religious tensions and civil war in the Byzantine Empire, the appetite for racing started to decline at the end of the sixth century.

In Rome, the last official race was held at the Circus Maximus in 549, in a city then under control of the Ostrogoths. Charioteering had run a long race, but the experiences of Rome’s racing fans are a foundation for the potent mix of camaraderie and tension experienced in stadiums all over the world today.

David Álvarez carried out his doctoral research at the Complutense University, Madrid, and is a specialist on the role of games in Roman history.
STAFF AT THE CIRCUS

In 1806 a mosaic dating to the second century A.D. was found in Lyon, France.

1. The gatekeeper
   Above the starting boxes appears the person who is responsible for opening the gates at the beginning of each race.

2. The officiant
   The organizer of the games, known as the editor, sits in the loggia and will drop a handkerchief (mappa), to start the races.

3. The wreckage
   Spectacular crashes that happened during chariot races were called naufragia ("shipwrecks" in Latin).
It depicts a chariot race that took place in the city, known then as Lugdunum.

The presenters
Standing on the spina, two figures hold the victory trophies, the palm and laurel wreaths, which will be presented to the winners.

The cheerleader
A jubilator on horseback rides alongside the racers to encourage them. They wear the color of their faction.

The waterboy
A sparsor carries a basin to sprinkle water on the horses and charioteers to cool them as they pass.
A hero to the English and a thorn in the side of the Spanish Empire, Drake gilded the Elizabethan age with his exploits. Today, historians probe the darker side of the corsair’s career, including links to slavery.
CONQUERING THE WORLD

Samuel Lane’s 19th-century portrait of Sir Francis Drake reflects the evolution of the Elizabethan sailor into a British imperial hero. Opposite: A 1577 document detailing Drake’s plans to enter the Pacific, a feat he achieved a year later as part of his circumnavigation of the globe.
el Draque (the dragon). Historians have peeled away these layers to reveal a more nuanced portrait. Drake lived just as England was beginning to carve out a new, naval role for itself on the European and global stage. A brilliant and fearless navigator in a new age of colonialism, Drake used—and was used by—England’s elite to get rich through pillage and slave-trading.

Tales of Adventure
In the popular imagination, Drake is associated with one monarch: Elizabeth I. Drake’s youth, however, was deeply shaped by the religious tumult brought on during the reigns of her predecessors. Born in 1540, late
in the reign of Henry VIII, Drake was a child under the Protestant Edward VI (1547–1553) and then the Catholic Queen Mary I (1553–58).

Drake’s early years were spent on a farm in Devon in western England. After his father, a sheepshearer, became a Protestant curate in southeast England, Drake was sent to live with relatives, the Hawkins family in Plymouth. The Hawkinses, as sailors and traders, exploited the growing transatlantic trade. Drake’s life would be dominated by Plymouth, the port that would play a key role in England’s colonialism—and from where the Pilgrims would set off in 1620.

John Hawkins, Drake’s older cousin, became a close friend and mentor. Around age 18, Drake began sailing on the Hawkinses’s boats and was already gaining experience at sea in acts of piracy against French vessels. Requiring skill, bravery, ruthlessness, and a streak of cruelty, it was a job at which Drake would excel all his life. Drake, Hawkins, and other privateers were tacitly permitted to prey on French shipping because England was at war with France. This war, of benefit to Spain, was a consequence of Queen Mary’s decision to wed Spain’s King Philip II in 1554.

Simplified accounts of Drake often portray him as anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic. His early life, however, was marked by close links with Spain, then a global
to match Spain at sea, so she needed to find a different way to challenge the Spanish Empire. Smaller operations proved to be a profitable strategy, but in the headlong race for wealth and glory, consideration for the lives of non-Europeans was absent. By 1562, with the help of fellow Spanish traders and the backing of a London syndicate, Hawkins broke into the lucrative transatlantic slave trade, seizing people in West Africa to sell in the Americas. Following the success of the first expedition, Elizabeth and members of her privy council invested in the next two trips, financially benefiting from the sale of people as chattel. Drake participated in all of Hawkins’s ventures, including the operation to purchase and kidnap hundreds of people from local rulers in Sierra Leone.

Despite their profits, Hawkins and Drake faced a problem: The Spanish crown prohibited trade between its colonies and other nations, even though colonists sought trade opportunities. Hawkins and later Drake, developed a baroque ritual: First, he requested a license to match Spain at sea, so she needed to find a different way to challenge the Spanish Empire.

Profit and Glory
In November 1558 Mary I died, and her half-sister Elizabeth, a Protestant, became queen of England. In the early years of her reign, Elizabeth was careful not to antagonize Spain but was aware of how the Americas were generating great wealth for Spain, increasing its naval power and spreading the Catholic faith.

Colonial expansion intrigued the queen, and little in the way of international law governed the course that expansion could take. At the time, Elizabeth I did not have the naval power to match Spain at sea, so she needed to find a different way to challenge the Spanish Empire.
NATIONAL DEFENSE

The fortress of San Juan de Ulúa has guarded the port of Veracruz, Mexico, for nearly 400 years under the flags of different countries. Seated on a small island of the same name, the first Spanish structures were built there in 1535 and enlarged over the years to include towers, a prison, and a palace. Francis Drake had an encounter with the Spanish there in 1568 when the fort served as a colonial outpost for Spain. When Mexico declared its independence in 1821, Spanish troops were reluctant to quit the fort but were forced out in 1825. The United States would occupy the fortress during the Mexican-American War after winning the Battle of Veracruz, a 20-day siege in March 1847. The fort returned to Mexican control after the war, in 1848.

trade and would be rebuffed. Then he fired on the colonial settlements; in response, the Spanish put on a show of resistance. After a decent interval had elapsed, both sides worked behind the scenes to covertly buy and sell.

In 1568, however, at the fort of San Juan de Ulúa, in the port of Veracruz (today in Mexico), this tactic failed. Drake was sailing under the command of his cousin Hawkins, who had docked in San Juan de Ulúa to repair and restock his six ships with assurances that the Spanish would not attack. The Spanish reneged, sinking or capturing four of the English ships. Drake and Hawkins managed to escape to safety. Hawkins’s ship, however, held many survivors, whom he was later forced to leave stranded; Drake, meanwhile, headed back alone to England, “and so forsooke us in our great myserie,” Hawkins wrote later. The incident placed a great strain on the two men’s relationship.

Drake, who lost goods and close friends in the attack, vowed to take revenge. Drake asserted that the incident left him with a deep hatred for both the Spanish and Catholicism. His seamanship would give him plenty of opportunities for revenge. England was not officially at war with Spain, so Drake could not yet receive a letter of marque from the queen to attack enemy ships and populations. Even so, during a series of expeditions he conducted from 1570, backed by the crown, Drake led increasingly daring raids into the Spanish Main. In Central America Drake climbed a tall tree from which he could sight the Pacific and vowed that he would enter its waters aboard an English vessel.

These early incursions into Spanish colonies included notable failures. From these, Drake learned the need for discipline and planning. Finally, in 1572, after a carefully organized raid on a treasure caravan in Nombre de Dios (today in Panama) he struck gold—or rather silver—in huge quantities. The haul allowed him to return to England with a fortune, as well as significant plunder in captured boats. The wealth and reputation of the young buccaneer had attracted the admiring attention of the queen. Drake was now one of Elizabeth’s Sea Dogs, a group of captains
(including Hawkins) whose piracy provided a source of income for the crown while disrupting Spain’s colonial operations.

**Around the World**

The England that Drake returned to in 1573 was enjoying a brief truce with Spain. For a few years, he refrained from long-distance ventures, but in 1577 glory beckoned once more: He was appointed to command an expedition through the Strait of Magellan to the Pacific.

Although the venture could not be publicly supported by the crown, Drake did have the queen’s personal backing. In their meeting, Elizabeth reportedly told him she “would gladly be revenged on the king of Spain for divers [sic] injuries that we have received.” The objective of the venture was to “find out places meet to have traffic.” Since it was not envisaged that the fleet would have anything to trade, the queen was guardedly saying the voyage would enrich itself and its financial backers through piracy.

Crewed by about 170 men, the five-ship fleet set out from England in the dying days of 1577.
Initially, the crew were told they were going to the eastern Mediterranean, but evidence for another plan must have become clear from early in the voyage.

Led by Drake’s own ship, the Pelican, the fleet followed roughly the same route of the Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan, who nearly 60 years before had captained the first circumnavigation of the globe. A Venetian nobleman, Antonio Pigafetta, chronicled the voyage, and Drake’s crew studied Pigafetta’s account. The honor to chronicle Drake’s journey fell to the ship’s onboard rector, Francis Fletcher.

The Atlantic crossing was rough on Drake’s crew, leading to problems with morale. Back in 1520, Magellan had quarrelled with a senior officer and bloodily put down a revolt in San Julián (in what is today southern Argentina). By coincidence, the same windswept port was the setting of Drake’s settling of scores with his senior officer Thomas Doughty. Tensions between the noble Doughty and the lower class Drake came to a head in July 1578, when Drake accused him of treason and witchcraft.

Claiming his authority was based on a royal commission—a lie, but an effective one—Drake tried Doughty and condemned him to death. Fletcher recounted how the two men shared a final meal together, “as cheerfully as ever in their lives they had done aforetime.” Shortly afterward, Doughty was beheaded. It has been argued that Drake’s subsequent decision to rename the Pelican was to appease Doughty’s close friend, Christopher Hatton, an influential investor of the expedition whose crest was a golden deer, or hind.

The newly christened Golden Hind led a much smaller fleet, by then reduced to three boats since damage had rendered others too unseaworthy to sail into the Strait of Magellan. The stormy passage sank one boat and caused another to return to England after being separated from the group.

In fall 1578, after 16 chaotic days, the Golden Hind and Drake sailed into the Pacific. Entirely alone,
After Drake's January 1586 siege of Santo Domingo (in what is now the Dominican Republic) on the island of Hispaniola, the rest of the Spanish Main went on high alert, especially wealthy settlements like Cartagena de Indias (in modern Colombia). Founded by Spain in 1533, this Caribbean port had grown to become an important trading center for enslaved people from Africa and the resources extracted from the South American interior. On February 9, 1586, Drake anchored near Cartagena with a force of 3,000 men who disembarked and marched to the city. They confronted Spanish forces along the way, but Drake's troops broke through the defenses and took the city. Casualties were low: Twenty-eight of Drake's men died with just 50 wounded. Spain lost only nine lives with 35 wounded. Drake occupied the city and held it (as well as several hostages) for ransom until March 26. Drake's men plundered the town itself, and eventually Drake collected a ransom of 110,000 ducats. Drake's invasions of 1585-86 exposed how vulnerable the Spanish colonies were and led to a wave of fortification in the Americas.

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Resuming his great voyage westward, the Golden Hind roughly followed Magellan’s return route through the Spice Islands, then across the Indian Ocean to round the Cape of Good Hope. His return to Plymouth, on September 26, 1580, filled the English with national pride and the coffers of his powerful investors with Spanish loot. His knighthood followed in April 1581 on the decks of the Golden Hind.

Chaos in the Caribbean
After the circumnavigation, Drake spent the next few years dabbling in local politics in England. He served as mayor of Plymouth and purchased nearby Buckland Abbey as a fitting abode for a now wealthy man. Despite all this comfort, Drake could not stay away from the sea, and it is unlikely that Queen Elizabeth would have let “her pirate,” as she allegedly called him, stay ashore for long.

Tensions were reaching a breaking point with Spain. Philip’s support for Elizabeth’s enemies in Ireland and Scotland, together with Elizabeth’s support for insurgents in the Spanish Netherlands, was moving the two countries closer to war. In 1585 the queen called upon Drake. He was chosen to command a fleet to target Spain’s Caribbean holdings in what became known as his “great expedition.”

Setting sail on September 14, 1585, Drake’s 29-ship fleet, crewed by 2,300 armed men, surged south to Spain itself. Historians believe Drake may have been hoping to ambush the Spanish treasure fleet near the southern tip of Portugal, but no sighting was made. After a failed attack on the Canary Islands, the fleet headed south for the Cape Verde archipelago off the coast of Senegal, where the corsairs spent two weeks looting the few riches the island had and hoarding food. They also picked up an epidemic (possibly pneumonic plague) on the island, which devastated the ships’ crews. As Drake’s fleet headed west toward the Caribbean, nearly 300 crew members died.

Drake’s first objective was Santo Domingo (today the capital of the Dominican

TREASURE HUNT
In a July 1586 letter (below), Francis Drake informs William Cecil, lord high treasurer and queen’s adviser, that he had not intercepted the Spanish treasure fleet during his latest sojourn to the Caribbean.
By early January 1586, his forces had taken the city, but the looting did not produce the goods they’d hoped for, so the English demanded a ransom to leave. Having finally secured an acceptable fee, Drake’s fleet moved on to Cartagena de Indias (today in Colombia) to repeat the tactic. After looting homes and richly adorned churches, they demanded a ransom from the local authorities. Drake was under pressure to complete the negotiations quickly as the epidemic was still spreading among his men. Conditions aboard his ships were worsened by taking prisoner large numbers of enslaved people.

In April the fleet set sail again, but the ravages of the pestilence forced Drake to abandon plans to attack Cuba. In early June he landed in Florida, where his men looted the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine. Having rested and taken on supplies, the fleet swept northward to the English colony of Roanoke Island (in today’s North Carolina, United States).

When Drake arrived, he learned that the Roanoke colonists wanted to abandon the struggling settlement to return to England. The colonists accompanied Drake’s fleet on its return leg across the Atlantic, bringing with them “[t]hat Indian plant,” a chronicler wrote, “which they call Tabacca and Nicotia.” Some historians believe Drake took the enslaved people from Cartagena to Roanoke Island, but it is not known if they stayed there or were taken to England. What befell them has never been established.

Drake’s missions had proven both that Spain’s colonies were poorly defended and that England could significantly damage its enemy’s imperial prestige through small targeted attacks. Even though the great expedition turned out to be a financial flop, netting a fraction of what its investors hoped for, Drake’s star continued to rise, especially in the context of England’s defeat of the Spanish Armada.

Spain was set on invading England with its impressive naval forces (about 130 ships), but in 1587 Drake had staged a daring raid—“singeing the King of Spain’s beard,” as he described it—on the Spanish port of Cádiz. Drake’s forces destroyed Spanish ships and supplies, delaying
Philip II’s assault against Elizabeth I until 1588. When the Spanish Armada eventually sailed north, it was defeated by a combination of the English navy and poor weather.

Drake served as a vice admiral in the effort to defeat the Spanish and earned the love of his country for it. For generations, a story circulated that Drake was playing bowls at Plymouth when news of the Armada’s sighting reached him; unperturbed, he declared there was still time to win the game and then beat the Spaniards. This tale helped forge a popular belief that Drake’s cool confidence helped secure the English victory.

The Myth of Drake
Drake’s last years were not glorious ones. Rather than retire to Plymouth, he returned to his life at sea. In 1589 his punitive raids into Spain caused great loss of life on both sides. Several years later in August 1595, he crossed the Atlantic with John Hawkins in a bid to rescue Hawkins’s kidnapped son and harass the Spanish. Their efforts were unsuccessful, and Hawkins died in November 1595. Drake pressed on but was turned back by Spanish forces in Panama. In January 1596, at age 55, he died of dysentery aboard his ship. Dressed in a full suit of armor, he was enclosed in a lead coffin and buried at sea off the coast of Panama.

After his death, romantic myths arose around Drake’s legacy in English culture. His baser material motives were overlooked in order to forge a dashing, unflappable hero. In Spanish history, meanwhile, Drake provided ample material for the portrayal of a villain. Lope de Vega’s poem La Dragontea (1598) presents a vivid demonization of the English sailor, whereas Juan de Castellanos’s El Discurso del Capitán Francisco Draque slyly complements the pirate’s skills and uses his devastation attacks on Caribbean ports to criticize Spain’s King Philip II. Long after British and Spanish imperial fortunes waned, Drake’s figure serves as a lightning rod for the intense debate over the ethical dimensions of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

HOME FROM THE SEA
In 1580 Drake bought Buckland Abbey near Plymouth, a 13th-century former Cistercian abbey that was dissolved by Henry VIII. When not at sea, Drake lived here with his second wife, Elizabeth Sydenham. The couple did not have children.

JULIUS PURCELL IS DEPUTY EDITOR OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC HISTORY.
Illustrated maps were a key feature of the 1589 publication of A Summarie and True Discourse of Sir Francis Drake's West Indian Voyage. This work is a chronicle of Drake's great expedition of 1585-86 and was written by Walter Bigges, one of the expeditioners. The illustrated maps were created by Italian cartographer Giovanni Battista Boazio, who filled the maps with intricate detail. One map shows Drake's fleet in front of Santo Domingo (today in the Dominican Republic); ships scuttled by the Spanish to block entry to the harbor are visible. Boazio incorporated distinctive creatures from the Americas, including a sea turtle and a caiman, which may have been based on the sketches of John White, a colonist at Roanoke (modern North Carolina), the first English settlement in North America.
Visitors to the Pius-Clementine Museum at the Vatican often stop in their tracks when they first glimpse it. Located in the Octagonal Court, the sculpture “Laocoön and His Sons” depicts a shocking scene: Sea serpents bind a terrified man and his two young sons, who struggle in vain against the writhing coils. Rearing back in a futile gesture to free himself, Laocoön is shown at the moment when one of the snakes is poised to deliver a strike.

A study of horror in marble, the work has been described by British classicist Nigel Spivey as "the prototypical icon of human agony" in Western art. The grim story of the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons varies across classical sources, but one of the most familiar is that recounted by Virgil in the Aeneid, completed in 19 B.C.

In Book II of the epic, which details the end of the Trojan War, Laocoön suspects that the wooden horse sent by the Greeks is a trap. After striking the horse with a spear, Laocoön and his sons are seized by sea serpents that drag them down to their deaths, which the Trojans interpret as divine punishment. To appease the gods, they drag the horse into their city.

A Find Fit for a Pope
The discovery of the Laocoön grouping was one of the most momentous of the Renaissance era. It had a lasting impact on sculptors, most notably Michelangelo. In January 1506 a landowner, Felice de Fredis, ordered construction work in a vineyard on his property on the slopes of Rome’s Esquiline Hill. Finding Roman coins, inscriptions, and statues was common for anyone digging in Roman soil, but the workers’ discovery on January 14 was extraordinary: a sunken chamber containing a group of exquisite and sizable marble sculptures.

The sculpture’s figures were remarkable but not completely intact; the adult male figure was missing his right arm, and various fragments were missing from the two children. They had clearly lain hidden for centuries, but it did not take long for news of the discovery to reach Pope Julius II. A keen collector of treasures from Rome’s classical past, the pope sent a delegation to inspect the find. He sent his architect Giuliano da Sangallo, future cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, and the sculptor Michelangelo. After gazing upon the discovery, the men quickly identified it. Sangallo, his son later recorded, immediately declared: “This is the Laocoön of which Pliny wrote.”

During the Renaissance, both artists and scholars revered the classical age and sought to bring its values forward to their own time. Educated people like Sangallo were familiar with Pliny the Elder’s first-century A.D. Natural History, a compendium of

**Bits and Pieces**

- **40–20 B.C.** Historians consider this the most likely period in which three Rhodian sculptors created the “Laocoön” grouping.
- **1506** After being unearthed in Rome, a sculpture is inspected by scholars and identified as Pliny’s “Laocoön.”
- **1520** The “Laocoön” is restored. Artists attach a replacement arm to the adult male figure, whose original limb is missing.
- **1957** The arm attached in 1520 is replaced with a marble limb found in 1905, which will later be deemed the original missing piece.
knowledge covering history, science, and the arts. In it, Pliny describes a sculpture “above all that the arts . . . have produced. Out of a single block of marble, the craftsmen of Rhodes—Hagesander, Polydoros and Athenadoros—designed a group of Laocoön and his sons, with snakes entwining them.”

Call to Arms
By March 1506 the work was moved to the Vatican’s Belvedere Courtyard, newly designed by Donato Bramante. Despite the quick identification of the “Laocoön,” questions lingered. The sculpture matched Pliny’s descriptions in many major aspects except one: It was carved not from a single block of marble but from as many as eight different pieces. Scholars puzzled over the identity of its maker, when it was made, and why artists would be drawn to depict such anguish.

“A WRETCHED FATHER”
The wretched father, running to their aid
With pious haste, but vain, they next invade;
Twice round his waist their winding volumes roll’d;
And twice about his gasping throat they fold.
The priest thus doubly chok’d, their crests divide,
And tow’ring o’er his head in triumph ride.

Aeneid, Virgil, Book II (Translated by John Dryden)
A keen collector of antiquities for the Vatican, Julius II bought the “Laocoön” in March 1506.

As part of their analysis, artists proposed different orientations for the missing pieces of the grouping. Overseen by Bramante, a contest was held in 1510 to propose the best model for Laocoön’s missing right arm. Michelangelo suggested it be bent back toward the shoulder to indicate the priest’s frenzied attempt to free himself. Raphael, Michelangelo’s rival and judge of the contest, picked a different pose, one with an outstretched arm, which was incorporated when the work was restored in 1520.

**Made by Michelangelo?** Michelangelo’s close involvement with the sculpture and its evident influence on his later works have always introduced a touch of intrigue into the discovery. Columbia University art historian Lynn Catterson has even advanced the theory that the sculptor of the “Laocoön” was, in fact, Michelangelo himself.

Catterson looks to a 1501 sketch by Michelangelo, which, she argues, shows stylistic similarities with the sculpture. Critics say that huge logistical and financial obstacles make such a scheme improbable.

Most historians accept that the sculpture is either the direct product—or a Roman-era copy—of the Hellenistic era when Greek
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sculpture reached a zenith of dynamism from the fourth to first centuries B.C. Pliny’s encyclopedic work furnishes crucial clues: *Natural History* was dedicated to the Roman emperor Titus, who ruled A.D. 79–81. The grounds of Titus’s palace included the Gardens of Maecenas and the site where the sculpture was found in 1506. Historians struggled to identify the sculptors named by Pliny, or to ascertain if they were from the era of Titus or an earlier time. In 1957 a grotto at Sperlonga on the coast near Rome was excavated. It was on the grounds of a villa used by Emperor Tiberius (r. A.D. 14-37). Inside, sculptures were found, one of which was signed with the same names Pliny records as the sculptors of the “Laocoön.”

Clearly, the sculptors lived before Titus’s time. By the time of the Sperlonga discovery, historians were familiar with the sculpture excavated in the 1880s at the second-century B.C. Hellenistic site of Pergamum in Turkey, whose writhing figures match the style of the “Laocoön.” It is likely that the sculptors, inspired by the Pergamum style, created the “Laocoön” in the late first century B.C.—perhaps in the form of a marble copy of a bronze original, now lost.

**An Icon for the Age**

“Laocoön and His Sons” has meant many things to many ages. To the Romans, it represented the seeds of Rome’s founding by Aeneas. To Renaissance scholars, it exemplified the dynamism and naturalism of Hellenistic art that they so greatly admired.

The statue’s popularity continued through the centuries. Napoleon removed it from the Vatican and placed it in the Louvre in Paris in 1798. In 1816 the sculpture was returned to the Vatican. In 1905 antiquarian Ludwig Pollak discovered a marble arm in a sculpture workshop near the spot where the “Laocoön” was found. In size and style it was similar to the famous grouping.

In 1957 the Vatican Museum’s authorities finally announced that the fragment was likely to be Laocoön’s famous missing arm, and the fragment was attached to the piece. The arm is bent back—as, 450 years before, Michelangelo had suggested it should be.

—Rubén Montoya

NAPOLEON took the “Laocoön” to Paris in 1798, where it was displayed in the Louvre with other objects from Italy, as shown in this circa 1805 painting by Hubert Robert. Pavlovsk Museum, St. Petersburg
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