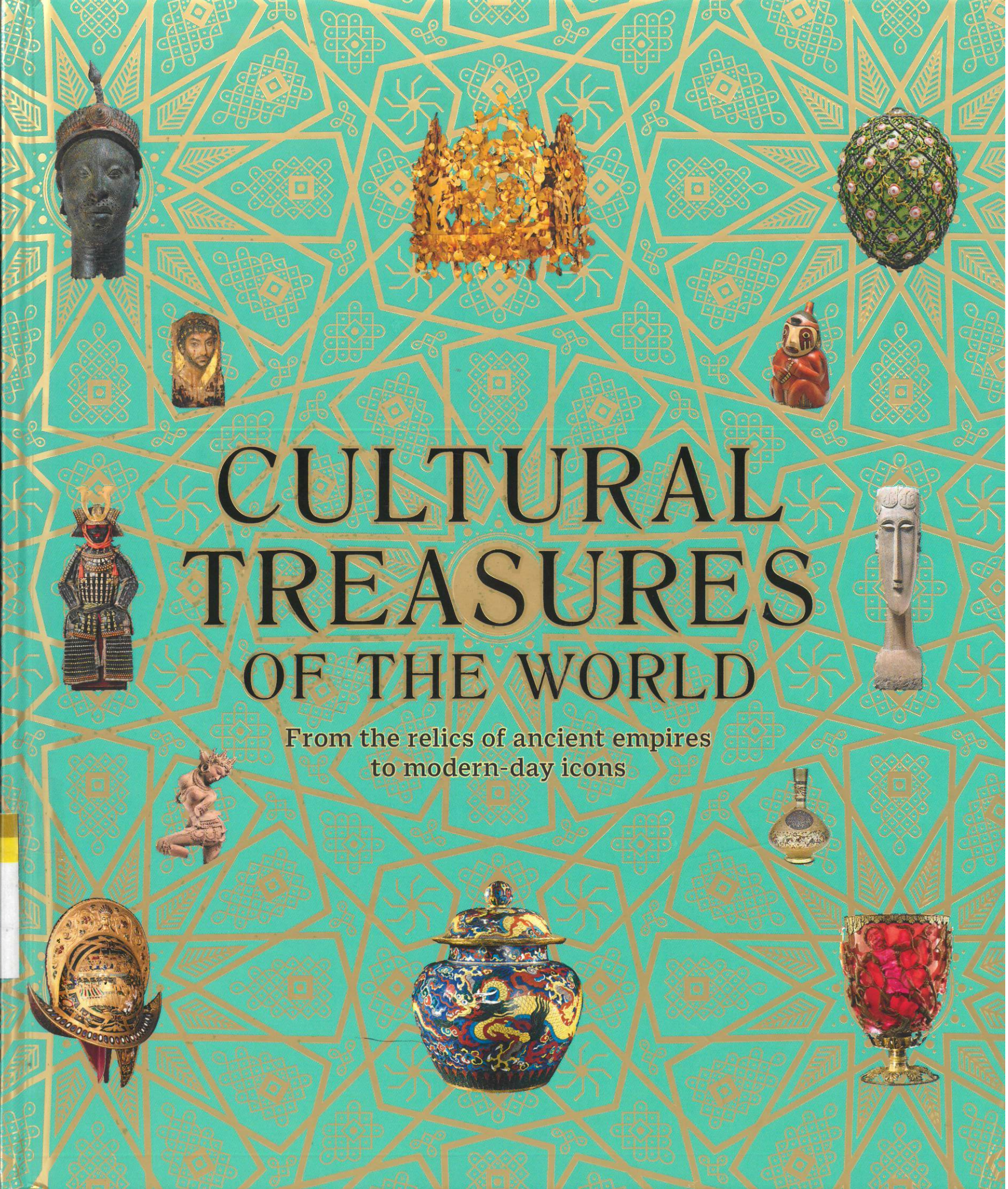




CULTURAL TREASURES OF THE WORLD

From the relics of ancient empires
to modern-day icons





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Bib. 00006768
Item 100009078
Barcode 000010009839
Call no. CB13
-C968
2022
Date 51.1.67





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Produced for DK by
COBALT ID

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First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
Dorling Kindersley Limited
DK, One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens,
London, SW11 7BW

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A Penguin Random House Company
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
001-324296-Sept/22

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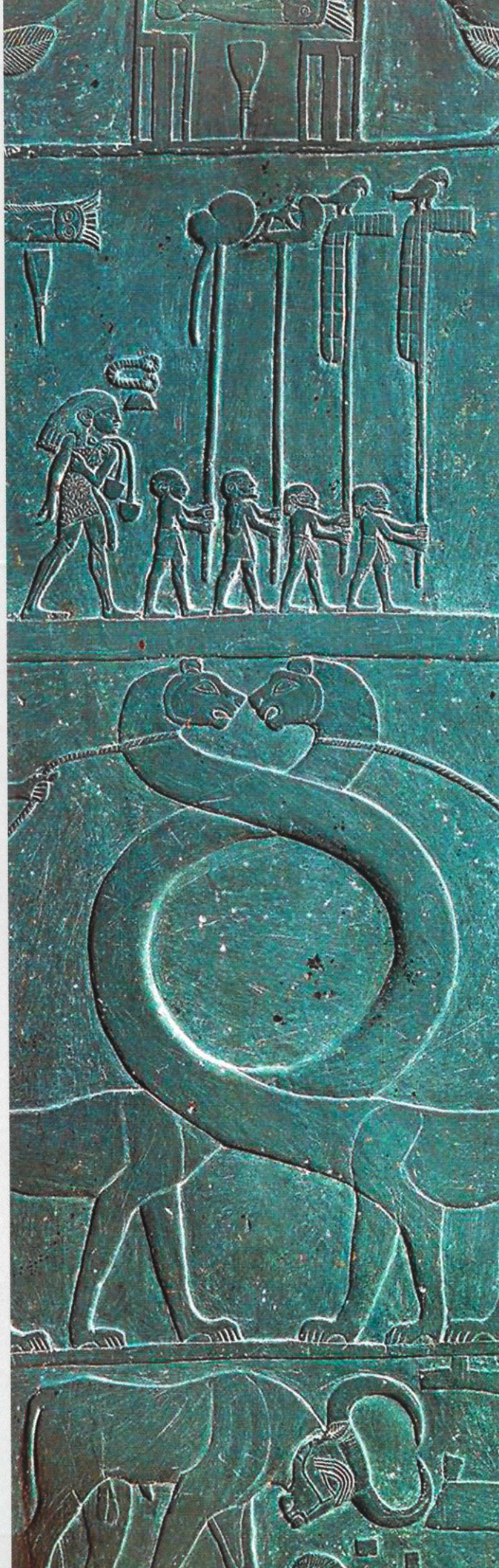
A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-0-2415-0892-3

Printed and bound in UAE

For the curious
www.dk.com

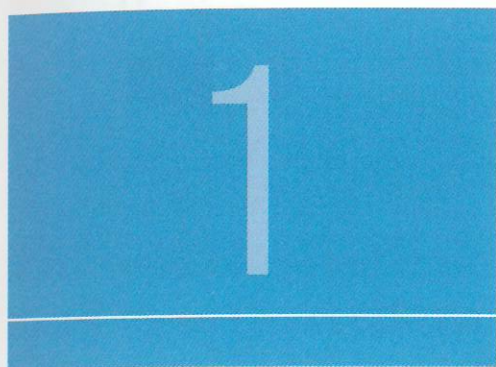


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THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

This masterpiece of embroidery tells the story of England's conquest by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066 (see pp.138-39).



Introduction

The first objects deliberately crafted by our distant ancestors around three million years ago were stone tools – essentially pebbles given a sharp edge by striking them against other rocks. They proved so perfectly fit for their purpose that they remained in use for a million years. Over time, human ingenuity provided for other essentials, giving us the first weapons around 300,000 years ago, clothing 70,000 years ago, ceramic pots 20,000 years ago, and implements made of bronze 5,000 years ago and of iron 3,200 years ago. The same human impulse to improve everyday life has driven the technologies that shape our world today.

Woven deeply into human history is an even more remarkable desire to make things that are not strictly practical or necessary. The earliest remaining evidence of this creative drive goes back some 40,000 years, well before people had given up their nomadic lifestyles, to the Venus goddess sculpture found at Hohle Fels in Germany and the cave paintings of Altamira in Spain. Artistic endeavour is seemingly rooted in the human psyche, or – in the

words of the 19th-century English designer and polymath William Morris – it is “no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life.” It is this fundamental human instinct, which has bequeathed us the most ornate, expressive, beautiful, and significant objects in the world, that is addressed in this book.

Extraordinary objects appear in every culture, and each one of them provides insights into how people of that culture lived. Studying and interpreting these artefacts reveals much about their creators’ beliefs, customs, social structures, and – above all – the things they treasured the most. Despite their diversity of form, the objects shown on the following pages have much in common. Making each one required a significant investment of time, effort, and skill, and an appreciable level of craftsmanship or artistic sensibility. And most were produced with posterity in mind – evidence of yet another strong human urge, the desire to preserve ancestral heritage and create a cultural legacy.



△ NEBRA SKY DISC, c.1600 BCE

This Bronze Age disc, discovered near Leipzig in Germany, carries a view of the heavens. It is an ancient calendrical device and perhaps one of the oldest star maps ever made (see p.35).



△ ORACLE BONES, c.300–1046 BCE

This ox scapula (shoulder blade) was inscribed in the Chinese Shang dynasty as part of a divination rite. Its pictographs provide first-hand accounts of the concerns of the Shang rulers (see pp.42–43).



△ HEREFORD MAPPA MUNDI, c.1300

Occupying a single sheet of vellum (calf's skin), this map provides a unique insight into concepts of the world in Middle Ages Europe. It was drawn in ink by English monastic scholars (see pp.166–67).

“The aim of art is to **represent** not the **outward appearance** of things, but their **inward significance**.”

ARISTOTLE, 384–322 BCE

Some were specifically designed with a religious purpose, for example, the paintings and sculptures of gods, mythological creatures, representations of ancestors, or beings in a spirit world; others, including masks, robes, and vessels, were crafted for use in ceremonies. Others still were made to honour the status of an important figure in society, or to commemorate a specific event. As civilizations became more sophisticated and able to support a class of professional artists and artisans, objects were increasingly made for purely decorative or artistic reasons, with the sole purpose of providing enjoyment. Creative people around the world continue this tradition, producing a dazzling array of “cultural treasures”.

The objects pictured and analysed in this book are considered to be treasures not because of their intrinsic worth – some are indeed made from precious materials and are literally priceless, while others are formed from humble materials such as clay, stone, or wood – but because of the value bestowed on them by the society that inspired their creation. It is their cultural context

that provides the value – the broader system of beliefs and practices surrounding the object – rather than the object itself. That great value is recognized by anthropologists, historians, and ordinary people today; accordingly, most of the objects included are now housed in museums or galleries, or on sites that are protected and preserved for posterity (see pp.342–43).

Each object described in this book is a product of its time, of its place, and of its people. Reading this book as a collection reveals not only differences between cultures through the ages and around the world, but just as significantly, the values that we all share. Objects give us first-hand information – they are primary historical sources that speak to us viscerally as well as academically, making them an invaluable guide to world history and culture, an idea that echoes the words of US cultural critic Camille Paglia: “All objects, all phases of culture are alive. They have voices. They speak of their history and interrelatedness. And they are all talking at once!”



△ AZTEC SUN STONE, 1502–21

This huge stone was probably used as an altar in human sacrifice – a practice embedded in Aztec life. Regular offerings to the sun god Tonatiuh, depicted in the centre, were believed to ensure good harvests (see p.222).



△ IZNIK LIDDED BOWL, c.1580

The town of Iznik in Turkey was home to the potteries of the Ottoman Empire that produced some of the world's most finely decorated tiles and vessels (see pp.226–27).



△ MAQDALA CROWN, 1740s

This exquisitely decorated gold crown, which carries images of the apostles, was commissioned by Empress Mentewab of Ethiopia and presented to the Orthodox church (see p.249).



40,000_{BCE} – 501_{BCE}

The period from 40,000_{BCE} to 500_{BCE} saw the spread of humans across the globe and the development of civilization from cave-dwelling and hunting and gathering, through settlement and migration, to the emergence of complex societies in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Central America. What unites these ancient cultures is the human drive to create objects of meaning and beauty that reflected nature, daily life, and the rituals and religions that helped people make sense of the world around them. From the earliest depictions of the human form to the sophisticated beauty of ancient Greek art, and from carvings and paintings to pottery and intricate metalwork, the period encompasses the early flowering of human creativity.



Hohle Fels, Germany

Venus of Hohle Fels

The oldest known depiction of a human being, sculpted from the tusk of a woolly mammoth, unearthed in a cave

An extraordinary figurine found in the Hohle Fels cave in the Swabian Jura of southern Germany shed new light on Palaeolithic culture, placing the beginnings of prehistoric art much earlier than previously assumed. The very obviously female figure was carved in mammoth ivory with flint tools between 40,000 and 35,000 years ago, making it the world's earliest known figurative carving.

The figure's prominent sexual characteristics have led scholars to assume it is a fertility symbol: it has been anachronistically dubbed a "Venus" (a reference to the Roman goddess of love), in common with later Stone Age statuettes of a similar nature. The Hohle Fels Venus – one of the earliest known examples of "mobiliary" art (see box, below) – is a voluptuous figure, apparently glorifying female reproductivity, and it is this that dictated the figurine's proportions: the short limbs are dwarfed by the body, with its slightly waisted midriff, large breasts, wide hips and thighs, and exaggerated genitalia; instead of a head there is a small perforated protuberance through which a cord might have been threaded.

MOBILIARY ART

The Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers were nomadic people, following herds of animals and taking shelter from the weather in caves. Their art therefore took two forms: paintings on the walls and ceilings of caves, known as parietal art; and mobiliary art – small and portable sculptures carved from wood, bone, ivory, or stone, or fashioned in clay, to accompany them on their travels.



PREHISTORIC CARVED HORSE, VOGELHERD CAVE

Smoothly carved ivory finely engraved with grooves and crosses

REPAIR
Broken sections have been glued back together.



◁ VENUS OF DOLNI VESTONICE

One of the world's earliest known ceramic artefacts, this figurine dates from 29,000–25,000 BCE; with its exaggerated breasts, hips and belly, it is typical of the "Venus" sculptures of the Upper Palaeolithic, or Late Stone Age, in Europe.

PERFORATION

In place of a head is a perforation in the carving, through which a cord was probably threaded

PROPORTIONS

The figure's small arms and short, footless legs are out of proportion with the body.



△ SIDE VIEW

In profile, the exaggeratedly swollen breasts and rounded abdomen are particularly conspicuous, emphasizing the figure's femininity and fertility.

CLOTHING

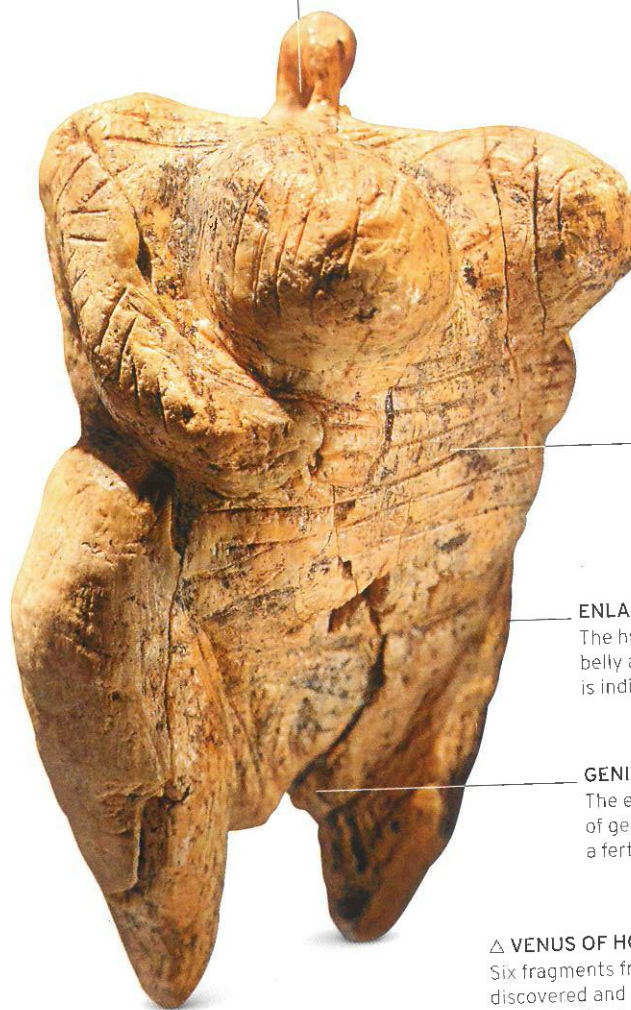
Grooves cut into the torso and arms possibly represent clothing.

ENLARGED BODY

The huge body, with its prominent belly and breasts, and wide hips, is indicative of fecundity.

GENITALIA

The exaggerated representation of genitalia suggests the figure was a fertility symbol.



Scale



△ VENUS OF HOHLE FELS

Six fragments from this ancient object have been discovered and pieced together to form an almost complete figurine – only the left arm is missing. Height: 6cm (2 1/4 in). Date: c.38,000–33,000 BCE.

Lion-Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel

An imposing lion-headed figurine, painstakingly reconstructed from fragments of ivory found in the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave



The caves of the Swabian Jura region in Germany have yielded a wealth of artefacts from the Upper Palaeolithic, including many skilfully carved figures and ornaments. Among the oldest of these is this carved mammoth-ivory sculpture depicting, in great detail, a lion-headed figure with a partly human body.

Discovered in tiny pieces in the dirt on the floor of the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave, the Löwenmensch, or Lion-Man, was pieced together over a period of more than 70 years as further fragments were found. Now almost complete, it reveals an astonishing degree of craftsmanship. Carved from a mammoth tusk using flint cutting tools, the hybrid figure has a clearly recognizable lion's head and paws, and the elongated back of a feline, but its arms and legs, and its confident upright stance are unmistakably human.

Considerable time and care went into the making of this figurine, suggesting it had immense cultural or religious significance, perhaps as a representation of a mythical anthropomorphic creature, or as an image of a shaman dressed in animal skin and wearing a lion's-head mask.

The Hohlenstein-Stadel **lion-man** has been assembled from more than **1,000** fragments of ivory

CARVING IVORY WITH FLINT TOOLS

The Upper Palaeolithic, or Late Stone Age, saw the replacement of simple flint-flake tools with more sophisticated blades made from a knapped flint core. A variety of specialized scrapers, knives, and pointed tools were produced, making intricate carving of ivory and bone possible; but sculpting tusks and bones, especially across the grain, was an arduous task requiring both strength and skill.



UPPER PALAEOLITHIC FLINT TOOL



HEAD

The figure's head and neck are those of a European cave lion (now extinct).

GROOVES

Seven parallel grooves are deliberately gouged into the left arm.

PAWS

Lion's paws take the place of human hands.

ELONGATED BODY

The body is elongated, like that of a feline.

IVORY FRAGMENTS

Hundreds of tiny ivory fragments were pieced together, much like a three-dimensional jigsaw.

GENDER

Ambiguously shaped fragments made sexing the figure problematic, but it is most probably male.



△ SIDE VIEW

The variety of carving techniques of individual features suggests that several flint tools were used in the sculpting.

◀ LION-MAN OF HOHLENSTEIN-STADEL

The lion-man figurine is the earliest anthropomorphic animal sculpture yet discovered, and its combination of human and feline characteristics gives a tantalizing glimpse into a possibly shamanic Palaeolithic culture. **Height:** 31.1cm (12¼in). **Date:** c.38,000–33,000 BCE.

Scale



▷ OCHRE

Reds, browns, and yellows were produced using different ochres (natural clay earth pigments).



BISON 43

The female bison identified as "Bison 43" is painted in a quite sophisticated, naturalistic style.



◁ MANGANESE

The body, mane, and horns are outlined with black manganese and charcoal.

IRREGULARITIES

The artists used cracks and other irregularities to add volume or emphasize and help capture various anatomical features, such as the bison's head.



EARLIER DEPICTIONS

A previous red-figure layer has been painted over.

CEILING

The height of the ceiling in the Polychrome Chamber varies from about 1.2m to 2.7m (4ft to 9ft).

DETAILS

A charcoal stick was used to depict finer details, such as hair on the chin.

▽ ALTAMIRA BISON

This exceptional image of a female bison is one of dozens of depictions on the ceiling vault of the Polychrome Chamber at Altamira.

Height of bison: 150cm (59in).
Date: c.15,000–12,000 BCE.

Altamira Bison

Remarkable treasures of European prehistoric art adorning the walls of a Spanish cave



Between 21,000 and 11,000 years ago, the cave complex of Altamira near Santillana del Mar, northern Spain, was home to Palaeolithic peoples of the Solutrean and Magdalenian cultures. Artists from these cultures left dozens of breathtaking paintings on the walls and ceilings of the galleries and chambers into which the 300m (984ft) long cave is divided.

Prehistoric cave art

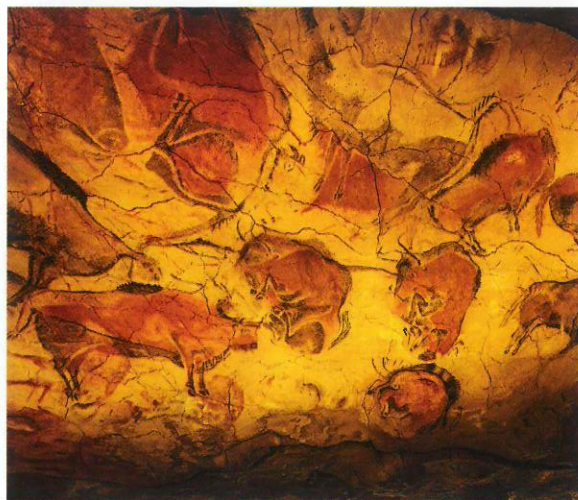
Animals that could be hunted – bison, horses, wild boar, goats, and deer – form the bulk of the paintings. They were created on the walls and ceilings of the caves; in some areas, the artists would have used planks or a form of scaffolding to reach the ceilings.

The first paintings, in the Polychrome Chamber (the cave's largest), were red-figure bison, made using haematite or ochre pigment, diluted with juice or saliva to create hues. Polychrome animals (*see left and below*) were subsequently painted over many of them. For these later animals, the artists used manganese to produce black and often also exploited natural cracks and contours in the surface to create dynamic effects.

Some artists used hollow bird bones to spray paint on the rock and moss pads to smear it. The magnificent 150cm (59in) bison shown here, like most animals in the cave, is just under life-size.

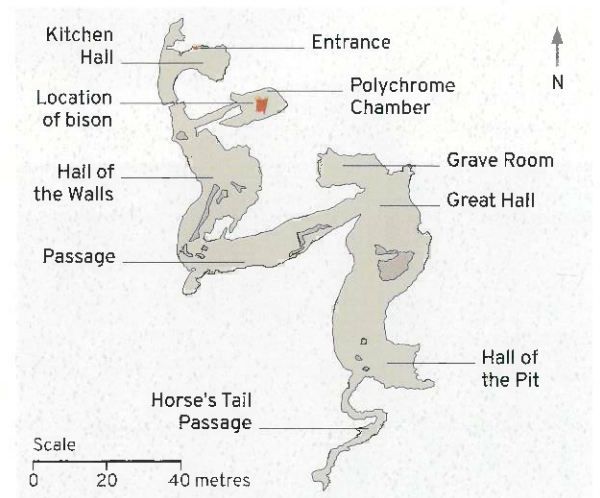
The caves were discovered in 1868, and investigated properly from 1879, but at first the paintings were dismissed as modern forgeries. Only in 1902 were they recognized as among the finest examples of prehistoric European cave art, so precious that now visitors can only see replicas, to stop fungus (which grows on the moisture from people's breath) from destroying them.

The Polychrome Chamber at Altamira has 27 bison, four does, one stag, and two horses painted on the walls



△ RED BISON ON THE CEILING AT ALTAMIRA

The artists who created these astonishing paintings on the ceilings and walls of the dark caves would have worked using the dim light from oil lamps (made from animal fat).



△ ALTAMIRA'S GALLERIES

There are several galleries in the Altamira cave complex, including the Polychrome Chamber, the Great Hall, the Hall of the Pit, and a passage known as the Horse's Tail.

Scale



Kakadu National Park,
Australia

Scale



Kakadu Rock Art

Thousands of spiritually significant Aboriginal images forming one of the world's greatest concentrations of rock art

There are over 5,000 recorded rock art sites in Kakadu National Park in Australia's Northern Territory. Dating from around 20,000 years ago to the present day, the paintings comprise one of the longest continuous historical records of any culture in the world.

The main galleries of *gunbim* (Aboriginal rock art) are at Ubirr and Burrunguy (Nourlangie Rock), where paintings cover the walls, ceilings, and boulders of Aboriginal rock shelters. Images range from animals and plants to human figures and ancestral beings, along with hand prints and stencils. The rock art records the beliefs and history of the Bininj/Mungguy (the Indigenous traditional owners of the land in this area), testifying to their intimate relationship with the territory and to their spiritual heritage. Certain images are considered *andjamun* (sacred and dangerous) and may be seen by only a few senior Aboriginal men and women. Newer paintings are often layered over older ones, giving a glimpse into different time periods.

RED PIGMENT

Haematite, an iron oxide, was used to give a red colour, and is the pigment that has lasted longest over the millennia.

HAND OUTLINES

Pigment was blown from the artist's mouth over an outspread hand to create a stencil effect.

DIFFERENT HEIGHTS

Hand prints cover whole walls at different levels, according to the height of the artist and perhaps also his or her status.



△ KAKADU ROCK ART

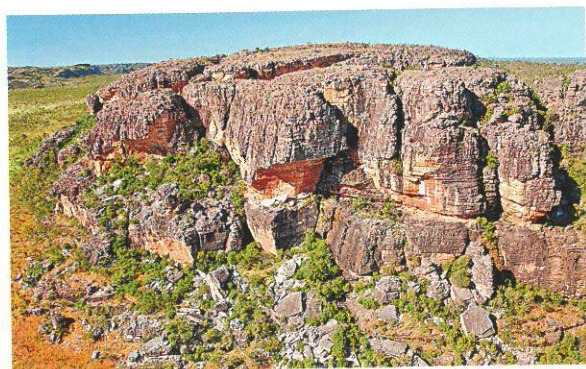
Aboriginal artists frequently employed stencils, including their hands, in their painting. Such prints are probably the oldest paintings made at Kakadu. Dimensions: life-size. Date: c.20,000 BCE–2000 CE.

CHILD

Small, low-level prints such as this one were probably made by children.

BLACK PIGMENT

Black was derived from manganese oxide or charcoal, mixed with water to form a paste.

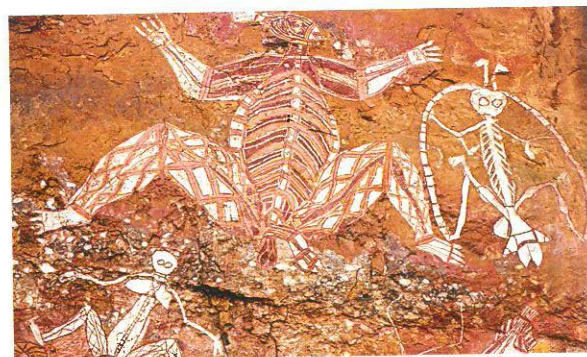


△ KAKADU NATIONAL PARK

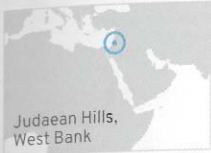
Rocky outcrops such as this one near Ubirr served as shelters for Aboriginal people for thousands of years, and, like Ubirr, are frequently the site of rock art.

20TH-CENTURY ROCK ART

Traditional rock art continued to be painted at Kakadu until the 1980s. This image, at the Burrunguy site, was made by artists Nayombolmi (c.1895–1967) and Old Nym Djimongurr (c.1910–1969) in the 1960s. Nayombolmi is known to have created at least 650 works of rock art over the course of his life. Painting still forms part of Aboriginal culture, as a way of passing on cultural practices and laws, but is now more often created on bark or canvas.



ANCESTRAL FIGURES BY NAYOMBOLMI AND DJIMONGURR, 1963–64



Judaeen Hills,
West Bank

Scale



Judaeen Stone Mask

A mysterious 9,000-year-old carved limestone mask from a key moment in human history

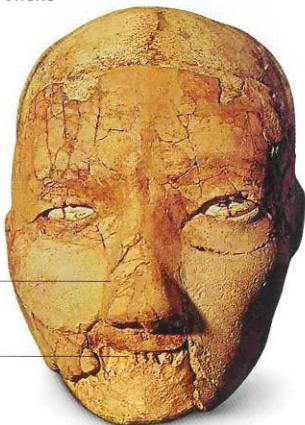
This compelling and beautiful Neolithic stone mask was found near the settlement of Pnei Hever in the southern West Bank, and is one of sixteen similar masks from the area of the Judaeen Desert and Hills. It dates to the Neolithic period around 9,000 years ago, a time when human cultures were moving away from hunting and gathering towards agriculture, and beginning to settle. This agricultural revolution was accompanied by an increase in activities relating to religious ritual, and it is thought that the mask played a ritual role, perhaps in death rites or ancestor worship.

Smoothly and expertly carved from a yellowish-pink limestone, the mask has an eerie quality, with its blank eyes and partly open mouth. The cheekbones are sculpted and a set of teeth is clearly defined, showing the high level of the carver's skill. Perforations along the edges of the mask, together with its hollowed-out back, suggest that it may have been worn over the face, or perhaps attached to a pole.

NEOLITHIC PLASTERED SKULLS

In another example of early ritualized behaviour from the same region, several plastered skulls dating from the Neolithic period have been found buried under house floors at sites in Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. Wet plaster was moulded around the skull to recreate facial features, and fragments show that shells and paint were used to denote the eyes and elements such as hair and moustaches.

PLASTERED SKULL
FROM JERICHO,
WEST BANK,
7000-6000 BCE



Nose remodelled
in plaster

Teeth ground back
to the roots

LIMESTONE

The mask is carved from limestone from the Judaeen Hills, identified as a possible centre of mask production.

JUDAEAN STONE MASK

Created using stone tools, the mask displays remarkable craftsmanship. **Height:** approx. 25cm (10in). **Date:** c.7000-6000 BCE.



WEARABLE MASK

The mask's proportions indicate that it was the right size to be worn over the face, perhaps as part of cultic rites.

NOSE

The somewhat truncated nose adds to the mask's skull-like effect.

SMOOTH FINISH

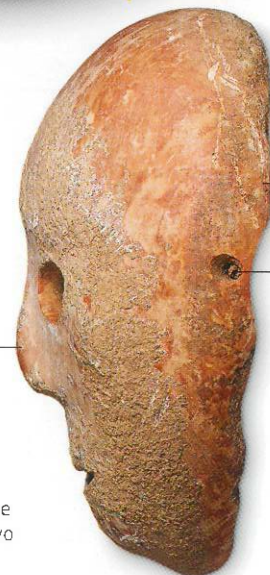
The limestone was smoothed to a fine finish, which is now eroded in some areas.

PERFORATIONS

Drilled holes indicate how the mask may have been tied to a person or object.

▷ SIDE VIEW

The mask has a shallow profile, with the nose and rounded forehead forming two smooth curves.



PALETTE OF NARMER ▷

Discovered at Hierakonpolis, an ancient capital of Egypt, the palette is an important ritual object. Narmer himself is thought to have played a key role in the unification of his nation. **Height:** 63.5cm (25in). **Date:** c.3100 BCE.

Palette of Narmer

A unique artefact used in sacred rituals from the dawn of Egyptian history; its imagery symbolizes ancient cultural events



Hierakonpolis, Egypt

The Palette of Narmer is a 4th-century BCE grey siltstone tablet celebrating the achievements of King Narmer, who many historians have identified as Menes, the legendary founder of Egypt's First Dynasty (see box, below). Narmer's palette was found in 1898 by the British archaeologists Frederick Green and James Quibell in a temple complex at Hierakonpolis, one of the capitals of ancient Egypt.

Unique significance

Small, undecorated Egyptian palettes (commonly found as grave goods) were used for preparing cosmetics – the cosmetics were probably intended to adorn the statues of deities in the temples. Larger, decorated palettes served a ritual purpose and are much rarer. Most of the decorated palettes depict

animals, but the iconography of the Narmer Palette is considerably more complex, indicating that this was an object of immense cultural significance.

The palette features low-relief engravings of exceptional quality and, even at this very early stage, displays traditional features of Egyptian art. The narrative is in registers (horizontal strips) and the figures are shown with their heads in profile, but with frontal torsos. The imagery is so unusual that scholars cannot agree on its meaning, but it is widely thought to relate to the unification of Egypt (see box, below): it is the earliest-known artefact showing the same king wearing the crowns of both Upper Egypt (the Nile Valley) and Lower Egypt (the Delta). On one side of the palette, Narmer raises his mace to crush an enemy's skull (a traditional image of royal authority), watched over by the falcon-god Horus (see also below). On the other side, he is shown leading a military procession to view the headless corpses of his defeated enemies. Below this, two intertwined beasts symbolize the unification that this victory has probably achieved.

In hieroglyphics, **Narmer's** name is represented by a **catfish** and a **chisel**

Two dogs define the sides of the palette

"Serpopards" (see opposite, bottom) encircle the pigment bowl



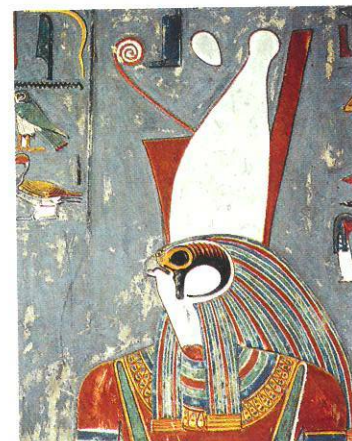
▷ TWO-DOGS PALETTE

This is more typical of the ceremonial palettes that were found at Hierakonpolis. With its mix of wild animals and mythical creatures, it embodies the earlier, predynastic concept of kingship (see box, right).

THE UNIFICATION OF EGYPT

The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt was the most significant event in the country's ancient history, marking its creation as a nation state and, around 3100 BCE, ushering in the dynastic era. At a social and political level, this process probably took place over the course of several reigns, although it may have been reinforced by a single, decisive battle. The scale of the change is reflected in Narmer's Palette. Earlier palettes showed hunting scenes, in which royal authority is linked to the controlling power of wild animals (see left), but with Narmer the emphasis shifted from hunting to warfare. The king is shown in human form crushing his enemies. He is also portrayed as a unifier, wearing the crowns of both Upper and Lower Egypt (see opposite). These were combined into the double-crown or *pschent*, representing unification, in the reign of Den (died c.2995 BCE) in the First Dynasty.

THE GOD HORUS WEARING THE PSCHENT CROWN





◁ **NARMER'S NAME**
Narmer's name is shown in hieroglyphs, alongside the gates of a royal palace.

WHITE CROWN
Narmer is shown here wearing the white crown, or *hedjet*, of Upper Egypt (see box, opposite).

RED CROWN
Narmer wearing the red crown, or *deshret*, of Lower Egypt (see box, opposite).

STANDARD-BEARERS
Four standard-bearers in procession.

THE GODDESS HATHOR
Hathor appears twice on both sides of the palette (see also left).



COSMETICS BOWL
The necks of two serpopards (see below), held with ropes by two attendants, form the bowl in which cosmetic ingredients were ground and mixed.

△ **MYTHICAL CREATURES**
The modern name for these mythical creatures is "serpopard" (a combination of "serpent" and "leopard"). The original Egyptian name is unknown.



▷ **REVERSE VIEW**
The other side of the Narmer Palette commemorates the victories of King Narmer, identified as King Menes, the unifier of Upper and Lower Egypt.





Ur, Iraq

Scale



Ram in the Thicket

One of the most remarkable survivals of the Sumerian civilization, which flourished in the 3rd millennium BCE

This is one of a pair of almost identical statuettes that were discovered in 1928–29 at Ur, a major religious, political, commercial, and artistic centre of Sumer (now in southern Iraq), a region that was home to one of the first great civilizations. Archaeologist Leonard Woolley gave the statuette its title in allusion to the biblical story of Abraham, who sacrificed a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. In fact, the figure represents a goat standing on its hind legs to reach leaves in a tree.

The statuette was found in a royal burial site, so it was likely a funerary offering for a person of rank, possibly a high priestess. Originally mounted on a wooden core, the piece displays the impressive artistic and technical skill of the Sumerians. Luxury materials were used, including gold, silver, and copper, with lapis lazuli and shell for the fleece; lapis lazuli for the goat's eyes and beard contributes to the face's lively expression. The figure's exact meaning is uncertain, but it may be connected with the fertility of the land.

Goats were associated with the shepherd god Dumuzid, consort of the goddess Inanna

LEONARD WOOLLEY

Sir Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) was one of the foremost archaeologists of the 20th century. He worked in various parts of the Mediterranean world and the Near East, but he is famous above all for his association with Ur, where he was director of excavations from 1922 to 1934. Renowned for his unflagging energy, he began work on site soon after sunrise and continued in his office well into the night. He spread knowledge of his work through popular books as well as scholarly publications.

LEONARD WOOLLEY AT UR



LAPIS LAZULI

The goat's horns, eyes, beard, and shoulder fleece are made of the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli, imported from Afghanistan.

▷ RAM IN THE THICKET

The animal is thought to be a markhor, a wild species of goat noted for its large, corkscrew-shaped horns. **Height:** 46cm (18in). **Date:** c.2600 BCE.

DIVINE SYMBOL

The eight-pointed star or flower was associated with the goddess Inanna, later known as Ishtar.

GOLD LEAF

Gold leaf is used on the tree and the goat's face and legs.

SUPPORT

The tube that rises from the goat's shoulders suggests that the goat and its companion figure were used as supports for a small bowl or tray.

BASE

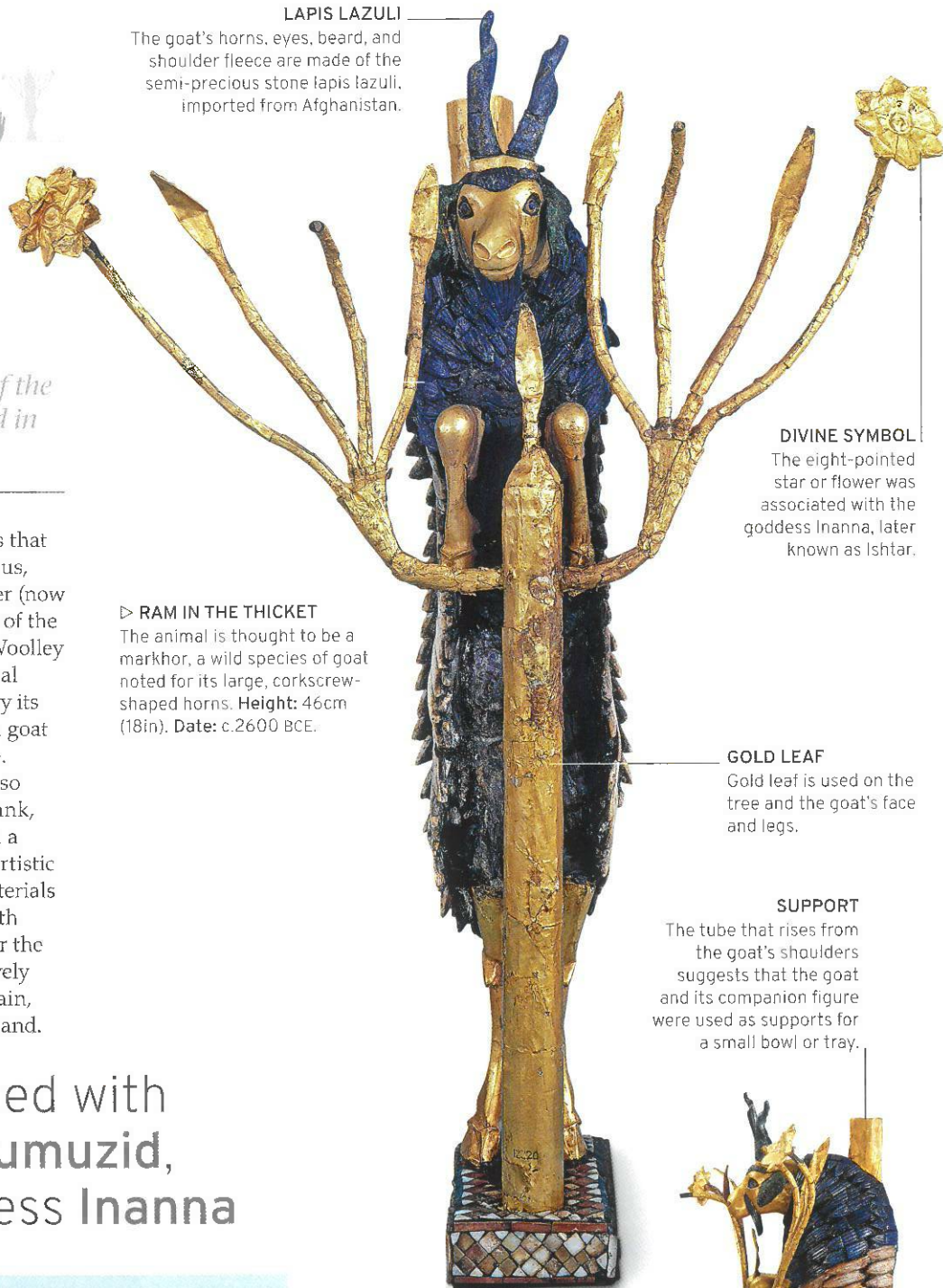
The wooden base is decorated with silver, lapis lazuli, shell, and limestone.

BODY FLEECE

The body fleece is made of intricately carved shell.

▷ SIDE VIEW

The figure and its near-identical companion piece were probably arranged facing one another.





Scale



Cycladic Figure

A type of radically pure ancient sculpture that has been much imitated and forged in the modern world

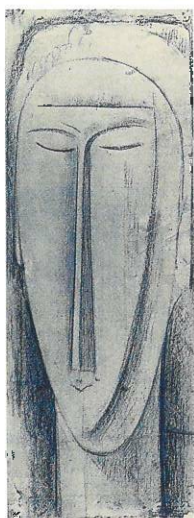
The term "Cycladic" refers to a civilization that flourished in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE on the Greek Cyclades islands in the Aegean Sea. These islands, particularly Naxos and Paros, were renowned for their high-quality marble, which was used to produce a distinctive type of figure in which the forms of the body and face are simplified to an almost abstract purity. The figures are mainly female and are generally depicted standing with arms crossed over their stomach, and their legs separated by a deep cleft. Shown here are a complete female figure (*far right*) and a head that has been broken off another figure (*right*), both slightly under life-size.

The purpose of the figures is uncertain, but many have been found in graves, so they may have had some ritual use. Since most are female, they were perhaps connected with a fertility or reproductive deity. In the 20th century, modern sculptors such as Brancusi and Modigliani were inspired by their elegant simplicity of form. Because of this very simplicity, they have been much imitated by forgers.

INFLUENCE OF CYCLADIC SCULPTURE

In the early 20th century many progressive painters and sculptors were inspired by non-Western art, finding in it a vigour and freshness lacking in mainstream European art. African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian art were all influential. Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920) was particularly enthusiastic about Cycladic sculpture. Its impact is notable in the serenity and simplified forms of his sculpted stone heads (see p.308), which are strikingly close in spirit to Cycladic art, as can be seen in the pencil study shown here.

STUDY FOR A
SCULPTED HEAD,
AMEDEO MODIGLIANI, 1912



▷ CYCLADIC FIGURE

The complete figures vary from 8cm (3in) to almost life-size. The characteristic down-pointed feet of this figure meant that it could not stand upright. Height: 140cm (55in). Date: c.2800–c.2300 BCE.

LUSTROUS MARBLE

The most famous stone from the Cyclades comes from Paros (Parian marble); sculptors prized its regular grain and lustrous white colour.

SMOOTH SURFACE

The smooth surfaces were created by painstaking rubbing with abrasive powder made from emery (an extremely hard stone mined on Naxos).

CROSSED ARMS

The female figure has its arms crossed in typical fashion, with left arm above right.

SHALLOW DEPTH

The figures are usually made from slim rectangular blocks of marble, so the backs of heads are flattened.



◁ SUBTLE DETAILING

This profile view shows that the nose is carved as one with the forehead in a single smooth, shallow curve. An ear is visible in low relief on the side of the head. Although this 27cm (10½in) high head is now almost featureless, originally it may have been enlivened by coloured paint.

DAMAGE

This damage looks accidental, but sometimes Cycladic figures seem to have been deliberately broken, perhaps in some kind of ritual.



Tell Asmar,
Iraq

Scale



Tell Asmar Hoard

A collection of distinctive statues of worshippers with the hallmark large staring eyes of Sumerian temple sculpture

Sumer was one of the first civilizations in the world, emerging in the region known as Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now Iraq. Sumerian city-states developed a sophisticated culture centred around temples dedicated to their gods, in which art and crafts played a major role.

The excavation of one such temple, in Tell Asmar (ancient Eshnunna), revealed a hoard of twelve small stone statues of different sizes, carved from alabaster in a distinctive style. Apart from one who is kneeling, the ten men and two women are all portrayed in the same static, standing pose, with hands clasped and faces raised to heaven. Although the figures are highly abstracted, their dress and hair exhibit the styles of the time; the men are bare-chested and wearing long skirts, with crimped hair and beards, while the women wear dresses. The most striking feature, however, is the exaggeratedly large eyes, given prominence by an inlay of white shell and black limestone, fixed in place with bitumen. Each figure was believed to embody the essence of a worshipper, and some are inscribed with the name of who they represent. Placed in the shrine, they carried their dedicatee's prayers to the gods.

ALABASTER

As they are both relatively soft and easy to work, the two different types of alabaster, gypsum and calcite, were used for fine indoor sculpture in ancient Mesopotamia and the Middle East. The softer of the two, gypsum alabaster (as used for the votive statue on this page) is generally a translucent white and finely textured, while calcite alabaster (right), favoured by the ancient Egyptians, is more durable, and often banded, mottled, or marbled with different colours.

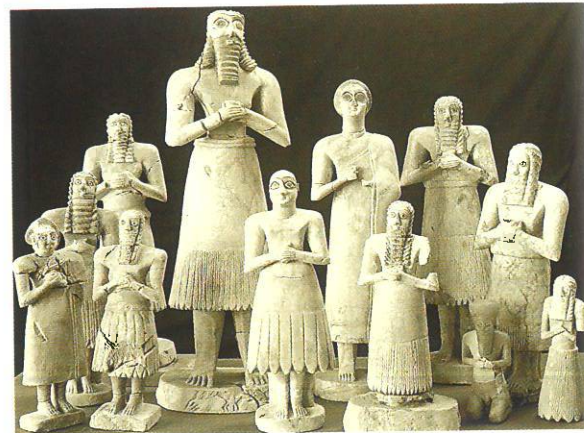
EGYPTIAN CANOPIC JAR, c.664–525 BCE



The two largest statues in the hoard may represent the god Abu and a mother goddess figure

▷ PRAYERFUL INDIVIDUALS

The 12 figures of the Tell Asmar hoard are shown here. The varying sizes of the figures, and the type of stone they are made of, reflect the status of the worshipper they represent.



TILTED HEAD

The head is tilted back slightly to look towards heaven.

STARING EYES

The wide-open eyes may represent an attempt to communicate directly with the deity.

BLACK BEARD

The highly stylized beard and hair were originally blackened with bitumen.

CLASPED HANDS

Hands are clasped in a gesture of prayer or supplication.

SKIRT AND BODY

The pleated hem of the skirt forms a solid circular base to the cone-shaped body.

◁ TELL ASMAR HOARD

This gypsum alabaster figure was discovered in a temple dedicated to the god Abu in Eshnunna (now Tell Asmar), Iraq, and typifies the sculptural style of the Early Dynastic period of Sumer (c.2900–c.2350 BCE).
Height: 29.5 cm (11½ in).
Date: c.2900–2550 BCE.



Great Sphinx of Giza

A colossal, majestic limestone sphinx honouring the pharaoh Khafre, carved from the bedrock beside the pyramid complex at Giza

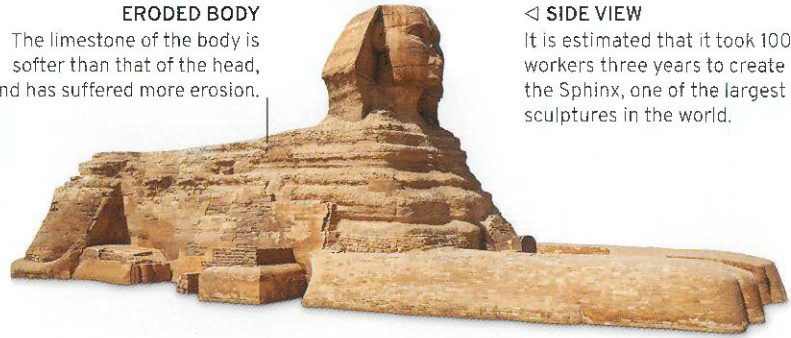


In ancient Egyptian culture, the sphinx, with the head of a human and the body of a lion, had iconic status as a powerful guardian, and many pharaohs had their likeness carved on the body of a sphinx to guard their tombs. Located next to the second pyramid at Giza, that of Khafre (ruled c.2558–c.2532 BCE), the Great Sphinx is believed to bear the face of Khafre, its likely creator.

This monolithic sculpture on the plateau of Giza is thought to have been carved from a rock formation, the lower body and legs formed by cutting a ditch around it. The head is adorned with a *nemes* (royal headdress); the face, though lacking its nose and ceremonial beard, gazes across the desert with a compelling power. Much mystery surrounds it, but during the New Kingdom (c.1550–c.1077 BCE) it is known to have been revered as the sun god. Wind and sand have eroded much of the detailed carving and worn away large parts of the body, yet despite this, its monumental scale ensures the Sphinx remains a breathtaking spectacle alongside the pyramids at Giza.

ERODED BODY

The limestone of the body is softer than that of the head, and has suffered more erosion.



◀ SIDE VIEW

It is estimated that it took 100 workers three years to create the Sphinx, one of the largest sculptures in the world.

MISSING NOSE

The missing nose would have been about 1m (3ft 3in) wide.

▽ GREAT SPHINX OF GIZA

The Great Sphinx is by far the largest and most magnificent of all the Egyptian sphinxes, and has become a symbol of both ancient and modern Egypt. Height: 20m (66ft). Date: c.2550 BCE.

Scale



THE SPHINX IN OTHER CULTURES

Although usually associated with Egypt, the sphinx also figured in other ancient cultures, notably in the Asian and Greek traditions, whose sphinxes had wings and were often female. In Greek myth, Oedipus famously solved the riddle set by the Sphinx that guarded the city of Thebes, causing her to kill herself.



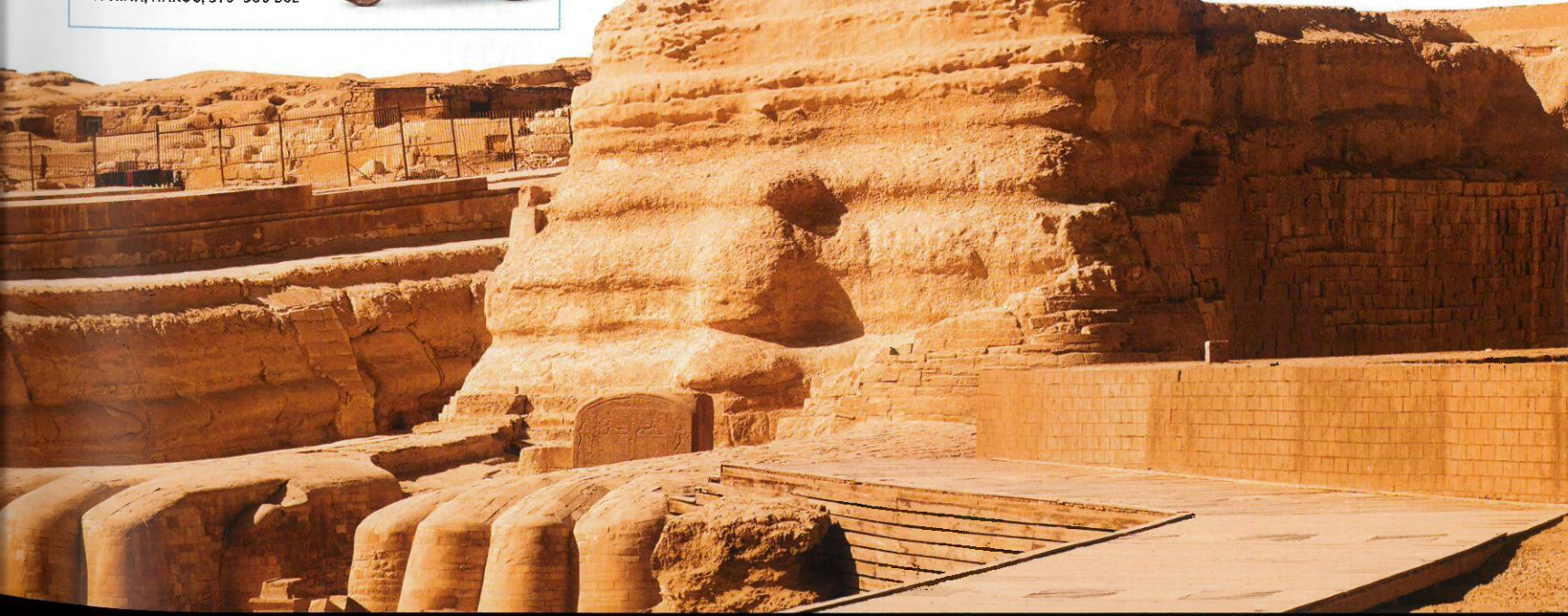
SPHINX, NAXOS, 570–560 BCE

PRIMARY COLOURS

Traces of pigment on the face and body suggest it may originally have been painted in bold colours.

MISSING BEARD

It is likely that a ceremonial pharaonic beard was added to the monument at a later date, but this too is now missing.



▽ STANDARD OF UR

The two long sides of the Standard have been dubbed "Peace" (see below) and "War" (see opposite). The end panels are also arranged in three bands; most bear images of animals, mainly goats. Height 21.6cm (8½in). Date: c.2600–2500 BCE.



◁ SOVEREIGN HOST

Ur's ruler presides in state at a banquet. The Sumerian word for sovereign was *lugal*, literally "big man".

▷ MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT

A musician holds a lyre in one of the earliest representations of a stringed instrument.



FRUITS OF THE LAND

Farm labourers line up, some with goats and asses, to pay a tax of food to the ruler.

Standard of Ur

A glorious mosaic box commemorating victory in war that is a symbol of one of the world's earliest centres of civilization



The Standard of Ur is a startling reminder of the great sophistication of the first urban civilizations. Its very existence in its current form is almost as extraordinary. The work consists of inlaid mosaic scenes made from shell, limestone, and lapis lazuli attached to a wooden frame with bitumen glue. When it was discovered in 1927 in a royal tomb at Ur (now in southern Iraq) during an archaeological excavation, the bitumen had decayed and the wood disintegrated. By registering the location of each piece taken from the soil and using plaster or wax to record the shapes of missing objects, the team was able to reconstruct it in its present form.

The Standard owes its present title to the Sumerian city-state where it was found. It lay beside the skeleton of a man who had gone to the grave with his ruler.

Leonard Woolley (see p.22), leading the excavation, identified this figure as a standard-bearer, and conjectured that in life he had carried the striking decorated box on a pole to advertise his master's achievements. His suggestion is a guess, but no more convincing alternative has yet been accepted.

What is certain is that the box's four panels illustrate one of the world's earliest city-states in peace and war. One side commemorates a military victory, the other a celebration banquet. On each, the city's ruler rises in the uppermost tier head-and-shoulders above those around him. The tomb was that of a king provisionally identified as Ur-Pabilsag (died c.2550 BCE). Otherwise nothing is known of him, but in the Standard he is enthroned for future ages in regal splendour.

▽ REVERSE VIEW

The War panel is an exercise in triumphalism, showing Ur's ruler (top centre) surveying naked, bound, and bleeding prisoners. Soldiers and war-chariots line up in the lower registers.



◁ WHEELED WARFARE

Wheeled vehicles were a Sumerian invention, and these war chariots are among the very first depictions of them.

Scale



PRISONERS OF WAR

Captured enemy soldiers are led naked before the ruler to await death or a life of servitude.



GATHERING SPEED

The four asses drawing the chariots gather speed as the strip progresses, from a sedate walk (*far left*) to a gallop.



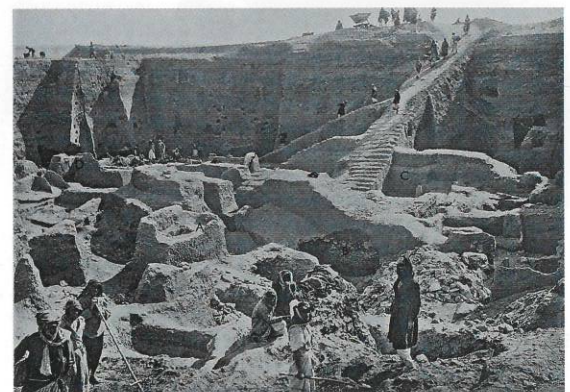
The **lapis lazuli** in the Standard came from **Afghanistan**, indicating the vast extent of the **Sumerians'** trade links

◁ END PANEL

The enigmatic images on this end panel feature scenes of people and animals; the image in the top register closely resembles the statuette known as "Ram in the Thicket", which was also found at Ur (see p.22).

THE ROYAL CEMETERY AT UR

The magnificent Standard was one of many finds made in the cemetery at Ur excavated by Woolley's team from 1926 onwards (see also p.22). Among the 2,000 or more graves unearthed there, Woolley identified 16 as royal burials because of the richness of the goods found within them.



EXCAVATIONS AT THE CEMETERY

▷ HEAD OF AN AKKADIAN KING

Often referred to as the Head of Sargon, despite being officially unidentified, this life-size bronze portrait head of an Akkadian ruler remains remarkably evocative, even after being vandalized. **Height:** 31cm (12in). **Date:** c.2300 BCE.

EXPRESSIVE BROWS

The stylized eyebrows give the face an expression of benevolence and humanity.

EMPTY SOCKETS

The eyes may originally have been inset with an inlay of precious stone.

OVERSIZED NOSE

The size of the nose is exaggerated to emphasize Sargon's grandeur, but was flattened by whoever defaced the statue.

GEOMETRIC BEARD

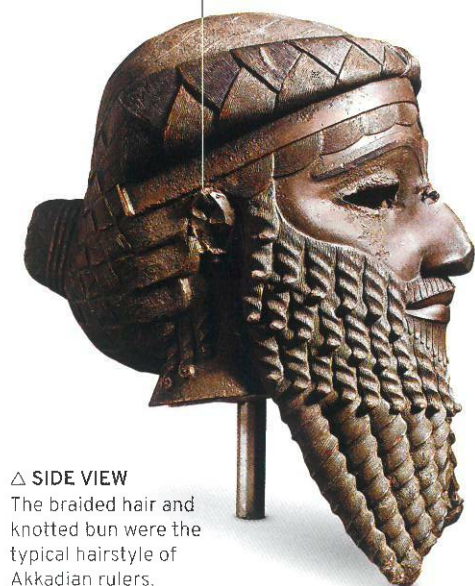
While the face is portrayed with some naturalism, the beard and hair are more geometrically stylized.

DAMAGED EARS

Little remains of the ears, which were crudely torn off.

BROKEN BEARD

The beard, emblem of wisdom and maturity, was shortened by the vandals deliberately to humiliate the memory of the king.



△ SIDE VIEW

The braided hair and knotted bun were the typical hairstyle of Akkadian rulers.



Scale



Head of an Akkadian King

A striking bronze representation of an Akkadian ruler, possibly Sargon the Great, created in Mesopotamia around 2300 BCE



In the early 24th century BCE, Mesopotamia (the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq) consisted of a collection of small city-states. In one of these, Akkad, a ruler came to power who went on to conquer neighbouring states and establish the Akkadian Empire.

Damaged magnificence

This emperor, known as Sargon the Great, wielded unprecedented power and commanded godlike reverence, inspiring numerous images and inscriptions testifying to his achievements. This bronze head is believed to be a representation of Sargon, or possibly one of his successors, and may be all that remains of a full-body statue of the ruler.

The head, expertly cast in bronze, is portrayed with great artistic skill, as befits such a powerful emperor, with the features slightly idealized for emphasis. Its

naturalistic style was new to Akkadian art, at a time when depictions of local gods, considered kings of specific regions, were giving way to portraits of exalted earthly rulers – of whom Sargon was the first.

What is immediately apparent is that the head has been mutilated: the eyes are crudely gouged out, the ears torn off, the nose flattened, and the beard broken. These are the very features that distinguished him as a strong and revered leader, so this literal defacing and beheading was likely deliberate – a symbolic gesture by a later conqueror to indicate that Sargon was not immortal, and the empire he had created had been brought to an end.

The sculpture's beauty signalled the king's inner beauty or goodness

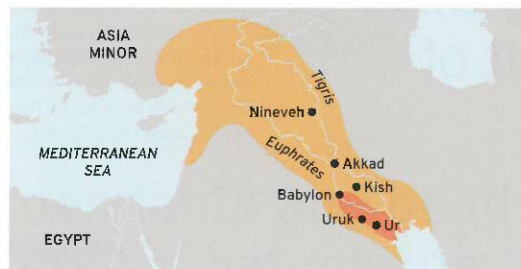


△ SARGON'S VICTORY STELE, c.2300 BCE

This fragment of a victory stele, or commemorative column, shows Sargon leading a triumphal procession. His hair is in a royal bun and he is shaded with a parasol by an attendant.

SARGON OF AKKAD

According to tradition, Sargon (ruled c.2334–2279 BCE) rose from humble origins to become cupbearer to the king of Kish. He went on to found the city of Akkad, proclaiming himself king. During his reign, he conquered all the city-states of Sumer (the southern region of Mesopotamia), establishing the Akkadian Empire – notable as the first empire in recorded history – which stretched as far as the Mediterranean, and north into Asia Minor.



KEY

AKKADIAN EMPIRE ORIGINAL SUMERIAN TERRITORY



△ GODDESS INANNA

Sargon claimed to derive his authority from the powerful goddess Inanna (or Ishtar), the queen of Heaven, whose cult became one of the most widespread in Sumer. She is seen here in a terracotta relief from Tell Asmar, Iraq, early 2nd millennium BCE.

Mohenjo-daro,
Pakistan

Scale



Mohenjo-daro Dancing Girl

*Small enough to fit in the palm of a hand,
a vivacious figurine that testifies to a
civilization that flourished 4,500 years ago*

This small, characterful statue of a slim young woman was discovered in 1926 at the archaeological site of Mohenjo-daro, in present-day Pakistan. Constructed around 2500 BCE, Mohenjo-daro was a major centre of the great Indus Valley Civilization, first excavated in the early 1920s. Made using the lost-wax method of bronze casting (see p.164), the statuette opened people's eyes to the technical achievements of one of the world's earliest urban civilizations. The use of metal was unusual, as most of the many figurines from Indus Valley sites were made of fired clay.

Naked apart from a stack of bangles on the left arm and four on the right, the girl is standing with her head slightly bent back, knees flexed, and one arm on a hip, a pose that has led to her being identified as "dancing". In fact, it is not known if the figure is dancing – it has been suggested it may depict a warrior, a labourer (the unencumbered right arm free for work), or even a goddess – but it has become established as the Dancing Girl. The arms and legs are disproportionately long, but the figure's natural look and the insouciant self-confidence of its pose have won it wide renown.

It has been suggested
that the **Dancing Girl**
may be a **portrait** of
a **real woman**

FACIAL FEATURES

Some commentators see the facial features as African, although the hairstyle and body decorations are distinctively Indian.

BRAIDED BUN

The girl's long hair is braided into a bun that rests on her right shoulder.

NECKLACE

The torso is naked but for a necklace with three large pendants.

BANGLES

The girl has 25 bangles decorating her left arm, and only four on her right.

LOST ACCESSORY

In its left hand the figure apparently held an object, now lost.

▷ MOHENJO-DARO DANCING GIRL

The small figure's feisty vitality gives a human aspect to a civilization otherwise known at the time of its discovery mainly for its fired-brick ruins. **Height:** 10.8cm (4¹/₄in). **Date:** c.2500 BCE.

MISSING FEET

The figure was probably cast with feet, which have broken off.



Babylonian Jewellery

Gold ornaments dating back to the early days of Babylonian grandeur and still retaining their original glittering lustre



Gold was treasured from the beginnings of history for its malleability and resistance to corrosion, as well as its beauty. In Mesopotamia (the fertile region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, home to successive ancient cultures, including the Babylonians) gold artefacts were being produced by early in the 4th millennium BCE. Thought to have been made in the 18th or 17th century BCE, the pendants and beads shown here demonstrate in exquisite detail the degree of sophistication the goldsmith's art had by then attained. Several employ the technique of granulation, originating with the Sumerians around 2500 BCE (see box).

The jewellery is thought to have come from Dilbat, a hill town in the Euphrates valley of what is now Iraq, which was conquered by Sumu-Abum, first king of Babylon's First Dynasty, shortly before the pieces were made. Besides their beauty, the pendants had a talismanic significance, with each depicting or symbolizing one of the many deities in the Babylonian pantheon.

GODDESS LAMA

The two female figures wearing headdresses and long flounced robes are thought to represent the goddess Lama, a protective deity.



TRIPLE STRANDS

The separate beads made up a triple-stranded necklace from which other ornaments could be hung.



▽ BABYLONIAN JEWELLERY

The pendants were found with a hoard that also included gold cylinder seals and lids. Diam. of largest medallion: 3.6cm (1 1/2 in). Date: c.1800–1600 BCE.

STORM GOD

Crooked lines representing forked lightning symbolized Adad, god of storms and rain.



MOON GOD

The crescent shape was emblematic of the moon god, Sin.



GODDESS ISHTAR

The eight rosettes on two pendants suggest they were sacred to Ishtar, goddess of love and war, whose symbol was an eight-pointed star.



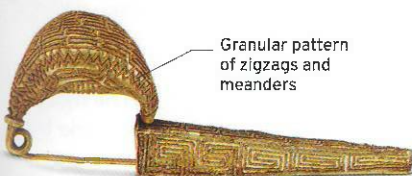
SUN GOD

The solar image of rays emanating from a central circle was the symbol of Shamash, the sun god.



GRANULATED JEWELLERY

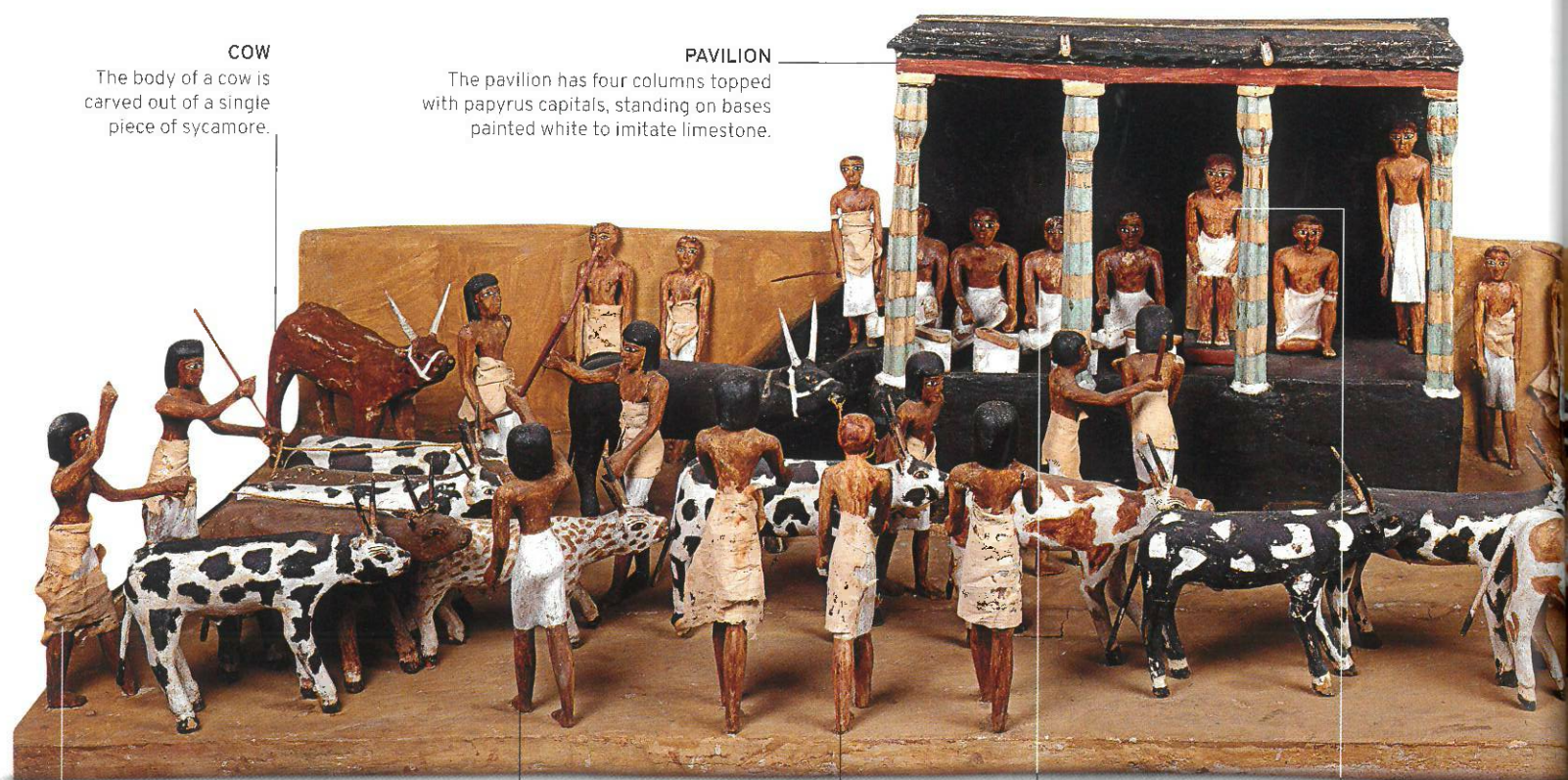
The oldest known jewellery made using the decorative technique of granulation, in which tiny spheres of gold are fused to a surface in a pattern, date from the city-state of Ur around 4,500 years ago. By the 8th century BCE the method had reached Etruria in present-day Italy. Etruscan goldsmiths excelled in the technique, creating exquisite and intricate works (see pp.54–5).



Granular pattern of zigzags and meanders

ETRUSCAN GOLD FIBULA, 700–600 BCE

The pendants and beads formed part of a **hoard** that may have been held by a **jeweller** for **raw materials**

**COW**

The body of a cow is carved out of a single piece of sycamore.

PAVILION

The pavilion has four columns topped with papyrus capitals, standing on bases painted white to imitate limestone.

LINEN KILT

Fragments of linen are attached above a white-painted kilt.

HUMAN FIGURES

The people are made of conifer wood, with arms and legs slotted in separately.

HIGHER RANKS

A shaved head denotes higher-ranked estate workers.

SCRIBES

Four scribes take notes on papyrus scrolls and wooden writing boards.

▷ MEKETRE

Meketre is depicted seated on a throne, with his son Inyotef sitting to his left.

**△ MEKETRE TOMB FIGURES**

This model is the largest found in the tomb, and shows Meketre and Inyotef inspecting a parade of cattle, probably as part of an annual tax assessment. Width: 175cm (69in). Date: c.1981–1975 BCE.

Scale



Meketre Tomb Figures

Scores of beautifully carved and painted figurines concealed in the tomb of an Egyptian high official to serve him in the afterlife



Thebes, Egypt

Arrayed in scenes that mimic the life of a prosperous estate, these silent wooden figures comprise one of the most engaging testaments of ancient Egyptian life. They come from the rock-cut tomb of Meketre, chief steward to the 11th Dynasty pharaoh Mentuhotep II and his successors.

Servants in the afterlife

In his tomb were laid dozens of shabtis, or funerary figurines, depicting workers and servants to provide for Meketre in the next life. Mainly relating to food production, the remarkably well-preserved models

include a granary, a bakery, a brewery, a stable, a slaughterhouse, cattle, and even a garden. Made at a time during the Middle Kingdom when non-royal officials were gaining power and wealth, the figures were produced in carpentry workshops using adzes and bow-drills, then hand-carved to differentiate men, women, officials, and occupations. The figures of Meketre and his son are finer, probably made by a master-craftsman. Concealed in a bricked-up area near Meketre's burial chamber, the models were missed by looters, who left behind them some of the most vivid and haunting pieces of ancient Egyptian art.

SCALE

The human figures are at roughly one-seventh to one-eighth scale.

BREAD AND BEER

Conical loaves of bread and bottles of beer are carried in a basket.

LIBATIONS

This man bears a vessel for libations (drink offered to the gods) and an incense burner.

WOODEN BASE

The base and backboard are made of rough sycamore wood 2–3cm (¾–1¼in) thick.

PROCESSION OF OFFERING-BEARERS

The two men and two women may be Meketre's children, and are shown carrying offerings for his burial ritual, including bread, beer, geese, and folded linen sheets. The yellow wood represents the desert floor on the way to the tomb.

HAND FED

The two oxen in the left-hand stall are being hand-fed with grain by two stablemen.

CATTLE STABLE

Oxen are being fattened for slaughter in this model stall, with the four on the right feeding from a manger.

TOMB BOATS

For ancient Egyptians, models of boats interred in tombs were intended to help the soul navigate its way to the afterlife. In Meketre's case, they would also have represented the official inspection tours and leisure cruises he undertook along the Nile during his life. His tomb contained 13 boats (four travelling boats, two kitchen boats, four yachts, two canoes, and this hunting or sporting boat), all provided with models of the crew, including cooks, sailors, fishermen, and Meketre and his son.

Helmsman controlling rudder

Shelter of woven reeds and decorative shields

Meketre, seated

Girl offering Meketre a mallard

Fishermen with harpoon

Fisherman carrying red *Mormyrus* fish

HUNTING OR SPORTING BOAT

When the archaeologists cleaned the tomb figures, they found the fingerprints of those who had made them or placed them in the tomb

Knossos,
Crete

Minoan Snake Goddess

A figurine regarded as an icon of Minoan art, but whose cultural and religious significance remains a mystery

Little is known of the religion of the Minoan civilization, which flourished in Crete between about 2000 and 1100 BCE. So when two female figurines made of Egyptian faience (see box), with bare breasts and clutching what appeared to be writhing snakes, were discovered under the Royal Palace at Knossos, they were assumed to represent goddesses, or, at the least, priestesses. However, there is little other evidence of the existence of such a goddess in the Minoan pantheon. Whether or not it is accurate, the name “snake goddess” has persisted, and the smaller of the two statuettes in particular, shown here, has become a popular symbol of Minoan culture.

The statue’s formal pose suggests some form of ritual: the arms are outstretched and the snakes held high. The very deliberately exposed breasts give the impression that she is a maternal goddess, or perhaps a priestess presiding over a fertility rite. Her colourful formal dress and ceremonial apron also point to the figurine’s having some religious or ritual significance.

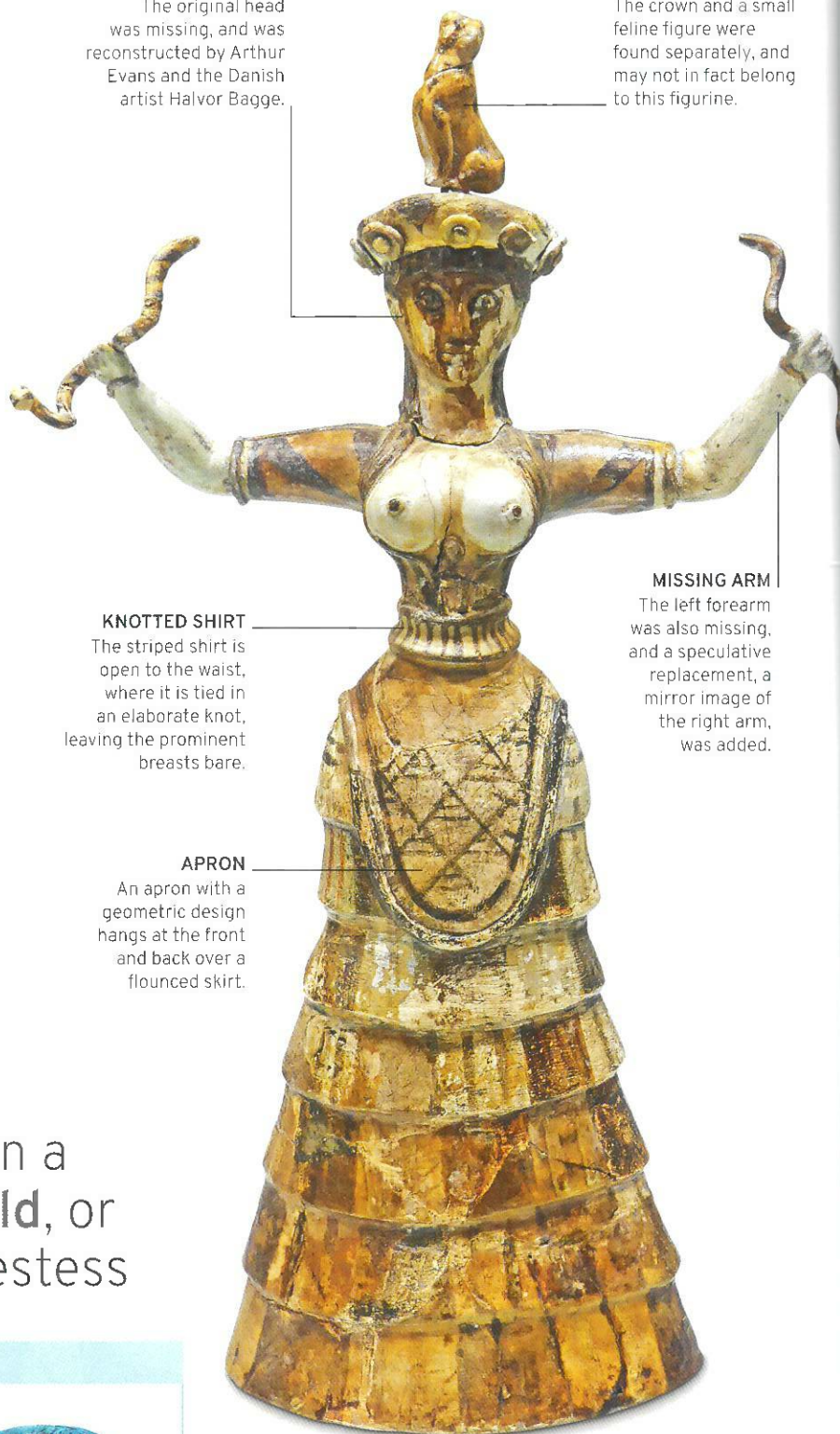
The figure may have been a goddess of the household, or a “snake-wrangling” priestess

MISSING HEAD

The original head was missing, and was reconstructed by Arthur Evans and the Danish artist Halvor Bagge.

CAT AND HAT

The crown and a small feline figure were found separately, and may not in fact belong to this figurine.



KNOTTED SHIRT

The striped shirt is open to the waist, where it is tied in an elaborate knot, leaving the prominent breasts bare.

MISSING ARM

The left forearm was also missing, and a speculative replacement, a mirror image of the right arm, was added.

APRON

An apron with a geometric design hangs at the front and back over a flounced skirt.

EGYPTIAN FAIENCE

Known as Egyptian faience to distinguish it from true faience, the technique of moulding figures in a crushed quartz paste and then firing was developed in Mesopotamia and perfected by the ancient Egyptians, who passed the skill on to trading partners such as the Minoans. The fine, brightly coloured glaze was particularly suitable for items of jewellery and small figurines.



ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FAIENCE FIGURINE OF A HIPPOPOTAMUS, 2000–1900 BCE

△ MINOAN SNAKE GODDESS

The faience “snake goddess” was discovered among a collection of broken and discarded items in an underground chamber beneath the Royal Palace by the British archaeologist Arthur Evans, who controversially reconstructed the missing parts. Height 29.5cm (11½in). Date: c.1600 BCE.

Scale



Nebra Sky Disc

One of the most exciting archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, a Bronze Age depiction of the heavens that is the earliest known astronomical chart



Believed to date from about 1600 BCE, the Nebra sky disc is a unique Bronze Age artefact, depicting astronomical features of particular importance to its creators. The bronze base has a striking blue-green patina to represent the sky, with heavenly bodies – sun, moon, and stars – picked out in gold leaf. It is not known whether the disc's function was as a practical astronomical instrument, or whether it had some religious significance, but either way it gives a unique insight into early humans' observations of the sky.

Analysis of the materials has shown that the disc as it was discovered is the result of several stages of development, with additions of astronomical detail

at different times. The original design consisted of simply a gold disc and a crescent (most likely representing the sun and the moon), amid 32 small gold circles (representing the stars); the arcs on either edge, and at the bottom, and the punched indentations around the rim, were all added at later times.

The sky disc was uncovered in 1999 by looters, who sold it

BRONZE AGE ASTRONOMY

Bronze Age communities were primarily agricultural, and used astronomical phenomena to mark the passage of time, the changing of the seasons, and the best times for planting and harvesting their crops. The two solstices in summer and winter were one indicator, monitored by using astronomically aligned instruments. Another was the annual disappearance and reappearance of the Pleiades constellation.



THE PLEIADES

SUN DISC

The gold disc is generally taken to represent the sun, or possibly the full moon.

PLEIADES

This group of seven stars is believed to represent the constellation of the Pleiades.



CRESCENT

The crescent represents the crescent moon (or possibly the sun or moon in eclipse).

SOLSTICE MARKERS

Golden arcs on opposite edges show the angle between the positions of sunset at the summer and winter solstices (the gliding of the left-hand arc is missing).

SUN TRANSPORT

An arc at the bottom, inscribed with parallel lines, may depict a "solar barge" to carry the sun across the heavens, or a rainbow.

◁ NEBRA SKY DISC

The sky disc is a thick, solid-bronze plate, which has (probably deliberately) been allowed to develop a deep blue-green patina, with the design inscribed upon it and then gilded. **Diam.:** approx. 30cm (11¾in). **Date:** c.1600 BCE.

Scale





Erlitou, China

Scale



Erlitou Plaque

Dating far back into Chinese prehistory, a stunning bronze and turquoise plaque with a zoomorphic design

Bronze casting was known in China from around 3000 BCE, probably evolving as a byproduct of the use of high-temperature kilns for ceramic production. The earliest bronzes were utilitarian items, such as knives, but by around 2000 BCE objects with the grace and beauty of this small, turquoise-studded plaque were featuring as funerary goods in the graves of the elite.

The plaque is from the Erlitou culture, an important early Bronze Age urban society in China's Yellow River valley that existed from around 1900 to 1500 BCE. The remains of a bronze foundry and turquoise workshops have been found at the site, as well as other decorated objects including bells, cauldrons, and ritual vessels. The plaque shown here is inlaid with neatly trimmed turquoise tesserae forming a stylized animal mask. Its exact purpose is not known, but the fact that bronze bells were found buried with similar plaques suggests it was for ceremonial use by a figure such as a shaman. The loopholes at the corners together with its slightly curved shape indicate that it might have been tied around a shaman's arm (or perhaps to his chest) during ritual offerings, accompanied by the sound of the bell.

THE TAOTIE

The stylized animal head on the Erlitou plaque represents an early form of the *taotie*, a mythical creature that was a staple of ancient Chinese art. Described in classical sources as "one of the four evil creatures of the world", it was viewed as a savage beast whose image could be used to scare away potential enemies.



▷ TURQUOISE INLAIS

Rectangular pieces of turquoise were inlaid into the bronze.



▽ ERLITOU PLAQUE

The plaque's stylized animal-mask design may have been intended to ward off evil spirits, possibly as part of a shaman's paraphernalia. **Height:** 17cm (6in) long. **Date:** c.1900–1500 BCE



CONTOURS

The plaque is waisted, seemingly imitating the shape of a human body.

EYES

Protruding balls of turquoise represent the creature's eyes.

LOOPHOLES

The loopholes may have been used to tie the plaque around the arm during ritual offerings of food and drink to the spirits.

Three such plaques were found in graves at Erlitou, two of them placed on the chest of the deceased



Scale



Minoan Octopus Vase

A huge-eyed octopus spreading its tentacles in all directions, capturing the appeal and immediacy of mid-Bronze Age Minoan art

The art of few, if any, early cultures matches the freshness and vividness of that of Minoan Crete, which flourished in the 2nd millennium BCE, more than a thousand years before the classical Greek city-states rose to prominence. Excavations on the island have revealed wall paintings of stunning originality, as well as pottery of extraordinary charm and vitality.

Dating from around 1500 BCE, this vase represents the pinnacle of the Minoan potter's art. By the time it was made, vessels were fired at a higher temperature than in the early Bronze Age, producing ware of finer quality. The vase, designed to hold a liquid such as oil or wine, was wheel-made from two separate halves joined together, with the handles and base applied later. The design was painted on by hand, employing a dark slip (liquefied clay) made from shale. The curvilinear shape of the octopus and its writhing tentacles extend across the surface and echo the round-bellied form of the pot, generating a sense of liveliness and movement. Although there is little attempt at realism, the artist's attention to detail is seen in, for example, the rendering of the suckers.

The octopuses depicted on this and other similar vases typify the Marine Style of the 15th century BCE, when Minoan civilization was at its height. As a Mediterranean seafaring culture, the Minoans valued the sea and were inspired by its creatures.

MARINE LIFE

Sea-themed decorative images scattered among the tentacles include sea urchins, shells, corals, and seaweed.

The pot may be the work of an artist dubbed the **Marine Style Master**

LIGHT-ON-DARK AND DARK-ON-LIGHT

Minoan potters applied great creativity in their use of coloration as much as form. In the Kamares ware from the Middle Minoan period (c.2100–c.1600 BCE), white and red were used on a dark background to make vivid, dense spiral and geometric patterns. In the later New Palace period (c.1600–1425 BCE), the colour effect was reversed, with darker hues on a light ground exuberantly depicting plants and marine life.

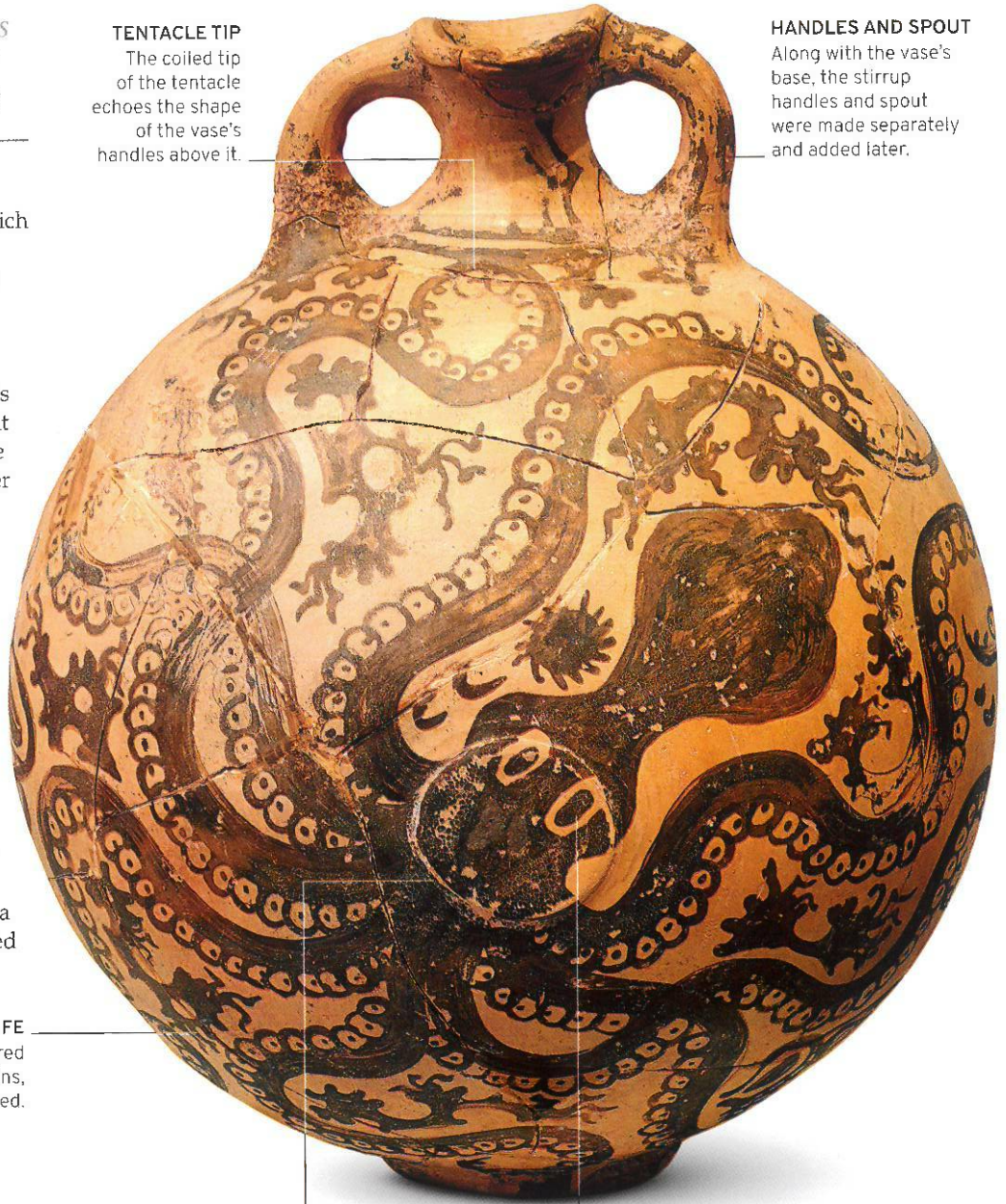


TENTACLE TIP

The coiled tip of the tentacle echoes the shape of the vase's handles above it.

HANDLES AND SPOUT

Along with the vase's base, the stirrup handles and spout were made separately and added later.



TWO HALVES

Raised discs, which appear on both sides, were the bases of each half of the vase before being joined together while the clay was still wet.

APPEALING EYES

The octopus's wide, almost cartoon-like eyes are a non-naturalistic feature that makes the image highly appealing to the viewer.

△ MINOAN OCTOPUS VASE

This round ceramic jar with engaging octopus is typical of the Minoan Marine Style.
Height: 27cm (10½in).
Date: c.1500 BCE.

CUT-OUT EARS

The ears are cut out of the sheet gold, accentuating the mask's three-dimensional effect.

EYELIDS

The eyelids are designed so that they appear either open or closed, depending on the viewpoint.

EYEBROWS

Uniquely among the Mycenaean masks, the eyebrows are shown as two separate, stylized arches.



DAMAGE

The thin nose is dented and crushed from the long burial.

FACIAL HAIR

The nobleman is depicted with a full beard and a handlebar moustache.

◁ SIDE VIEW

This view shows how thin the mask was hammered – presumably, in part, not to waste any of the precious gold.

TOOLS

Sharp chisel-like tools were used to delineate the finer details, such as the hair of the beard and moustache.

SMALL HOLES

The mask is believed to have been tied to the face of the corpse with twine attached through the holes by the ears.

Scale



◁ MASK OF AGAMEMNON

The Mask of Agamemnon was crafted from a sheet of solid gold, skilfully hammered into relief to adorn the buried corpse of a Mycenaean nobleman. **Height:** 25cm (10in).
Date: c.1550–1500 BCE.

Mask of Agamemnon

A 16th-century BCE gold funerary mask thought to be the likeness of a ruler of the ancient Greek city-state of Mycenae



Mycenae, Greece

In 1876, just outside Mycenae, German amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered a necropolis of shaft graves containing the bodies of noble men, women, and children, along with golden funerary objects, including weapons, jewellery, and death masks. One piece in particular stood out as the finest, which Schliemann believed to be a likeness of Agamemnon, leader of the Achaeans in the Trojan War.

Exquisite craftsmanship

In fact, the mask, along with the other finds in the burial site known as Grave Circle A, was shown to date from the 16th century BCE, some 300 to 400 years before the reign of Agamemnon and presumed dates of the Trojan War, in the 12th century BCE. However, the title of Mask of Agamemnon has persisted to this day.

The craftsmanship of this gold mask is exceptional: others from the same vast cache of objects, although opulent, seem crude in comparison. To make the mask, a thin sheet of burnished gold was cut to shape and hammered into relief over a wooden former. Once the basic shape had been formed by the repoussé technique (*see p.81*), the mask was turned over and the features picked out. This was done by chasing the details into the face using chisel-like tools to make indentations and grooves, and a finer cutting of the outline. The life-sized mask had been intended for a powerful person of high standing to wear on his journey to the next world, accompanied by a rich array of funerary goods. The mask's striking features are what have earned this spectacular object pride of place among the other treasures found at Mycenae.

The mask's **striking features** have led to its description as *the Mona Lisa of prehistory*

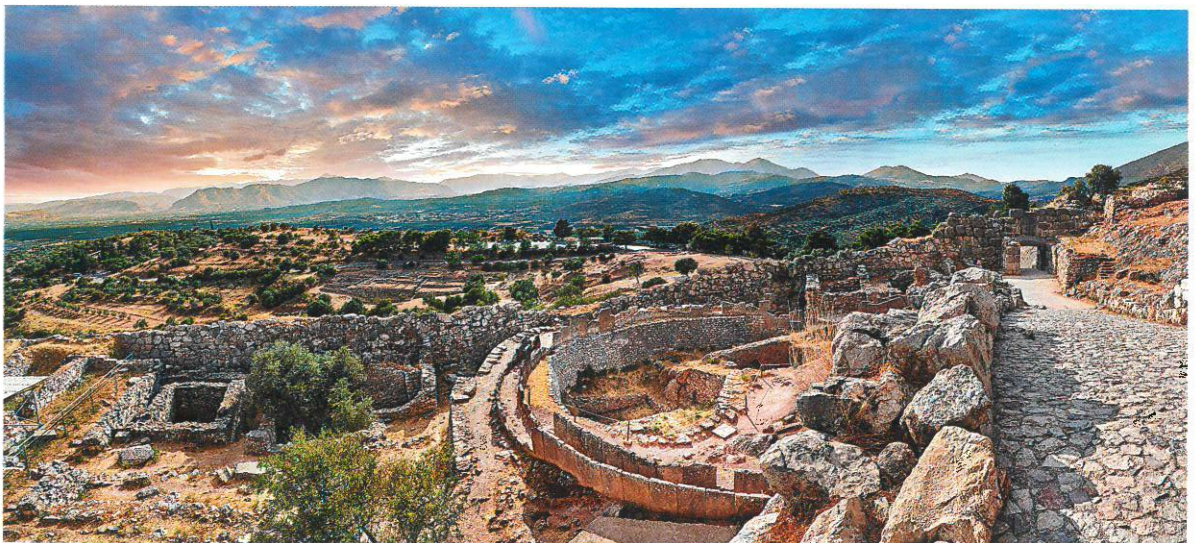


△ NESTOR'S CUP

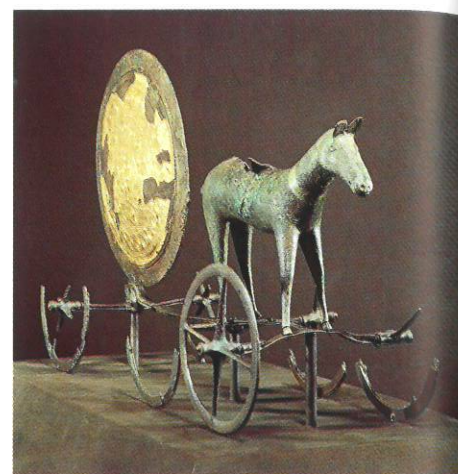
Among the cache of treasures found by Schliemann at Mycenae was a gold goblet said to belong to the mythical hero Nestor. Two birds are perched at the top of its handles.

▷ GRAVE CIRCLE A, MYCENAE

The prehistoric city of Mycenae in the Peloponnese is one of Greece's most important archaeological sites. Agamemnon's funerary mask was unearthed in Grave Circle A (shown here in the centre of the picture) at the ancient site, along with other spectacular objects.



The **sun chariot** has become a **national symbol** of Denmark, appearing on its **1,000-krone banknote**



△ CHARIOT AND DIVINE HORSE

It is believed that Bronze Age priests would have used the chariot of the sun in their rituals, pulling it to demonstrate the movement of the sun across the heavens.

DECORATION

Spiral patterns are typical of Nordic Bronze Age artefacts. The spiral was associated with sun worship.



CONNECTOR ROD

The horse is mounted on four wheels attached to a bronze rod, which connects to the axle bearing the disc.

△ TRUNDHOLM SUN CHARIOT

The sun chariot has been meticulously restored and reassembled by experts at the National Museum of Denmark. The disc retains much of its original gilding. Total length: 54cm (21¼in); disc diam.: 25cm (10in). Date: c.1400 BCE.

REVEALING DAMAGE

Damage to the horse's back reveals the clay core

**CARVED DETAILS**

Detailed features on the horse's head and neck were carved into wax before casting.

**WHEELS**

Each of the six wheels has four spokes and was cast as one piece.

◀ LEFT SIDE

No traces of gilding are found on the left side of the disc, corresponding to its correlation with the night sky.

Scale



Odsherred,
Denmark

Trundholm Sun Chariot

A unique representation of the sun chariot of Nordic mythology, dating from the Bronze Age

In 1902, a farmer ploughing on Trundholm moor in Zealand, Denmark, unearthed what he thought was a metal toy. After cleaning it, he realized that the horse and carriage might be of historical interest. The National Museum of Denmark established its significance as an example of Nordic Bronze Age culture. Ninety-six years later, archaeologists found a further 21 parts of the chariot (mainly fragments of the wheel rings, axles, and spokes) in the same spot, making the model almost complete.

The horse-drawn chariot is cast in bronze, and dates from about 1400 BCE, near the beginning of the Nordic Bronze Age. Before the find, it had been thought that the use of horses as draught animals began in the area much later, at the end of the Bronze Age.

Pulling light across the sky

The elegantly stylized horse pulling a disc on a two-wheeled chariot is believed to represent an early version of the Nordic myth of the sun chariot. The disc is gilded on one side and ungilded the other, to represent day and night. As the chariot is drawn across the heavens from east to west it presents its bright side, the sun, or day, to the earth, while on its return journey from west to east, the dark side, or the shady underworld of night, is seen.

It is, as yet, the only example of a model of a horse-drawn sun chariot found in Scandinavia, although parts of a similar disc have been found at Jægersborg Hegn, in the same area. Its location in a peat bog and the fact that it was the only object found there suggest the chariot may have been placed in the bog deliberately.

Oracle Bones

Divination materials from the 2nd millennium BCE that give a glimpse into the lives and beliefs of the ancient Chinese



Anyang,
China



△ ORACLE BONE PIT

From 1928 to 1937, some 20,000 oracle bone fragments were discovered in pits in Yinxu, near modern Anyang in Henan province.

Oracle bones were animal bones used in divination rituals in ancient China, a practice that reached its peak in the late Shang dynasty (c.1600 BCE–1046 BCE). Deities and ancestors – who were thought to have divine power – were believed to communicate through the bones, and official diviners sought guidance from them on behalf of society's elite. A wide variety of topics were addressed, including military strategy, crop harvests, the ruling family, childbirth, auspicious timing for an event, and the cause of illness.

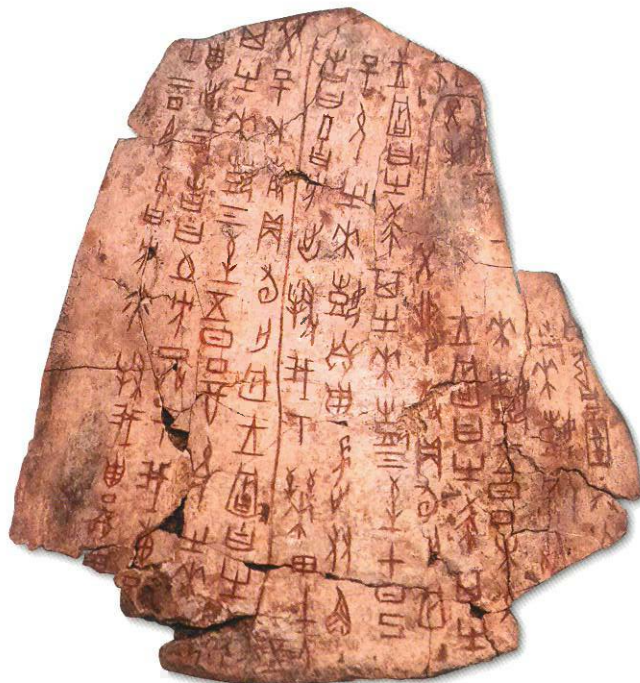
Reading the cracks

The plastrons (belly shells) of tortoises and the scapulae (shoulder bones) of cattle were used for the divination ceremony. After stripping the flesh from the shells and bones, the diviner cut them to shape

and polished them. They then chiselled hollows or pits into their surface so that they would crack more easily, and washed them in blood to imbue them with spiritual power. When a question was posed, the bones would be heated, often by inserting a hot metal poker into the hollows, causing cracks to form. The diviner interpreted the pattern of fractures to gain an answer.

The divination was carved onto the bones with a knife or, by the time of the Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–256 BCE), painted on with brush and ink. It usually consisted of a “preface”, recording the place, the date, and the name of the diviner, the “charge”, or question, the interpretation, and – very rarely – the outcome. The oldest known form of Chinese writing (*see box*), the inscriptions reveal a complex writing system, and offer an important insight into the lives of the Shang elite.

5,000 Shang characters have been **identified**, with about **2,000** now **deciphered**



▷ INSCRIBED OX BONE

This ox scapula is inscribed with divinations relating to astronomy, hunting, and the threat of invaders from the north.

ORACLE BONE SCRIPT

Oracle bone script is the oldest known Chinese script, perhaps even pre-dating the Shang dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE). The script shares similarities with the bronze ware scripts of the later Shang and the Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties, which evolved into regular script, developed around 200 CE and still used today.

Heaven, sky	Dog	Troop; [to] journey	Father
ORACLE BONE SCRIPT	SHANG BRONZEWARE SCRIPT	REGULAR SCRIPT	

▷ ORACLE BONES

This inscribed tortoise plastron excavated from the ancient Chinese capital Yinxiu, now in Henan province, records the ancestors' advice regarding the outcome of a military expedition against a neighbouring state. **Height:** 18.4cm (7in). **Date:** c.1300–1046 BCE.

RECORD OF A DIVINATION

The symbols record what was asked, by whom, when, and where, along with the diviner's interpretation of the cracks.

HEAT FRACTURES

Cracks were created when the shell was heated.

NATURAL MATERIAL

Jagged lines mark the edges of the skeletal components of the shell.

DIFFERENT CHARACTERS

The script is a mixture of pictographs depicting shapes with pictorial meanings, and non-figurative strokes, depicting more abstract concepts.

SMOOTH SURFACE

Oracle bones were polished and smoothed out so that the cracks would be more visible.

ANCIENT WRITING

Oracle bone script, dating from the Shang dynasty, is the oldest known Chinese script.

INK INFILL

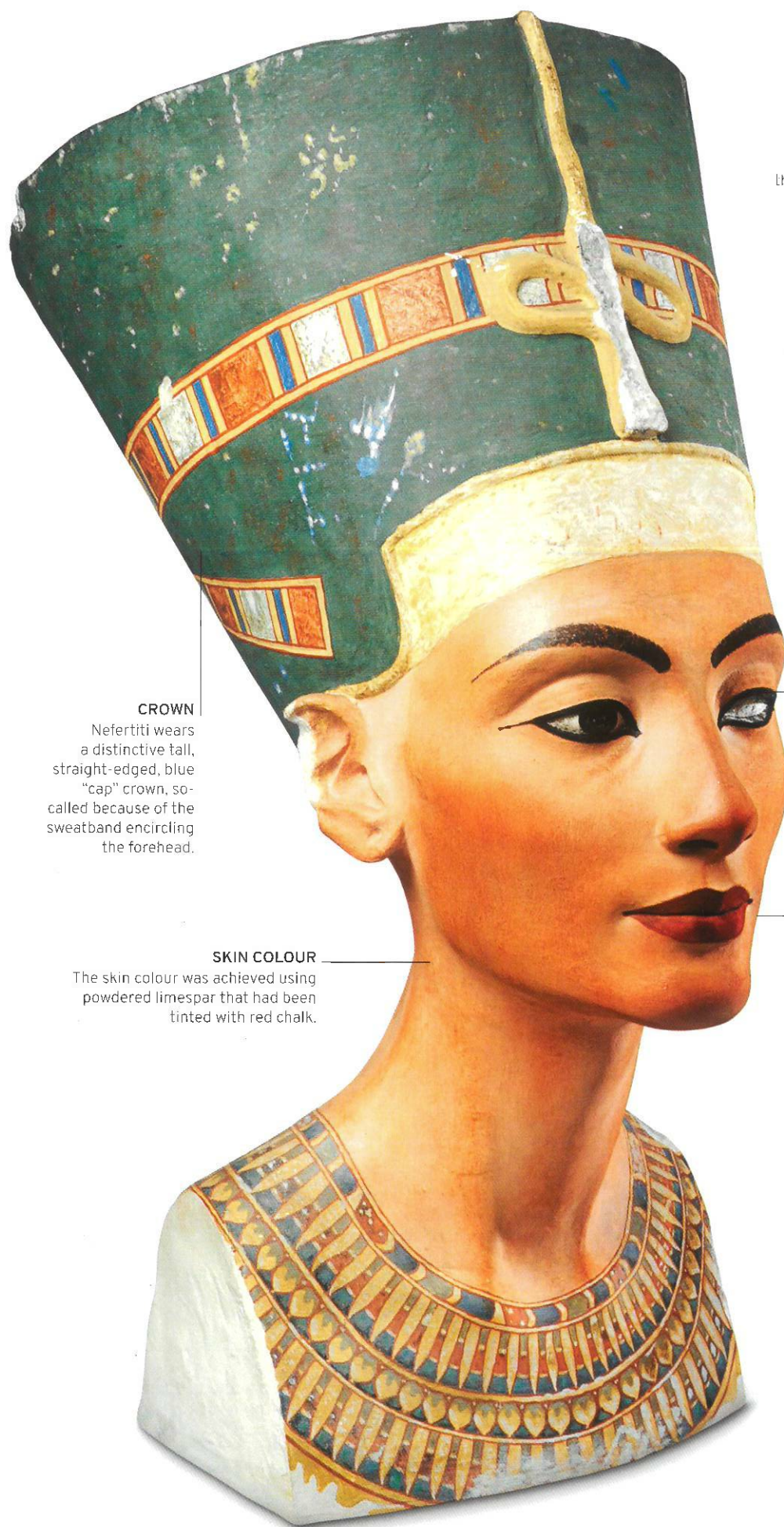
ink was often used to make the incised characters more legible.



△ BACK OF SCAPULA

This reverse side of an ox scapula is engraved with a record of a lunar eclipse. The blackened indentations show where the bone was drilled before heating.



**CROWN**

Nefertiti wears a distinctive tall, straight-edged, blue "cap" crown, so-called because of the sweatband encircling the forehead.

SKIN COLOUR

The skin colour was achieved using powdered limespar that had been tinted with red chalk.

URAEUS

The decoration on the crown is a stylized uraeus or cobra image, a symbolic representation of royalty.

EYE

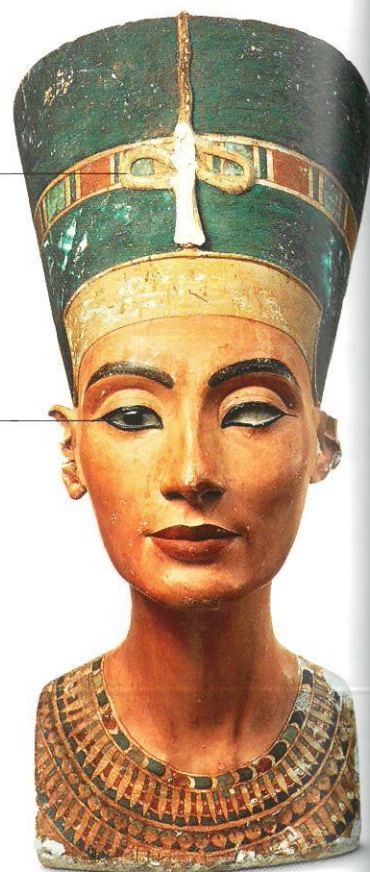
The remaining eye is inlaid with quartz, attached with black coloured wax.

COSMETICS

Ancient Egyptians of both genders made copious use of cosmetics, such as this eyeliner, made from kohl.

CT SCAN

A scan in 2006 revealed that the original carving had been made in limestone, which was refined in subsequent gypsum-based stucco coatings. For example, creases around the mouth and cheeks in the core layer were smoothed over in the outer, stucco layer.

**△ BUST OF NEFERTITI (ACTUAL)**

The painted bust incorporates layers of red ochre, yellow orpiment (a sulphide of arsenic), and the synthetic pigment known as "Egyptian blue" (made from calcium copper silicate), as well as other traditional pigments.

Nefertiti's name translates as "the beautiful one is come"

◁ BUST OF NEFERTITI (REPLICA)

Nefertiti is shown in regal majesty, wearing her distinctive royal headdress. The image is complete, except for one eyeball; the quartz insert representing the left pupil was missing at the time of its discovery. **Height:** 50cm (20in). **Date:** c.1340 BCE.

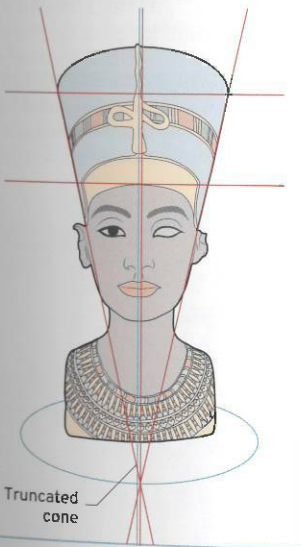
Bust of Nefertiti

A stunning 14th-century BCE bust of an Egyptian queen that remains a model of sophisticated beauty



GEOMETRY AND MEASUREMENT

An analysis of the bust viewed from in front and above shows that Thutmose gave the head the form of a truncated cone, working from the flat top of the crown down to the chin. Further research has revealed that in drawing up the model he might have employed an ancient Egyptian unit of measurement known as the *shesep*, meaning "palm" or "hand", and equivalent to roughly 7.5cm (3in).



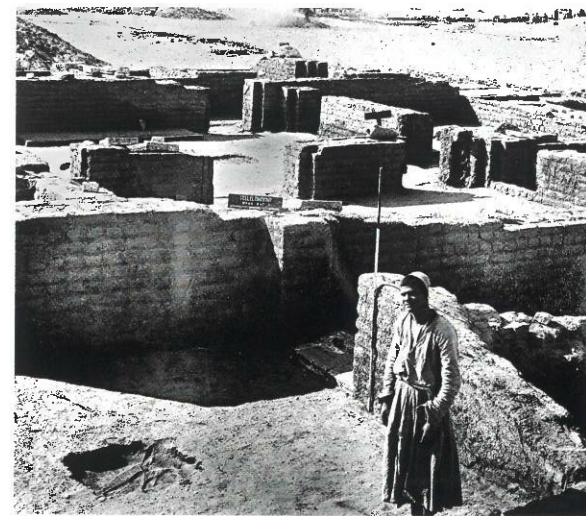
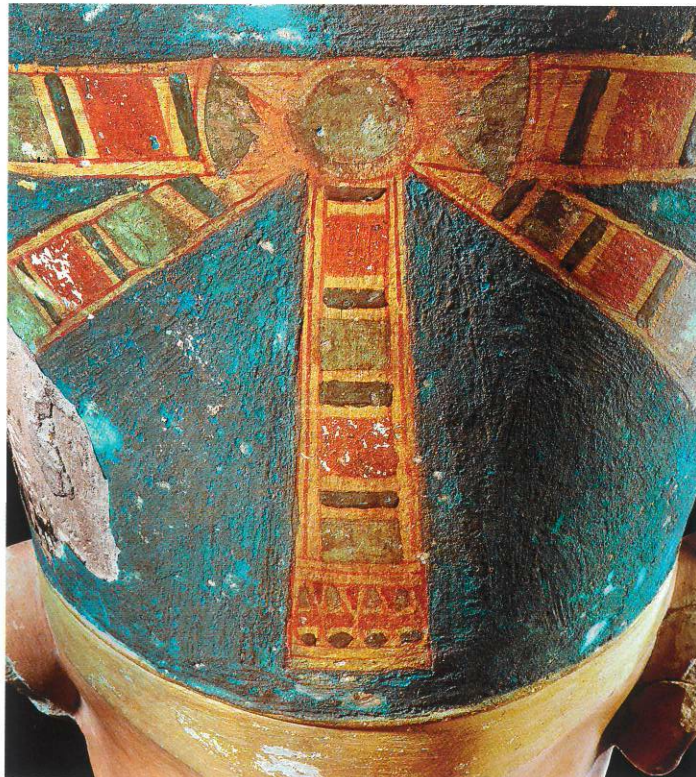
In December 1912, a German archaeological expedition led by Ludwig Borchardt was investigating the site of the abandoned city of el-Amarna in the desert, 320km (200 miles) north of Thebes, the capital of ancient Egypt. There, they came across the remains of a house belonging to a renowned sculptor named Thutmose. The discovery turned up many fine artefacts, but one in particular stood out: the bust of a woman, evidently a queen. Borchardt noted down details of his finds each night, but in this case words failed him: he wrote, "Description futile: must be seen."

Rejecting tradition

The bust was identified as a portrait of Nefertiti, one of the most significant women in ancient Egyptian history. Wife of Akhenaten (ruled c.1353–36 BCE), she enjoyed greater status and influence than other

Egyptian queens and may even have acted as co-ruler. There was much that was unconventional about her time in power, not least the development of a naturalistic style of art that was very much at odds with the stiff formality of earlier pharaonic imagery. For the first time, sculpted images showed the royal family in domestic settings, displaying their undoubted affection for one another. The bust of Nefertiti reflects this new realism, while also creating an image of timeless elegance.

Besides the extraordinary beauty, precision, and symmetry of the face, the work is remarkable for the colour preservation effected by the dry desert environment. The bust's overall appearance seems so modern that some writers have even questioned its authenticity, though this has now been confirmed by chemical analysis and CT scans.



△ THE ARTIST'S QUARTERS, EL-ARMANA

This image, taken during the archaeological dig in 1912, shows the house of the sculptor Thutmose. The bust was found in a corner of his workshop.

◁ REAR VIEW

The painted diadem decorating the back of the blue crown is tied in a stylized representation of a ribbon fastened with a gemstone.



Scale



ROYAL HEADCLOTH

Tutankhamun's magnificent gold *nemes* headcloth is inlaid with stripes of blue glass mimicking lapis lazuli.

GOLDEN EARS

The ear lobes are pierced to hold earrings.

FALCON HEAD

The collar ends in a gold falcon's head, symbol of the god Horus, inlaid with obsidian and coloured glass.

WADJET COBRA

A solid gold cobra (Wadjet) rises from the top, symbolizing rule over Lower Egypt. Its hood is inlaid with carnelian and lapis lazuli.

GOLDEN NEKHBT

The vulture (Nekhbet) symbolizes rule over Upper Egypt and has a beak of coloured glass.

EYEBROWS AND EYE BORDERS

These areas are inlaid with lapis lazuli in imitation of makeup.

EYES

The mask's eyes are fashioned from white quartz and black obsidian.

CURVED BEARD

A detachable plaited gold beard is inlaid with blue glass.

INTERIOR VIEW

The inside is inscribed with spells invoking the gods to protect Tutankhamun's spirit.

BROAD COLLAR

The collar shows lapis lazuli, green feldspar, and quartz, with a lotus-pattern border of coloured glass cloisonné (see p.189).



◁ MASK OF TUTANKHAMUN

The spectacular death mask weighs 11kg (24lb) and is largely of burnished gold, with details in lapis lazuli, carnelian, and coloured glass. Height: 54cm (21in). Date: c.1323 BCE.



△ REAR VIEW

The back of the mask shows the *nemes* headcloth gathered in a braid. The inscriptions either side of the braid are spells, taken from the Book of the Dead, to aid the pharaoh in the afterlife.

Mask of Tutankhamun

A solid gold funerary mask that is among the most famous and breathtaking artefacts to survive from ancient Egypt



Thebes, Egypt

Tutankhamun (ruled 1333–23 BCE) was just eight or nine years old when he ascended the Egyptian throne. He reigned for nine years, dying prematurely, possibly from a leg fracture. Even so, the young pharaoh's tomb in the Valley of the Kings, Thebes, was packed with treasures to accompany him in the afterlife, including an astonishing solid gold death mask.

Treasures of the boy king

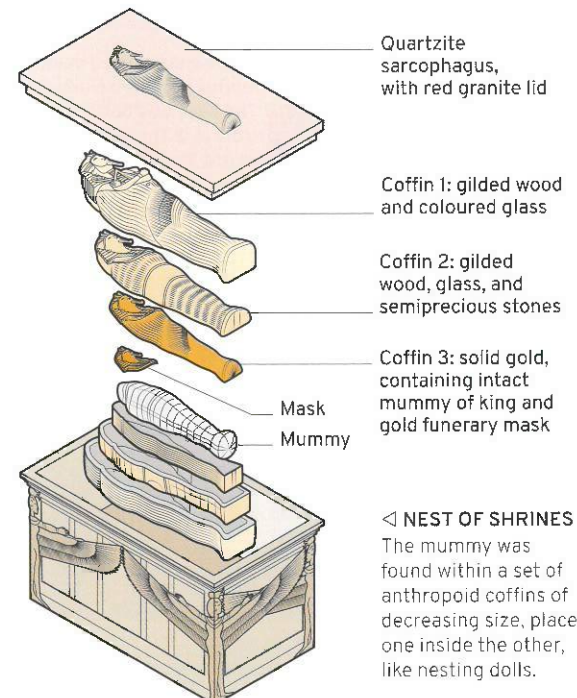
Opened by British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1923, the tomb contained more than 5,000 items. The most spectacular find was a series of four nested shrines, a stone sarcophagus and three anthropoid (human-shaped) coffins, which held hundreds of pieces of jewellery, scarabs, and amulets to protect the king's soul in the afterlife. The coffins, painted with protective deities and spells, depicted the dead

pharaoh in the guise of Osiris, lord of the underworld, with a crossed flail and sceptre. In the third, innermost coffin was the king's mummy and, covering the face, the lavish funerary mask.

Made from two sheets of burnished gold, the mask was beaten into shape and inlaid with semiprecious stones and gems. The face, with its high cheekbones and full lips, has the features of Tutankhamun, but the mask emphasizes his role as king: it bears a gold-and-glass version of the blue-and-gold striped *nemes* headcloth denoting kingship, and sports the false beard worn by pharaohs. A collar is decorated with striped inlays of semiprecious stones, such as feldspar, and ends in falcon-headed terminals. Everything about this and the other emblems in the tomb was designed to protect the pharaoh's passage through the underworld and ensure his resurrection as a god.

▽ HOWARD CARTER

British archaeologist Howard Carter (left) is shown here with a colleague examining the innermost gold coffin of Tutankhamun in Egypt in 1923. The discovery of the tomb caused a worldwide sensation.





Mummy of Katebet

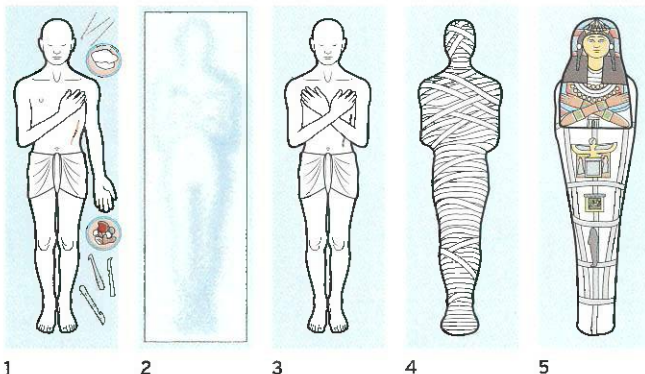
An intriguing and incredible 3,000-year-old elite woman's mummy from the world of ancient Egypt's death rituals

The mummy of Katebet wears an impressive death mask of cartonnage (linen covered in layers of plaster) covered in pure gold leaf. She is depicted wearing an elaborate wig, a broad collar, earrings, bracelets, and rings, adornments appropriate to a chantress (singer) of the god Amun – a high-ranking female official who participated in public state rituals.

The mummy is made particularly interesting and intriguing by its anomalies. The wooden arms are crossed over the chest in a position reserved for males, and this, together with the length of the coffin, shows that it was originally crafted for a man, possibly her husband, and repurposed for Katebet. The finely wrought cartonnage burial ornaments and the inscription on the coffin were also intended for a man. The presence of the brain – normally removed from a mummy – and large quantities of mud packing suggest that Katebet may have been buried in a hurry.

THE MUMMIFICATION PROCESS

The mummification process took 70 days and involved many stages, performed by priest-embalmers. 1 Internal organs, including the brain but not the heart, were removed. 2 The body was both covered and filled with natron salt for about 40 days to dry it. 3 The salt was washed off and the body padded with linen or sand. 4 The body was wrapped in linen strips, alternating with resin; amulets and prayers were placed in the wrappings. 5 A final linen shroud was secured with linen bands, a mask often placed over the face, and the mummy transferred to a coffin.



SWITCHED HEADDRESS

The original male headdress was carved out and replaced by a female headdress and painted hair.

EARRINGS

Two stud earrings of white calcite are positioned on the wig.

GOLDEN FACE

The funerary mask is of gilded cartonnage.

RINGS

Real rings are placed on carved wooden fingers.



△ PROTECTIVE FIGURES

A figure of the sky goddess Nut and a stone scarab would protect Katebet in the afterlife. The grey-white metal is tin.



△ ANUBIS

A gilded cartonnage amulet of the jackal-headed god of the dead, Anubis, offers further protection.

SHABTI

A clay shabti (servant for the deceased) would serve Katebet in the afterlife.

◁ MUMMY OF KATEBET

Found in a tomb in Thebes, the mummy of Katebet is wrapped in linen bandages, with a mask over the face. Height: 165cm (65in). Date: 1330-1250 BCE.

Scale



Hittite Stag Bibru

An elaborately engraved 2nd-millennium BCE sacred drinking vessel showing the marriage of art and ritual in ancient Hittite society



Eastern Turkey

The art of the Hittites, who dominated what is now eastern Turkey and western Syria for a thousand years from 1700 BCE, was influenced by religious ritual. One distinctive form was the zoomorphic (animal-shaped) drinking vessels, or *bibru*, used in "god-drinking" rites, where the Hittite king imbibed sacred wine to become one with the deity. Bulls and stags, emblematic of powerful gods, were often depicted in Hittite art.

This exquisite drinking vessel terminates in the forepart of a stag; the fine silver sheet from which it is beaten captures the taut musculature and alertness of the animal, and, by extension, of the god believed to dwell within. The cylindrical part of the vessel is decorated with a ceremonial scene that includes divinities, supplicants, and a stag collapsed against a tree, perhaps hunted as an offering to the stag god.



△ IN USE

When the vessel was tilted for use, the wine would have filled its hollow body right to the tip of the stag's nose.

◁ HITTITE STAG BIBRU

The drinking cup was created in two pieces, the head and the body, with the ritual scene carved beneath the rim. Height: 18cm (7in). Date: c.1350–c.1200 BCE.

The vessel may have been designed for the stag god's personal use



CHEQUERED PATTERN

A ring with an elegant chequered pattern joins the head to the body.

BODY

The vessel's body was hammered out of a single sheet of silver.

RITUAL SCENE

A frieze showing a religious ceremony adorns the body of the vessel.

VESSEL RIM

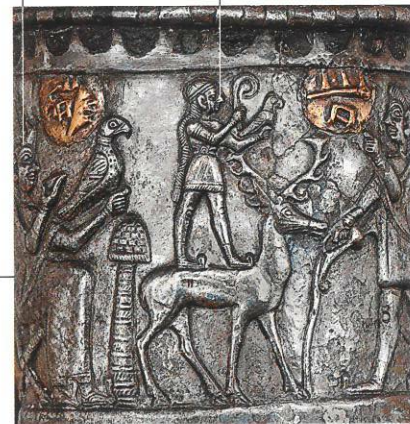
The outer rim of the cup has beadlike decorations.

GODDESS

A goddess sits on a stool, holding a bird of prey in one hand and a cup in the other.

STAG GOD

A god holding a falcon and a curved staff is pictured standing on the back of a stag.



△ RELIGIOUS FRIEZE

The figures in the frieze are depicted in profile and have the large ears typically found in Hittite art. Three men bring offerings to the deities.



Originally a **statement of power**, today the *gui* is a **historical document**



Huixian, China

Kang Hou Gui

An imposing Western Zhou bronze vessel used by Chinese warrior lords at ritual feasts honouring the ancestors

The 11th century BCE in China saw the Shang dynasty, which had ruled for more than 500 years, replaced by newcomers from the west – the Zhou. In the reign of the second Zhou king, a rebellion by remnants of the Shang was suppressed by Kang Hou, the king's brother. This magnificent *gui*, or bowl-shaped ritual vessel, famously commemorates Kang's role in a long inscription in its interior.

The *gui* would have been used as a centrepiece at ritual banquets in honour of the ancestors: the regular offering of food and drink to the dead was a way of retaining their favour and placating the gods, and such expensive bronze vessels were status symbols of the ruling elite. The lavish *gui* featured here, with its border of flower-like decoration above vertical ribbing, is particularly notable for its large, ornate handles in the form of horned animal heads, with birds' beaks emerging from their mouths. Its flared footring makes its solid form all the more imposing.

Bronze-casting technique

Shang bronze vessels were cast using a sophisticated process known as piece moulding. Clay was pressed against a ceramic model of the finished article to take an imprint of the form and decoration, and removed in sections for firing. The fired moulds were replaced over the model, shaved of its detailed surface, and molten bronze was poured into the space. After cooling, the outer casings were removed by breaking them. This *gui* would have been cast in pieces, using several moulds.

CHALCOCITE (COPPER) AND CASSITERITE (TIN)

Alloyed from a mixture of copper and tin, Chinese bronze was an expensive material that made it suitable only for ceremonial or luxury goods.

BEASTS AND BIRDS

The two handles portray tusked beasts topped by horns, swallowing birds.

BRONZE VESSELS

The startling sophistication of bronze ritual vessels stemmed from a long tradition of Chinese craftsmanship in bronze. Reaching a high point during the Shang and early Zhou dynasties (from c.1300 BCE to c.850 BCE), the richly decorated wares often featured intricate inscriptions on their interiors. Recording anything from military campaigns or historic victories to imperial decrees or political relationships, these were a way of communicating directly with the ancestors.



ZHOU WINE VESSEL, c.1000 BCE



BASE OF HANDLES

The base of the handles ends in a pendant decorated with birds' bodies, wings, and tails.

△ KHANG HOU GUI

This magnificent *gui* owes much of its historical importance to the inscription carved into its interior, which enables historians to accurately date the vessel. Height: 22cm (8¾in). Date: 1100–1000 BCE.

Scale

**ANIMAL HEAD**

The flower pattern is interrupted in the centre by a stylized image of an animal's head.

**△ INNER INSCRIPTION**

The inscription inside the vessel recounts how Kang Hou was rewarded for his part in putting down the Shang rebellion with a grant of land in north-central China.

LOWER BAND

The lower band repeats the incised pattern of the upper band, without the animal head.

UPPER BAND

The decorated band below the rim features engraved roundels and flower-like quatrefoils.

▷ SIDE VIEW

The *gui* would originally have been one of a set of vessels of different sizes used together at ritual feasts.



Nimrud,
Iraq

Scale



Phoenician Ivory Plaque

One of the finest ivory carvings from the ancient world, showing the elegance and control of Phoenician craftsmen

The Phoenician civilization flourished around the eastern Mediterranean between 1100 and 200 BCE, its homeland ruled by the Assyrians between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE. Masters of work in ivory, the Phoenicians used saws, drills, and gouges to create vivid scenes, often showing Assyrian or Egyptian influence. This especially finely carved ivory plaque depicts an African man or boy being devoured by a lioness, against a backdrop of papyrus plants and lilies. The dramatic scene is a reshaping of an Egyptian theme, the lioness representing Pharaoh triumphant. The artist has lent the figures a plasticity and power that creates a surprising sense of movement. The effect was further enhanced by the addition of semi-precious stones and gold leaf to pick out details.

One of a matching pair found in the sludge at the bottom of a well near the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (ruled 883–859 BCE) in the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud (near Mosul in present-day Iraq), the plaque was probably made on the Phoenician coast and taken to Assyria as booty or tribute. It is an outstanding example of many such panels that have been found (see box).

BLUE LOTUS
Lotus flowers inlaid with lapis are bedded on a mortar of calcium carbonate and blue powdered frit.

RED FLOWERS
Papyrus flowers are inlaid with red carnelian.

LIONESS'S HEAD
A lapis gemstone is embedded in the forehead of the lioness.

▽ **PHOENICIAN IVORY PLAQUE**
The plaque was originally affixed top and bottom by mortise joints, probably to a piece of furniture. Height: 10cm (4in). Date: 900–700 BCE.



BORDER
The lattice-work border was originally inlaid with lapis lazuli.

GOLDEN KILT
The man or boy wears a short kilt, decorated with a layer of gold leaf.

HAIR
The hair is created with gold-leaf-tipped ivory pegs.

THE NIMRUD IVORIES

Around 1,000 ivory plaques, panels, and carvings, many used to adorn furniture or boxes, have been excavated by archaeologists in the Assyrian city of Nimrud. They had been thrown down wells during the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in the 7th century BCE, or stacked in palace store rooms. Most were not locally made, but were produced across Mesopotamia and imported as luxury goods or looted by the Assyrian army in the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. Intricately worked and originally decorated with gold, silver, and gems, which were stripped by invaders, they are stunning examples of ancient ivory carving.



PHOENICIAN-CARVED SPHINX IN EGYPTIAN STYLE

The matching pair to this plaque was looted from **Baghdad, Iraq**, in 2002, and is **now lost**



Scale



Olmec Mask

A Mesoamerican jade mask from the 1st millennium BCE capturing for all time the gaze of an ancient Olmec being

The Olmecs, a people of the Gulf Coast region of eastern Mexico, created the first advanced civilization in the Americas, which flourished between 1500 and 500 BCE. At sites such as La Venta and San Lorenzo, they produced sculptures in ceramic, jade, and stone, ranging from monumental heads, enigmatic “baby” figurines, and elongated human figures, to were-jaguars, whose symbolism is not well understood.

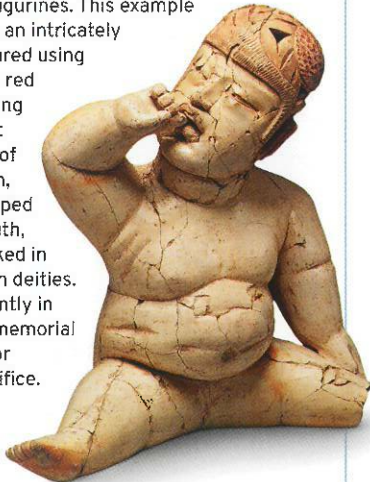
Few match the power of this small mask, with its finely sculpted outlines that capture perfectly the essence of the fleshy-lipped entity portrayed. Made of dense, hard jadeite – known to the Olmecs as greenstone – it was bored out with flint saws and scrapers, and then rubbed with abrasives and polished to create a lustrous green surface. Although the style is broadly realistic, the face incorporates traits typically found in Olmec portrayals of supernatural beings, such as the wide nose, the almond-shaped eyes, and the subtle frown of the toothless mouth.

PERFORATIONS

Holes in the ears may have been for earrings, perhaps of gold.

BABY-FACE FIGURINES

With its pudgy legs, forearms, and stomach, and its curious posture, this ceramic Olmec statue belongs to a group known as “baby-face” figurines. This example is particularly fine, with an intricately carved headdress coloured using powdered cinnabar and red ochre, and cross-hatching on its back to represent tattooing. The purpose of such figures is unknown, though the almond-shaped eyes, down-turned mouth, and square ears are linked in Olmec iconography with deities. Babies appear prominently in Olmec art and may be memorial images, ritual effigies, or connected to child sacrifice.



SEATED FIGURE,
1200–800 BCE

GREENSTONE

Because of its green colour, jadeite was linked with ideas of fertility and abundance.

CLEFT FOREHEAD

The pronounced cleft in the forehead was a sign of the Maize God, a key Olmec deity.

ALMOND EYES

The sculptor's chisel marks are visible on the deeply incised almond-shaped eyes.



DRILL HOLES

Indentations at the sides of the mouth and eyes may be drill marks used to guide the sculptor or may have held shell inlays.

INFANT LOOK

The fleshy, slightly down-turned lips are reminiscent of the earlier Olmec “baby-face” style.

△ OLMEC MASK

The mask may have been worn as a belt ornament, necklace, or headdress, or as some kind of funerary adornment. **Height:** 14.5cm (5³/₄in). **Date:** 900–400 BCE.

The mask is **too small** to have been placed **over the face**, and was probably used in **rituals**

Regolini-Galassi Fibula

A lavish golden fibula found in a tomb that is revered as one of the masterpieces of Etruscan art



The grave in which the fibula was found was covered by a **46m (151ft)** high tumulus

The Regolini-Galassi fibula – named for the priest and general who discovered it in 1836 – was found in one of the two burial chambers of a tomb near the ancient Etruscan town of Caere (now Cerveteri). Concealed beneath a huge tumulus, or mound of earth, the tomb (unusually) remained unlooted and contained rich grave goods, which date it to around 675 BCE, during an orientalizing phase of Etruscan culture, when it was influenced by Egyptian and Phoenician-Syrian motifs.

Elite tomb

Inscriptions on other items in the grave reveal that the deceased was a woman named Larthia Velthurus. She was clearly of high status: more than 300 objects are buried with her, including a massive gold pectoral (breastplate), other jewellery, an elaborate bronze cauldron, a funerary bed, and large quantities of pottery, as well as the fibula (brooch). Modelled

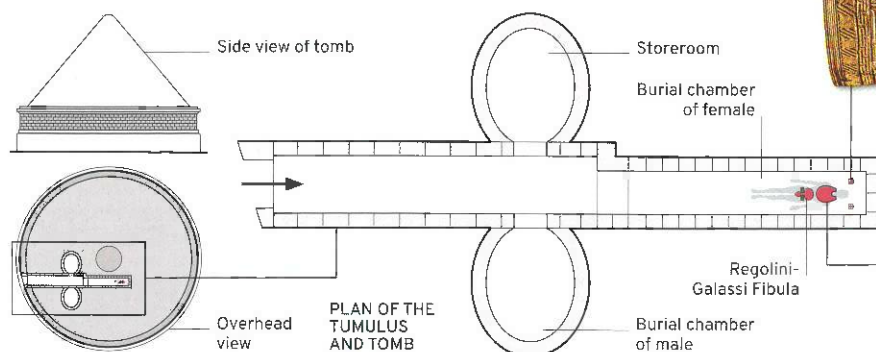
on clasps used to fasten cloaks, this may have been intended to secure her funeral shroud. It was made in three parts: the top part, adorned with five striking lions, was made by the repoussé technique (see p.81); the central, belt-like section was decorated with geometric zig-zag patterns more akin to the local Villanovan style than the fibula's other orientalizing features; the lower section was made by granulation – applying and fusing metal balls – to form tiny ducks amid a pattern of griffins. At the very end of the lower section is an image of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who helped souls on their journey into the underworld: this suggests that the fibula was funerary jewellery or a grave offering rather than an object used in life.

Although several smaller Etruscan fibulas in this style have been found in and around Cerveteri, the Regolini-Galassi fibula is by far the largest and most extravagantly decorated of all.

THE REGOLINI-GALASSI TOMB

The tomb was cut into the tuff (rock made from volcanic ash) underlying the earth tumulus. A short entrance passage or dromos, in which several bronze cauldrons were deposited, led into a 37m (121ft) long corridor forming the main part of the tomb. Off this were two oval chambers:

silver and bronze vessels were discovered in one of them; the cremated remains of a male were found in the other. The main burial chamber – which was sealed off by a wall with a small viewing window – contained most of the tomb's gold and silver objects, including the fibula.



BRACELET



GOLD PECTORAL

LION MOTIF

This is one of five repoussé lions on the fibula, a typical element of Etruscan orientalizing style.

PALMETTES

A palmette pattern of fan-shaped leaves in repoussé (see p.81), typical of Egyptian and Phoenician-Syrian influence, adorns the upper section.

**SHELL FINIALS**

The ends of the belt feature shell-like motifs.

ZIG-ZAGS

The central belt includes a zig-zag pattern reminiscent of water.

▷ REGOLINI-GALASSI FIBULA

Probably intended to go over the deceased woman's lower body, the fibula is hinged at the back, where a long, attached pin would have fastened it to her clothing. Height: 31.5cm (12½in). Date: c.675 BCE.

**△ GRIFFINS AND DUCKS**

A pattern of oriental-style griffins, along with 50 miniature ducks decorate the lower section of the fibula.



Strettweg Cult Wagon

A beautifully crafted and extremely rare example of a richly decorated, almost entirely preserved cult wagon from the Iron Age

Judenberg,
Austria

The bronze Strettweg Cult Wagon was found in an elite grave in Strettweg, near Judenberg, Austria, in 1851, alongside weapons, bronze vessels, and jewellery. Although other cult wagons (wheeled vehicles) have been found, the Strettweg Wagon is linked to the Hallstatt culture – renowned for its sophisticated metalwork – and is distinguished by its extraordinary and skilfully made bronze figural decoration and by the fact it is virtually intact. A tall female figure holding a bowl above her head stands on top of

the base plate, which has a large wheel on each corner. Two groups of figures stand to the front and back: two genderless figures leading a stag by the antlers; and a man holding a hatchet and a woman. Two riders flank the two groups at both ends. The scene suggests a ceremonial procession, with the stag as a possible sacrificial offering. The object was designed to carry a bowl, probably utilized during libation rites, a blood sacrifice, or incense offering, and would have been reserved for use by a high-ranking individual.

▽ SIDE VIEW

The figures and animals are arranged symmetrically on the square base plate. The large bowl carried by the central figure is supported by four long scissor-like rods.

▷ STRETTWEG CULT WAGON

The mysterious Strettweg Wagon was found in a grave believed to date to around 600 BCE. Its purpose has been long disputed, but it clearly had ritual significance in both life and as a grave gift after death. Found in several pieces, the wagon has been reconstructed and restored several times. **Height:** 46.2cm (18in). **Date:** c.600 BCE.

CENTRAL FIGURE

The central female figure, possibly a priestess or goddess, wears a broad belt and earrings and stands on top of a sun or wheel symbol.

MISSING SHIELD

Among the missing elements are this rider's shield and one of the riders (on the opposite corner).

ELONGATED FORMS

One of the distinctive features of this object is the elongated forms: the stags' antlers are disproportionately large, as are the legs of the humans and animals.

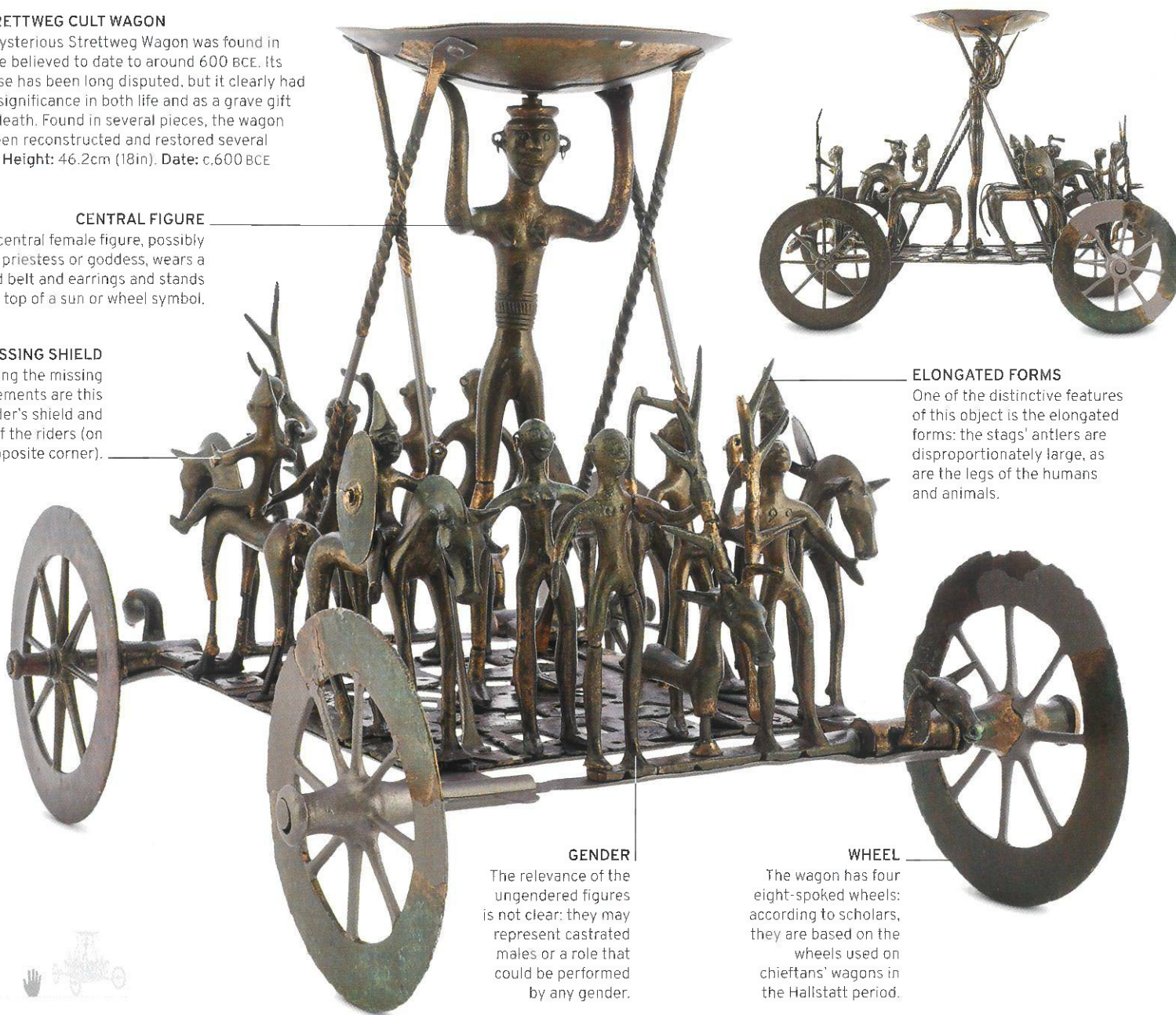
GENDER

The relevance of the ungendered figures is not clear: they may represent castrated males or a role that could be performed by any gender.

WHEEL

The wagon has four eight-spoked wheels: according to scholars, they are based on the wheels used on chieftans' wagons in the Hallstatt period.

Scale



The Cyrus Cylinder

A major document in the history of the Middle East that celebrates one of the greatest and most tolerant emperors of the ancient world



The Cyrus Cylinder is a cylinder of baked clay inscribed with 45 lines of text in Old Babylonian cuneiform. The document praises the Persian Achaemenid ruler Cyrus II for his actions following his conquest of Babylon (near modern-day Baghdad, Iraq) in 539 BCE. It justifies this conquest by accusing Nabonidus, the former ruler of the city, of banning the worship of Marduk, god of Babylon. After overthrowing Nabonidus, Cyrus adopted more tolerant policies towards the city's inhabitants.

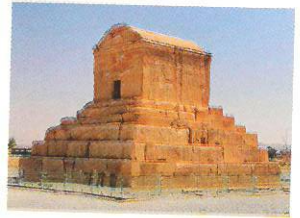
The Cyrus Cylinder's solid core consists of clay mixed with small pebbles to prevent cracking and ensure even firing; it was created either on a wheel or by hand-rolling, before a finer clay surface was applied. The text was inscribed on this surface using a stylus with a wedge-shaped tip to produce the

elegant cuneiform characters. The cylinder was baked in an oven to harden and preserve it and later secreted in the walls of Babylon's temple of Esagil, in accordance with a Mesopotamian custom of burying such documents in sacred buildings. Not long after its discovery in 1879, several fragments broke off.

Part of the text refers to returning images of gods to their sanctuaries, to freedom of worship, and allowing exiles to go back to their homelands – the latter has been interpreted as referring to Cyrus's decision to allow Jewish people to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. The cylinder thereby offers a powerful and unique insight into the early development of human justice and the attempt to embrace the diversity of different peoples and belief systems. A copy of it was presented by Iran to the United Nations in 1971.

CYRUS THE GREAT

Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great (ruled 559–530 BCE), founded the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire. Stretching from Asia Minor to northern India, it was the largest state created up to that time. Cyrus's rule was notably respectful towards conquered peoples. In Judaic tradition, Cyrus is honoured for allowing the Jews to return from Babylonian exile and rebuild Jerusalem, while in Iran he is remembered as the "father of the nation".



TOMB OF CYRUS AT PASARGADAE

TRANSLATION

This section of text translates as "I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world."

CUNEIFORM SCRIPT

The characters read from left to right in rows; the rows are separated by lines scored into the clay.

▽ THE CYRUS CYLINDER

This is a unique document in the direct voice of a ruler governing a multi-racial empire through tolerance rather than by forced assimilation. **Length:** 22.5cm (8¾in). **Date:** c.539–530 BCE.



COLOUR CHANGE

Colour variation, from light brown to beige, suggests several cylinders were stacked on top of each other in the kiln, so some parts did not receive direct heat.

FRACTURE

This section shows a fracture in the cylinder and adjacent areas where fragments have broken off.

SOLID CLAY

A missing fragment exposes the solid clay core. The cylinder's surface clay is finer.

Scale



HEBE

The girl wearing the very ornate dress is Hebe, the goddess of youth.

THEMIS

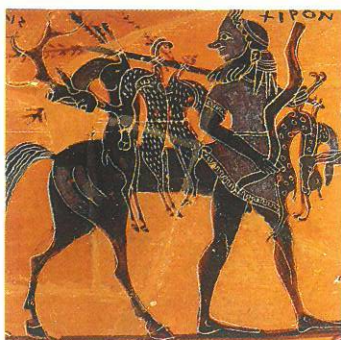
As are all the female figures, the Titaness Themis is shown with pale-coloured skin.

SIGNATURE

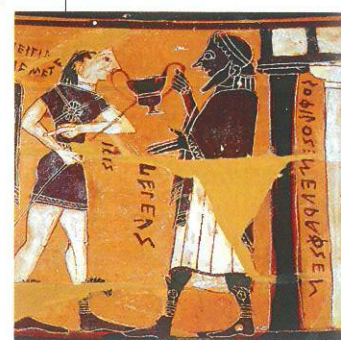
Sophilos placed his signature between the columns of Peleus's house.

DIONYSUS

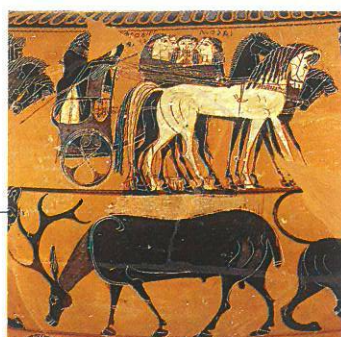
The second god to arrive is Dionysus, the god of wine, carrying a vine branch with grapes.

**△ CHEIRON**

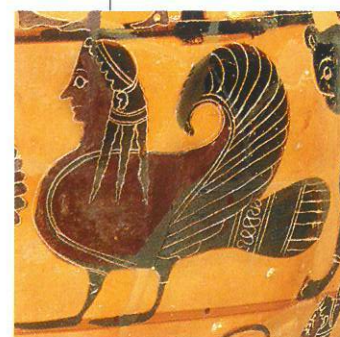
Cheiron the centaur is shown as he returns from hunting, carrying his kills on a pole.

**△ PELEUS AND IRIS**

The bridegroom, Peleus, greets his guests, holding a wine-cup in his hand. Iris is the first to arrive. A messenger of the gods, she is shown holding a herald's wand.

**△ ARES AND APHRODITE**

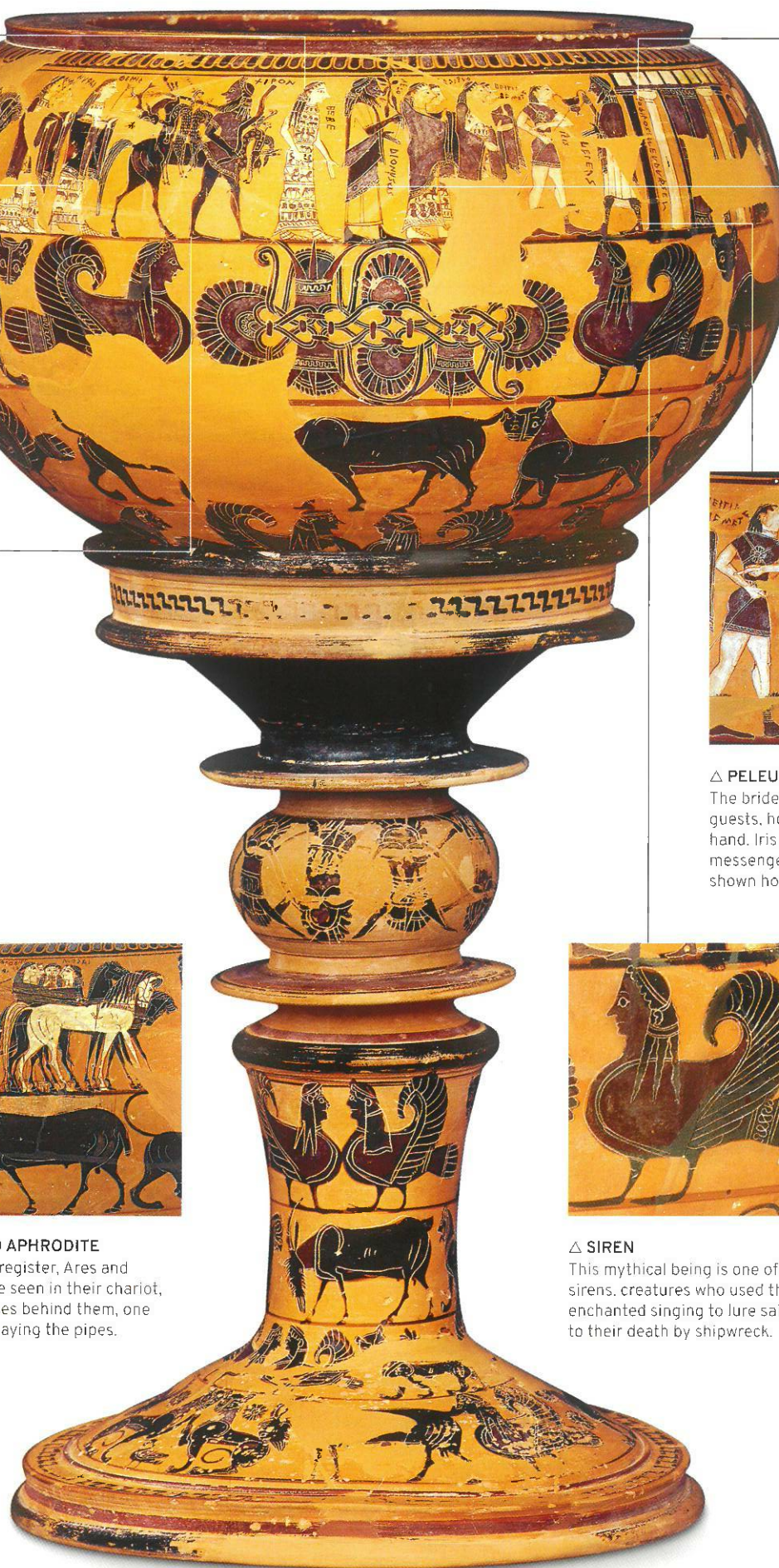
In the upper register, Ares and Aphrodite are seen in their chariot, with five Muses behind them, one of whom is playing the pipes.

**△ SIREN**

This mythical being is one of the sirens, creatures who used their enchanted singing to lure sailors to their death by shipwreck.

**△ ALTERNATIVE VIEW**

Like the bowl, the stand is decorated with friezes of real and mythical animals, as well as geometric patterns influenced by Persian art.



◀ ATTIC DINOS

As was typical for Greek *dinoi*, this one has a rounded bottom and is placed on a stand. The *dinos* was carefully restored from fragments, with remarkably few areas of loss. These were filled using plaster of Paris and painted. Height (with stand): 71cm (28in). Date: c.580–c.570 BCE.

Attic Dinos

Unique early Attic vase of exceptional quality that marked a significant change of direction in black-figure painting



A *dinos* was a mixing bowl for wine; the Greeks prided themselves on diluting their wine with water, unlike the so-called barbarian races. This beautiful example was created during the Archaic period of Greek art (c.800 BCE–480 BCE). It was made in Attica – the area around Athens – by Sophilos, the first Greek vase painter whose name is known: his signature appears on four surviving vases, three times as painter and once as potter; his signature on this vase (“Sophilos painted me”) emphasizes his chief skill.

Procession of the gods

Fragments of 37 different vessels have been attributed to Sophilos. A master vase painter in the black-figure style (see box), he was significant in increasing the importance of figural scenes in Greek vase painting. This black-figured *dinos* is Sophilos’s most spectacular

surviving work. Earlier Greek vases were mainly decorated with plant motifs – usually lotus flowers or palmettes – and friezes of animals and monsters. Sophilos used these on his *dinos* and its stand, but reserved the prominent upper register for a figural scene depicting the wedding procession of Peleus, a king, and Thetis, a sea nymph. Their marriage – a union between a mortal and an immortal – played a pivotal role in the Trojan cycle of legends, a popular subject for vase painters. Their son Achilles was the greatest hero of the Trojan war, and his mentor, the wise centaur Cheiron, is portrayed by Sophilos among the wedding guests. The other guests comprise a virtual roll-call of the Greek gods, who are pictured arriving in chariots or on foot, with groups of Fates, Graces, and Muses among them. Thetis is unseen and is presumed to be in the building behind Peleus.

The **name** of each **deity** is neatly written beside them in **classical Greek**

BLACK-FIGURE POTTERY

In black-figure pottery, figures and decoration were drawn in a silhouette-like style with incised details. Vessels were fired in three different stages to produce the coloration.

1 Figures and decoration were painted on the dried clay vase with slip (clay slurry); outlines and details were incised into the slip, while the background was left the colour of the clay. Red and white earth-based pigments were used to add further

details. 2 During the first, oxidizing stage of firing, air was allowed into the kiln, so that the vase turned orange-red in colour. 3 The temperature was increased, the oxygen supply reduced, and green wood fed into the kiln, turning the vessel black. 4 The vents were reopened to allow oxygen into the kiln and the temperature was reduced; the vase returned to its red colour while the areas of slip remained black.



1

2

3

4

△ SOPHILOS VOLUTE KRATER

A *krater* is another type of vessel used for mixing wine. This style of terracotta vase gains the epithet “volute” (a spiral scroll form) for its scroll-shaped handles. This splendid example from the early 6th century BCE is attributed to Sophilos.