Welcome to the Museum
ADMIT ALL
Historium
Curated by RICHARD WILKINSON and JO NELSON
Foreword by
SIR TONY ROBINSON
BIG PICTURE PRESS

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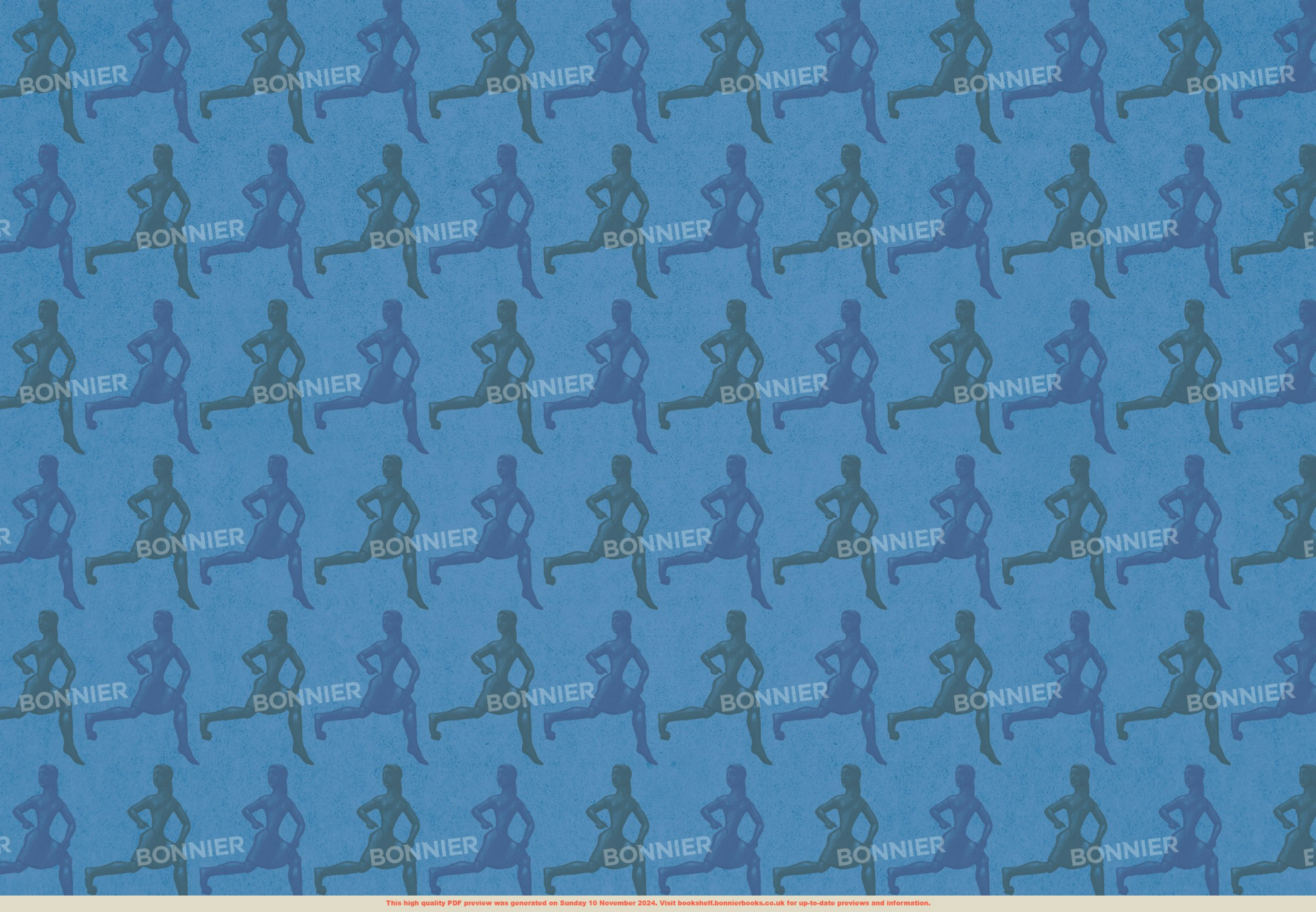

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What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of the past through the traces civilisations have left behind. It includes everything made or done by humans, from the earliest stone tools and the ruins of ancient settlements to fragments of writing and burial goods.

To understand the importance of archaeological objects, they must be put in context through careful detective work. Archaeologists take many samples from discovery sites for close analysis. A technique called carbon dating can roughly determine the age of any organic material, while traces of pollen can reveal the types of vegetation around at the time. Similar types of objects, such as pieces of pottery, are compared and classified to form a useful timeline.

Modern archaeologists are meticulous in their research, but this has not always been the case. Early excavations were hunts for buried treasure rather than attempts to understand the past. Objects were removed and sold on for their material worth, not their cultural significance. It was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD that scholars began to appreciate the historical importance of ancient artefacts, but even then many treasures were taken a long way from their places of origin to be displayed in museums around the world. Today there is still much debate about where items in museum collections rightfully belong. Some ancient cultures are still thriving today, and people from those cultures have sought, and continue to seek, the return of sacred and culturally important items.

Modern archaeology takes a scientific approach to learning from objects and today new technologies – from electron microscopy to satellite imagery – have made the discipline more accurate than ever, with each new discovery improving our understanding of the past. As you explore the different objects in *Historium*, take a moment to think what traces you and your community might leave behind – how will your mobile phone, the things in your house – even your toothbrush – be understood several thousand years from now?

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TIMELINE OF *HISTORIUM* OBJECTS

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Stone Age hand axe
700,000–1,000,000 years old
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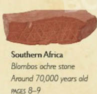

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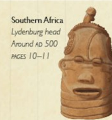

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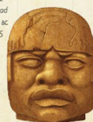

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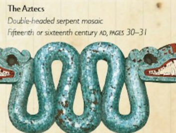

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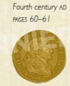

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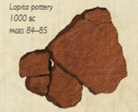

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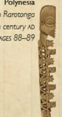

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Historium

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Gallery 1

Africa

Southern Africa
Western Africa
Ancient Egypt

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For Natalie and Otto – R.W.
For brother Jo – J.N.

BIG PICTURE PRESS
www.bigpicturepress.net

First published in the UK in 2015 by Big Picture Press,
an imprint of Bonnier Publishing Group,
Deepdene Lodge, Deepdene Avenue, Dorking, Surrey, RH5 4AT, UK
www.templarco.co.uk

Illustration copyright © 2015 by Richard Wilkinson
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978-1-78370-188-9 (hardback)
978-1-78370-365-4 (collector's edition)

Printed in China

This book was typeset in Gill Sans and Mrs Green
The illustrations were drawn and coloured digitally

Written by Jo Nelson
Text in 'Rome' chapter written by Katie Haworth
Designed by Winsome d'Abreu
Edited by Katie Haworth

Welcome to the Museum
ENTER HERE

Historium

Illustrated by RICHARD WILKINSON

Written by JO NELSON

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Southern Africa

Africa has the longest record of human inhabitants of any continent in the world. The earliest stone tools were found in eastern Africa and early human tool-makers seem to have spread to southern Africa around one million years ago. It is thought that the evolution of fully modern human beings occurred around two hundred thousand years ago, in eastern and southern Africa's savannah woodlands.

Cave paintings, shell beads and careful burial sites give clues to the daily lives and spiritual beliefs of hunter-gatherers in the late Stone Age. Evidence of herding animals and making pottery in eastern Africa dates from around 8000 BC and these practices appear to have spread to southern Africa by about 500 BC. Around AD 200, iron-using farmers appeared and agricultural communities quickly spread across the region.

The Limpopo and Save Rivers were used as early trade routes in southern Africa, taking ivory and gold from inland areas to trading posts on the coast. In the eleventh century AD, the first urban centres emerged in the region. Both the wealthy Mapungubwe state and the Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe owed their prosperity to the export of gold. Their trade networks reached to eastern Africa, Arabia, India and even China. As these centres flourished, so did the artistic endeavours of the people.

Away from the trading centres, most people still lived in small-scale farming communities with societies based around kinship. The arrival of Portuguese mariners in the fifteenth century AD marked the beginning of European interaction with southern Africa.

Key to plate

1: Stone Age tools

700,000–1,000,000 years old

These hand axes were found in Kathu in northern South Africa. With sharp points at one end and sharp edges down the sides, these stones were expertly chipped and shaped to make highly versatile hand axes. The hand axe was the tool of choice for human ancestors for over a million years. Its sharp edges would have cut trees or meat and scraped bark or animal skins, while its point could have been used as a drill. The area of the brain used when making a tool like this overlaps with the area used when speaking. It is highly possible therefore that humans from the early Stone Age already had some command of language.

2: Blombos ochre stone

Around 70,000 years old

Engraved ochre stones from the Blombos Cave are the oldest known examples of intricate designs made by humans. The geometric markings, etched with the point of a stone, are an astonishing example of very early creative behaviour. The Blombos Cave contained many more lumps of ochre, not engraved but shaped in a way that suggests they were being used for their pigment. The soft, iron-rich ochre would have been ground to a powder and turned into a reddish paint, perhaps for cave or body painting. Shell beads and bone tools found alongside the ochre stones support the idea that the early humans using this cave were interested in ornamentation.

3: Coldstream Stone

Date unknown

This painted stone was found buried with a human skeleton in a rock shelter near the southern coast of South Africa. The painting of three figures in red, black and white is well preserved and unusual for its variety of colours. The main rock artists of southern Africa were the San hunter-gatherers, and the figures on this burial stone may well be San medicine men performing a trance dance to enter the supernatural world. The central figure appears to be carrying a bow and hunting arrows over his shoulder. In his hands he carries what is thought to represent a feather and a palette, suggesting he himself is an artist. Most rock art is found on cave walls and depicts either animals or humans.

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Preface

Human beings are astonishingly creative. For over a million years they have been making and innovating – not merely functional tools but elaborate objects and intricate artwork.

At first glance, the purpose and significance of an artefact may seem unclear, but explored in its context it becomes a window into a distant time and place. The scratched lines on a piece of ochre may seem unremarkable, until you learn that they are 70,000 years old and the earliest known example of a person making a decorative pattern. A small clay figure may look rather ordinary, until you imagine it as one of thousands of tomb guardians, handcrafted to protect an immense mound where a Japanese emperor was buried.

Understanding objects in their context also enables us to make links between civilisations and recognise more general themes that emerge in human societies. A Mesopotamian board game and an ancient Egyptian model of breadmaking appear to have little in common, until you discover they were both chosen to accompany the deceased to the afterlife.

Writing about the objects in *Historium* has taken me on a tour of the ancient world as well as cultures that still thrive today. I've feasted with Celts, fought with Persians, traded with African kings, admired rock art with Aboriginal people, built elaborate temples and attended all kinds of ancient rituals. Now I'd like to invite you to do the same.

Jo Nelson
Author of *Historium*

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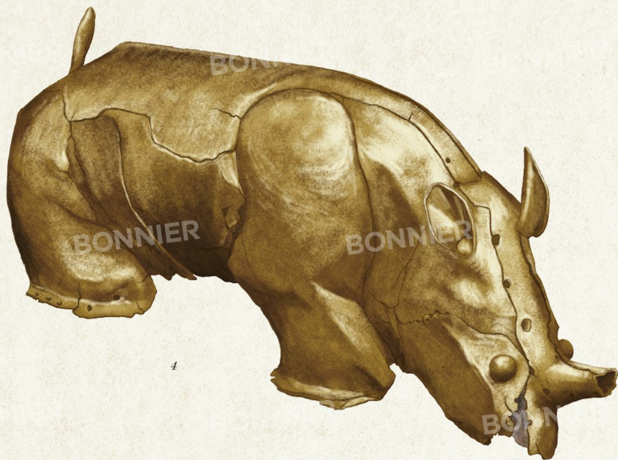

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4: Mapungubwe rhinoceros
AD 1220–1290
This gold-foil rhinoceros was discovered in a royal grave at Mapungubwe, one of southern Africa's first states. The site reveals the existence of a ruling elite, living separately in a hilltop settlement. This is the first known example of a class-based society in southern Africa. Among the grave goods excavated at Mapungubwe were items made of iron, gold, copper, ceramics, and trade glass beads originating from India, Egypt and Arabia. They reveal Mapungubwe's position as a wealthy trading centre with links to cultures across the Indian Ocean. Climate change at the end of the thirteenth century AD brought drought and crop failure to Mapungubwe, causing the Iron Age community to disperse.

5: Gold bowl and sceptre
AD 1220–1290
These gold items were also found in graves on the hill at Mapungubwe. Natural gold deposits in the area contributed to the kingdom's wealth and gold was a valuable trade commodity. It was also crafted into ornaments and jewellery for the local elite. At its height, Mapungubwe was the largest state in southern Africa.

6: Lydenburg head
Around AD 500
This is one of seven fired earthenware heads found carefully buried in a pit outside the town of Lydenburg in north-east South Africa. They date from southern Africa's early Iron Age and are the earliest known examples of sculpture in southern Africa. The heads are hollow with thin clay strips added to create facial details. It is possible the larger heads were intended as helmet masks, to be worn as part of a ceremony. The skill and thought that went into the designs suggest they were valued products of a well-organised and settled community.

7: Great Zimbabwe soapstone figure
Around fifteenth century AD
The ancient city of Great Zimbabwe was the heart of the thriving Shona Empire from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries AD. Its wealth lay in cattle production, gold and ivory trade. Extensive stone ruins of the impressive city, with its 20m (66ft) wall, still remain today, including eight birds carved in soapstone that once sat on walls and monoliths (tall slabs of stone). It is thought they represent the bateleur eagle – a good omen, protective spirit and messenger from the gods in Shona culture. The much smaller soapstone figure shown here is also thought to be from Great Zimbabwe, although its age and precise origin are not known with certainty.

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Western Africa

The oldest known ironworking culture in western Africa is the Nok civilisation, which existed from at least 900 BC to around AD 200. The impressive terracotta statues from this time and the iron furnaces found alongside them speak of an advanced, organised, society.

By around 400 BC, ironworking was fairly widespread in western Africa. Iron tools helped farming communities spread more quickly, and some of these developed into large states. Copper was scarce in western Africa, so communities imported it from northern Africa or mines in the Sahara Desert. These copper routes would have encouraged a flow of ideas and influences across the continent.

Western Africa has a long and rich oral tradition, but no indigenous writing existed until the nineteenth century AD. The earliest written accounts about the area are by Muslims from northern Africa and date from the tenth century AD. They describe large towns and cities, with markets, trade networks and systems of government ruled over by kings.

Notable civilisations amongst the western African states were the kingdom of Ife, the kingdom of Benin and the Mali Empire. These states emerged from around the eleventh century AD and reached the height of their powers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries AD. Their prosperity was reflected in high levels of artistic achievement, including glorious brass, bronze, terracotta and ivory artefacts.

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8: **Terracotta equestrian figure**
Thirteenth–fifteenth century AD
The Mali Empire (eleventh to sixteenth century AD) had a well-organised army with an elite corps of horsemen and many foot soldiers in each battalion. Mali's wealth stemmed from its gold mines and its regular surplus of crops. The army was needed to guard the empire's borders and to protect the all-important trade routes. This equestrian figure is one of hundreds of different terracotta sculptures made during the Mali Empire. The very fact that Mali had a cavalry is evidence of the empire's prosperous economy. Horses are not indigenous to Africa, so they would have been expensive animals to acquire and look after, not to mention the cost of bridles and other equipment. A successful empire needed a strong ruler. Unfortunately, weak rulers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries sent the empire into decline.

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9: Nok terracotta figure
Sixth century BC–sixth century AD
This terracotta figure is from the Nok culture, which is named after the village where the first terracotta sculpture of this kind was found. Other Nok sculptures, including human heads, figures and animals have been discovered across an area hundreds of square miles wide. They all share similar characteristics, such as the triangular, pierced eyes and elaborate hairstyling. The sculptures are hollow and built from clay coils. Their significance and purpose are unknown, but their sophisticated design and execution suggests a long tradition of terracotta art in the area. This figure is heavily adorned with jewellery and appears to be of high status.

10: Ivory armlet
Fifteenth–sixteenth century AD
The ruler of the Edo people in Nigeria is called the Oba of Benin. Ivory represents the Oba's longevity, strength, wealth and purity. The most elaborate ivory carvings were reserved for the Oba. This armlet features the Oba with mudfish legs and arms raised skywards. The mudfish lives on land and sea, and is symbolic of the Oba having both spiritual and secular powers. The current Oba traces his origins to a dynasty that began in the fourteenth century.

11: Brass plaque
Sixteenth century AD
This brass plaque is one of over nine hundred still in existence today. They once covered the interior walls of the royal palace of the Oba of Benin in Benin City, in modern-day south Nigeria. The plaques pay honour to the Oba by depicting his victories in battle and showcasing court rituals. The plaque figures are set in high relief and are beautifully executed. This particular plaque includes two Europeans – the tiny attendants floating above the Oba. They are Portuguese traders and the plaques themselves are made from the raw brass that the Portuguese traded with the Oba for pepper and gold. During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese were also heavily involved in the Atlantic Slave Trade, as were the British and French. The coast of Western Africa was sometimes called the slave coast.

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12: Ivory mask
Sixteenth century AD
This mask pendant is thought to represent Idia, the queen mother of Oba Esigie. The Oba of Benin performs a variety of rituals to honour his ancestors and thus bring good fortune to his people. Oba Esigie lived around AD 1504–1550. He most likely wore this mask during rituals in honour of his mother and it would have been placed either around his neck or on his hip. The little heads at the top represent Portuguese traders.

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Ancient Egypt

The civilisation of ancient Egypt began in oases on the banks of the River Nile in the north-east African desert. The Nile provided Egypt's all-important floodplain for growing crops, and also functioned as a major travel and trade route.

People began to farm the Nile Valley from as early as the sixth millennium BC. In the fourth millennium BC, early farming villages developed into Egypt's first towns. Egypt was united under one ruler in around 3000 BC, then ruled by pharaohs for the next three thousand years. There were three main periods of the pharaohs' rule, referred to as the Old Kingdom (2628–2181 BC), the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) and the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC).

The tremendous achievements of the ancient Egyptians are preserved in their art and monuments, in particular the mighty pyramids, temples and rock tombs. The afterlife was a preoccupation of the Egyptians and the wealthy elite followed elaborate funerary rites in the hope of being granted eternal life.

The Egyptian people believed that only the gods could keep order in this world, and that the pharaoh was a living representation of the gods. He ran the country through an organised system of government. Everyone paid taxes, either in goods or by working for the government, often on one of the pharaoh's major building projects.

During the New Kingdom, Egypt became the wealthiest, most powerful country of the ancient world. Although its strength then waned, its culture continued, even under foreign invaders, including the Greeks and Romans. When the Roman Empire officially became Christian in AD 380 it ordered the Egyptian temples to close, marking an end to ancient Egypt.

Key to plate

13: **Gilded outer coffin of Henutmehyt**
Around 1250 BC
Henutmehyt was a priestess from the Egyptian city of Thebes and it is clear from her lavish burial that she was extremely wealthy and highly regarded. Tombs and coffins were only ever for the rich; the poor were simply buried in the sand. Henutmehyt's body was mummified, a lengthy process for preservation that involved internal organs being removed and the body being dried out and wrapped in special bandages. Her mummy was then placed in a gold-leafed inner coffin inside this decorative outer coffin. Both coffins depict idealised versions of the priestess, designed to provide her spirit with a substitute body should her mummified body perish.

14: **Miniature broad collar**
332–222 BC
The Egyptians took great pride in their appearance, wearing fine linen, elaborate hairstyles and colourful, striking jewellery. This miniature collar, made of gold and semi-precious stones, is likely to have been made as an offering to the gods. Religious offerings were a daily ritual in ancient Egypt. Ordinary people would make small offerings to shrines in their own homes and priests would make three food offerings a day to the statues in their temples. The pharaoh, as supreme priest of all temples, would make the most important offerings of all.

15: **Inlay depicting 'Horus of Gold'**
Fourth century BC
This inlay is one of a group found at the site of the ancient city of Hermopolis. It is thought they formed a large inscription, listing the names of a king. The written word was deemed extremely powerful by the Egyptians and it was beautifully sculpted on monuments, in picture writing known as hieroglyphs. The Egyptians called this writing 'the words of the gods'. Egyptian kings chose their names very carefully and these names were steeped in meaning. This hieroglyph depicts the name 'Horus of Gold'. The falcon god Horus was closely associated with the Egyptian pharaohs.

16: **Ram's head amulet**
712–664 BC
This amulet comes from the period when Egypt was ruled by the Kushite kings. The kingdom of Kush was in Nubia, to the south of Egypt. During the 25th Dynasty, the Kushites ruled Egypt for around a hundred years. Images of Kushite pharaohs show them wearing rams' head amulets similar to this one. The ancient Egyptians associated the ram with fertility and with the god Amun, who had been adopted as the king of gods during the Middle Kingdom. Amulets were worn to bring good fortune and to ward off evil.

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17: Painted wooden canopic jars
Around 700 BC
During mummification, the intestines, stomach, lungs and liver were removed, preserved, then stored in special containers called canopic jars. It was traditional for the stoppers of the jars to represent the four sons of the god Horus, with the heads of a baboon, a jackal, a falcon and a human. Later the preserved internal organs were stored inside the body. Although the canopic jars were no longer needed, they continued to be included as important elements for a good burial.

18: Wooden model of bakers
Around 1900 BC
Bread was a staple part of every Egyptian's diet. Farmers grew wheat on the fertile land along the River Nile. It was ground into flour, then mixed with water and baked, both on a small scale at home and on a more industrial scale to feed workers. Models like this one were placed in tombs to represent the activities essential to everyday life – activities that were expected to be necessary in the next life too.

19: Painted wooden model of a harp
1550–1069 BC
This tomb model is another example of an object taken to the grave for use in the next life. Wall paintings show music and dancing as part of Egyptian banquet scenes. Musicians and entertainers were both male and female. In general, Egyptian women had more freedom than those in other ancient civilisations. Their main role was still to run the household and have children, but some also had jobs, ran businesses and owned property.

20: Bust of Queen Nefertiti
Around 1340 BC
Nefertiti was the wife of Akhenaten, the pharaoh who brought about a shocking change in Egypt by rejecting the worship of Amun and replacing him with Aten, the god of the sun disk. Nefertiti was a prominent queen, ruling alongside her husband and playing an active role in his religious reforms. Her name translates as 'a beautiful woman has come' and her beauty is evident in this bust. It was found in the ruins of a sculptor's workshop in Amarna, the new capital city founded by Akhenaten. There are numerous reliefs and statues of Nefertiti and this bust would have served as a model for artists to copy.

21: Page from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer
Around 1300 BC
This scene is from a Book of the Dead, about the burial of a royal scribe, Hunefer. These books contained beautifully illustrated instructions on how to perform a proper burial and achieve a safe passage to the next life. They were made for people of high rank and placed in their tombs. This scene shows priests performing rituals over Hunefer's mummified body while his wife and daughter mourn. Funerary texts were only made for people of high rank. Scribes were in this category because the art of writing was so highly valued. The book is painted on papyrus, the world's first paper-like material, which was made from strips of papyrus reed.

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22: **Fragment of a wall relief from tomb of Djehutyhotep**
Around 1850 BC
This figure is the first in a row of women that may have been sisters of the deceased, a governor named Djehutyhotep. As is customary in Egyptian relief art, the woman's shoulders are facing forwards while her legs and head are turned to the side.

23: **Gold amulet of a lion**
Around 1650–1550 BC
Amulets were small, precious objects in symbolic shapes. They were thought to bring power and protection. Animals were a common amulet design and the lion was a symbol of power and kingship. The mane and face of this lion show impressive detailing, especially considering it is only 3.6cm (1.4in) long. Egyptian metalwork dates back to at least the third millennium BC.

24: **Faïence vase in the form of Eros riding a duck**
Around 300–250 BC
This exquisite vase features the Greek god of love, Eros. It is made of faïence, an ancient type of glazed ceramic. It was probably made in Alexandria, the city founded as Egypt's capital by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. After Alexander's death, Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemies, a Greek dynasty, for nearly three hundred years. The port of Alexandria played an important role in transmitting Greek culture and it contained one of the most famous libraries in the ancient world.

25: **Gilded mummy mask**
Late first century BC–early first century AD
Mummy masks were placed inside Egyptian coffins over the face and shoulders of the mummy. The Egyptians believed that the spirit of the deceased could leave the tomb and that, on its return, it would use the mummy mask to identify the correct body. Yet mummy masks were rarely made as accurate portraits. They followed the idealised style typical of Egyptian art, with standard proportions for the depictions of human figures. The gilding on this mask relates to the sun god Re, whose flesh was said to be of pure gold. It was hoped that the deceased would be united with Re in the afterlife.

26: **Heart scarab of Hatnefer**
Around 1492–1473 BC
The Egyptians believed that their hearts were weighed after death by the god Anubis and that only those with a light, virtuous heart were granted passage to the next life. Heart scarabs accompanied the deceased to their tombs as good-luck charms. The scarab, or dung beetle, was a powerful symbol of rebirth and therefore a prominent feature of funerary art. Just as the young scarabs took flight from the dung ball, so the sun god rose up into the heavens, and so the Egyptians hoped they themselves would live on in death. This exquisite heart scarab and chain is inscribed with a passage from a Book of the Dead – a plea from the deceased, Hatnefer, to her own heart, not to let her down.

27: **Faïence *wedjat* eye**
1069–945 BC
The *wedjat* eye, also known as the Eye of Horus, was an Egyptian healing symbol and a very popular amulet design. It originates from the story of the god Horus, who lost his left eye in a battle and had it restored by the goddess Hathor. Blue and green were common colours for *wedjat* amulets as they symbolised regeneration.

28: **Statue of two men and a boy**
1353–1336 BC
This small statue shows a man of high status next to a younger man and a boy. The statue was most likely a domestic icon, used for veneration in the home. The family was at the heart of Egyptian society and it is possible that these three figures represent a grandfather, father and son.

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HISTORIUM

Gallery 2

America

The Olmec
The Maya
The Aztecs
The Hopewell
The Pueblo

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The Olmec

The Olmec civilisation thrived in southern Mexico from around 1200 to 400 BC. Its people cultivated the land along coastal lowlands and were mainly maize farmers who benefited from the annual river floods that irrigated and fertilised their soil. Abundant harvests enabled major centres to develop – notably San Lorenzo and La Venta – and these sites became home to Mesoamerica's first complex societies.

Although much about the Olmec remains a mystery, their civilisation is seen by many as the mother culture of Mesoamerica. Archaeological finds include stepped platforms leading to temples, ritual offerings, intricate sculptures and the first evidence of a sport known only as the Ball Game that became popular across Mesoamerica. What the Olmec called themselves is unknown. It was the Aztecs who later named them 'Olmec', which in the Nahuatl language means 'people who live in the rubber-producing region'. The Olmec extracted latex from rubber trees to make objects such as balls.

Archaeological evidence suggests the Olmec were spiritual people who saw the power of the gods through the forces of nature such as freshwater springs. Intriguing Olmec cave paintings of supernatural beings remain to this day, as do sculptures of all sizes, from small statuettes to massive altars and heads. Many were crafted to venerate the gods, to signify power or to provide protection. The Olmec also used earth or, more rarely, stone to build huge religious centres in their settlements and the first Mesoamerican pyramid was built at La Venta. Although the Olmec ceased to be a dominant culture around 400 BC, their strong imagery and customs profoundly influenced both the Maya and the Aztecs.

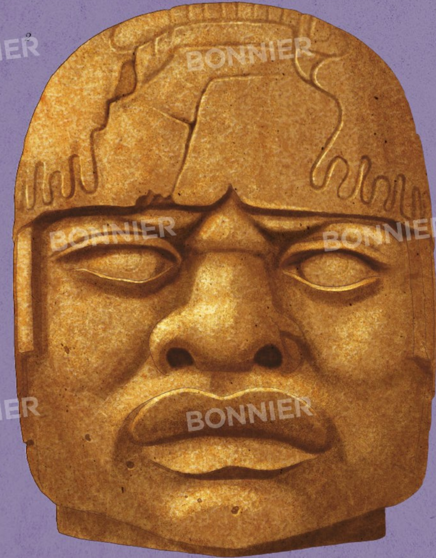
Key to plate

1: Seated female figurine
900–500 BC
The human form was the most common subject for Olmec sculpture, but very few stone sculptures of women have been found. This small jade figurine, dressed in a skirt, stands at only 7.7cm (3in) tall and is remarkably detailed given how hard jade is to carve. Jade was prized by the Olmec for its colour, shine and durability. It was also very scarce and had to be imported from around 600km (370m) away. Precious jade objects have been discovered in Olmec burial sites.

The green jade of this figurine has been stained with cinnabar (a reddish mineral ore), probably to help the carving stand out. It was discovered in a burial chamber in La Venta, along with other precious items, including a mirror made of polished hematite (a reddish-black mineral). A tiny hematite mirror also features on this figurine. Mirrors were seen as powerful, symbolic objects by the Olmec as well as the Maya and Aztecs after them.

2: Colossal head, number five
1200–900 BC
This is one of 17 colossal stone heads found in Mexico, ten of them at the site of San Lorenzo. They are numbered in the order they were discovered and they range in height from 1.47m to 3.4m (4.9ft to 11.15ft). The heads follow a similar design, with relatively flat faces and large features in low relief (not deeply carved), yet the distinctive facial features of each one indicate that they are unique portraits of real people, most probably Olmec rulers. They all wear striking headgear and one theory is that these are protective helmets, maybe worn for war or to take part in a ceremonial Ball Game.

The stone for these heads came from the mountains and had to be transported over long distances – up to 80km (50 miles). It may well have been carried along the rivers, strapped to large wooden rafts. One theory is that the stone was originally used as a massive altar for a ruler, then later sculpted into the ruler's head, perhaps to mark a rite of passage or to commemorate his death. The sheer scale of the heads suggests they were a display of power and the immense effort required to create them is evidence of a dominant ruler with a large workforce at his command.



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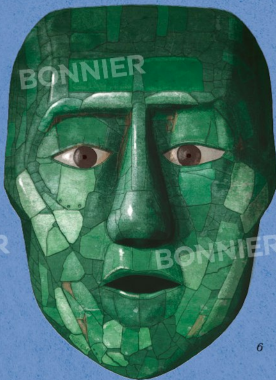

AMERICA

The Maya

The Maya civilisation rose to prominence in around AD 250. Its people never formed a single empire but lived in city-state kingdoms dotted across present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, northern Belize, western Honduras and El Salvador. What brought the Maya together as a culture was a shared belief system, a similar structure of society and similar styles of art and architecture.

The Maya settled in villages as early as 650 BC. Their cities began as ceremonial centres. Successive rulers added to the cities, building stone temples, palaces, pyramids, Ball-Game courts and plazas. The lifestyles of the royal family, aristocrats, priests and craftsmen in the city were sustained by the maize, squash and beans grown in the surrounding terraced fields.

Central to Maya life was a desire to please and appease the gods through rituals and ceremonies. People believed the gods required regular offerings, in particular human blood and sacrifices, to maintain order on Earth. Priests studied the heavens for a deeper understanding of the supernatural and became excellent astronomers and mathematicians.

Hieroglyphic writing carved on stone buildings has revealed much of what we know about the Maya. Their cities are now overgrown ruins, but around six million Maya descendants still live in the same region, mostly in small village communities, and some 70 Maya languages are spoken.

Key to plate

3: Vessel with a procession of warriors
AD 750–850
The naked figure on this vessel is a prisoner being led to a ritual sacrifice. At the head of the procession is a Maya ruler, identifiable by his jaguar pelt – a symbol of power and authority. He carries a bloodied weapon and has an instrument for bloodletting in his headdress. Even the Maya rulers would submit themselves to bloodletting when making special requests to the gods. The painting on this vessel is one of the few surviving examples of the colourful scenes that would have covered the walls of ancient Maya cities.

4: Incense burner
Fourth century AD
This ceramic incense burner shows a Maya king, sitting cross-legged and wearing an elaborate headdress. The headdress formed part of the king's ceremonial regalia, identifying him as the gods' representative on Earth and suggesting his own divine status. It was thought that the living king could communicate with the gods and that he would join them when he died. Smoke from burning incense was also thought to reach the gods and carry offerings to them.

5: Pair of ear flare frontals
Third–sixth century AD
These ear ornaments measure 5cm (2in) across and would have been attached to a shaft that went through a wide hole in the earlobe. They are carved with a motif based on petals or leaves. Many figures in Maya art are shown wearing ear flares, including the incense-burner king, also in this gallery. Jade was a symbol of wealth, since it was rare and very difficult to carve.

6: Jade mosaic funerary mask
AD 683
This mask, which belonged to Pakal the Great, called Janaahb' Pakal (Radiant Shield Sun), was discovered in a royal tomb beneath the Temple of Inscriptions at the ancient city of Palenque. The inscriptions of the tomb provide a written history of Pakal's dynasty and rule. According to them, he became king at the age of 12 and ruled until his death in AD 683, at the age of 80. Studies of his bones, however, suggest he was actually 45–50 when he died.

Under Pakal's reign, Palenque was transformed into a major Maya city and he commissioned the Temple of Inscriptions, built on a massive pyramid structure, as his own burial place. Pyramids were intended to replicate the surrounding mountains, where deities and ancestors were thought to reside. Jade of a bright green colour was highly prized by the Maya. This mask gave Pakal a youthful face for the afterlife, suggestive of the Maya maize god.

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The Aztecs

The Aztecs, or Mexica, lived in the Valley of Mexico from the twelfth century AD. According to Aztec belief, the Aztec people originated as a small, wandering tribe and were guided to the valley by their main god, Huitzilopochtli, who led them to settle on an island in the marshes of Lake Texcoco. Here they founded their capital, the city of Tenochtitlán, in around 1325 AD. A swampy landscape seems an unlikely setting for the development of Mesoamerica's last great native empire, but the Aztecs learned to grow food on artificial floating islands and gradually expanded their realm through waging war and forging alliances. Tenochtitlán became one of the largest cities in the world and was supported by an efficient system of trade and tribute.

Central to Aztec life was a sense of duty to the gods who had set the world in motion. Like the Olmec, the Maya and the Toltecs (a tribe who dominated central Mexico in the tenth to twelfth centuries AD) before them, the Aztecs believed that blood offerings were necessary to appease the gods and sustain life on Earth. Ceremonial wars were fought with the sole purpose of sacrificing any captives on top of steep temple pyramids. The Aztec word for blood literally means 'treasured water'. Priests would wrench the heart out of a prisoner and let his blood flow onto the soil below to encourage the rains to fall and the earth to be fertile.

The Aztecs were led by an elected emperor who was both the head of the army and chief priest. Revered by his people, he held divine status and was said to communicate directly with the gods. Each new emperor proved his might by waging war and winning new territories. By the early sixteenth century, the empire included 489 city-states and covered most of modern-day central and southern Mexico.

When a small Spanish army led by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547 AD) arrived in 1519 AD, they were astounded by the Aztecs' wealth and infrastructure, and appalled by the culture of human sacrifice. The mighty Aztecs had no experience of Spanish military tactics and weaponry. Two years later, Tenochtitlán lay in ruins and the Aztec lands became a Spanish colony.

Key to plate

7: Mosaic ceremonial knife
Fifteenth–sixteenth century AD
The wooden handle of this knife is carved in the shape of a warrior and is decorated with tiny pieces of turquoise, shell and malachite (a green mineral). The warrior figure wears an eagle headdress, the sign of an elite group of Aztec warriors, and appears to be holding the flint blade of the knife in place. Warriors would have fought with much plainer knives than this one – the more ornate designs were reserved for making sacrifices or for use in rituals. This knife is not strong enough to have been wielded with force, so it was probably only ever ceremonial.

There were two orders of high-ranking Aztec warriors: the Eagle and the Jaguar, which were considered the bravest of creatures. Young men had to perform at least 20 deeds of bravery before they could join the ranks of these orders.

8: Sun stone
AD 1250–1521
This intricately carved sun stone was once part of a temple complex in Tenochtitlán. It is also known as the calendar stone, because it features the 20 Aztec day names that formed the basis of their sacred calendar.

The Aztecs had two calendars, following a tradition that probably dated back to the Olmec. Like the Maya calendar, the Aztec sacred calendar was 260 days long and mostly used for divination. The Aztecs also had a 365-day solar calendar, primarily to mark civic events such as religious festivals and the farming seasons.

At the centre of the sun stone is the face of an Aztec sun god, surrounded by representations of the four previous world ages. The Aztecs believed they lived in the fifth and last of the world ages, which began when the city of Tenochtitlán was founded. According to Aztec mythology, each age was made and destroyed by the gods and had a different god serving as its sun.

9: Pot depicting Tláloc
Fifteenth century AD
Tláloc was the Aztecs' rain god and one of their most important deities. He decided whether to send rain or hail, cause floods or drought, make a good harvest or ruin the crops. The Aztecs believed Tláloc stored water in four massive jars, one at each point of the compass. This pot shows Tláloc painted blue to symbolise water and wearing a pointed headdress to represent the mountains, a precious source of water.

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10: Double-headed serpent mosaic
Fifteenth or sixteenth century AD
The serpent held deep significance for the Aztec people. Many of their gods took the form of a serpent, including the feathered serpent Quetzalcóatl, patron of priests and symbol of death and resurrection. Serpents were also a living example of regeneration because they shed their skins.

Around two thousand tiny pieces of turquoise have been meticulously arranged on carved wood to form this serpent. Turquoise was favoured over jade by the Aztecs, though both were prized for their colour. Turquoise evoked new growth, water and the feathers of the quetzal bird, which were worn in ceremonies by priests. Both the colour green and serpents signified fertility, and ensuring the land would remain fertile was at the heart of most religious ceremonies.

It is highly likely that this serpent was worn during human sacrifices on the chest of an important priest or even the emperor. The bright turquoise skin and open jaws – picked out in red and white shell – were intended to both impress and terrify the beholder.

The craftsmen best known for their turquoise mosaics were not Aztecs but Mixtecs. At the height of the Aztec Empire, many Mixtec towns came under Aztec rule and had to pay tribute to the emperor, including gifts of gold and turquoise. This serpent would have made a valuable item of tribute – an example of the fearsome power the Aztecs held and the high demands they could make.

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The Hopewell

The Hopewell culture prospered in and around what is now the midwestern United States of America from 100 BC to AD 500, a period known as the Middle Woodland. The term Hopewell is used to describe a wide scattering of people who lived near rivers in temporary settlements of one to three households and practised a mixture of hunting, gathering and crop growing. Hopewell settlements were linked by extensive and complex trading routes, which doubled as communication networks, bringing people together for important ceremonies.

The predominant surviving features of the Hopewell culture are its large burial mounds and earthworks (large, raised-earth structures). Hopewell mounds were enormous: the largest site at the Newark Earthworks in Ohio, called the Octagon, covers more than 50 acres – the size of about 100 football pitches. Hopewell earthworks are also notable for their precise, interconnected geometric shapes and the mathematical precision with which they were measured and positioned in relation to one another. The straight and parallel lines of the earthworks suggest a direct relationship with the positions of the moon, stars and sun, and the Octagon is now known to act as an observatory for watching the lunar cycle.

Precious burial goods have been found in some of the mounds. These include objects of adornment made from copper, mica, and obsidian, imported to the region from hundreds of miles away. Stone and ceramics were also fashioned into intricate shapes.

After AD 400 the Hopewell culture began to decline. The invention of the bow and arrow may have led people to live in larger, more permanent communities for protection as warfare became more deadly. With fewer people using the trade routes there was no longer a network linking people to the Hopewell traditions.

Key to plate

11: Dog pipe
AD 100–200
Hundreds of pipes, sculpted from stone into intricate representations of animals – from owls and herons to beavers and toads – have been found buried in Hopewell mounds. The natural pose of the dog in this beautifully crafted object shows that whoever made it was a keen observer of nature. Pipes provided an important link to the spiritual world. Shamans (spiritual leaders and healers) would smoke their pipes to induce a trance-like state for their healing rituals. The sculpted pipe animals would face the shaman as he smoked and take on the role of his spirit guide or a messenger from the deities. The ritual of sharing a pipe with a new acquaintance was also used along trade routes to signify peaceful intentions.

12: The Wray Figurine
100 BC–AD 400
This small stone sculpture was found on the ancient cemetery of the Newark Earthworks during construction on the site in the nineteenth century AD. It is thought to be of a shaman. The shaman is wearing a bearskin and appears to be in the middle of a transformation, either into a bear spirit or back to his human state. In his lap he holds a human head, perhaps in readiness for burial or to use in an act of divination. The Hopewell respected bears for their ferocity and for walking on two legs like a human. Their ability to wake from a long hibernation made them a powerful symbol of rebirth and a fitting subject for a burial object.

13: Mica hand
100 BC–AD 400
The shiny mineral, mica, was used to make Hopewell ceremonial objects. It occurs in layers that can be carefully prised into thin, fragile, almost transparent sheets. Artisans cut the sheets into geometric and animal shapes as well as human outlines. Thicker pieces were used as mirrors by spiritual leaders and some much larger slabs have been found in burial mounds. Mica was transported from the Appalachian Mountains, over 480km (300 miles) away, perhaps in a trade exchange with other Middle Woodland people or as offerings from pilgrims coming to see the great earthworks.

This delicately shaped hand is almost twice the size of a real hand, measuring over 28cm (11in) high and 15cm (6in) wide. Two piercings suggest it was attached to another object for display, perhaps to be carried or worn as part of a ceremony.

14: Projectile points
200 BC–AD 500
Fashioned out of flint and chert, varieties of stone that form sharp edges when broken, these points would have been used as knives or scrapers. The largest is 5.1cm (2in) long. Their distinctive shapes have enabled archaeologists to identify various Hopewell settlements and to estimate the population of each one.

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The Pueblo

Pueblo ancestry is shared by more than 75,000 Native Americans living in villages in south-west America today. The Ancestral Pueblo lived on the Colorado plateau and made use of the rocky mesas (tablelands), cliff faces and canyons to construct settlements.

The name 'Pueblo', meaning 'villagers', was adopted by Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century to distinguish settled, agricultural communities from neighbouring nomadic peoples. There was never a single Pueblo tribe and, while many Pueblo communities have shared beliefs and customs, there are five very different Pueblo languages. The nomads had their own name for the Pueblo that is also still used today: 'Anasazi', which means 'enemy people' in the Navajo language.

The Pueblo did not always live in settlements. Early stages of their history are known as the Basketmaker periods (AD 100–750), when the Pueblo relied more on hunting and gathering than agriculture and wove baskets to carry their possessions and supplies. As they increased their farming activities and became more settled, transportation was less important and the baskets were gradually replaced with pottery.

Early Pueblo dwellings were caves or shallow pit houses. Later (800–1300 AD), living units and storage rooms were built in stone and then added to – rather like apartment blocks today. Some buildings, known as Great Houses, ended up four storeys high, with as many as 800 rooms. Earlier pit houses were often incorporated into the Great Houses and enlarged into community or ceremonial rooms called *kivas*.

The Pueblo traded with other cultures and communities for goods that included shell beads from the coast, copper bells from western Mexico and turquoise from other Pueblo mines. A severe drought in the late thirteenth century AD and increased conflict with nomadic tribes led the Pueblo people to move south and east in search of more fertile lands. Seventeenth-century AD Spanish colonisers brought contagious diseases and more conflict, which further depleted communities. Today Pueblo cultures, languages and traditional arts and crafts are strong and there are more than 40 thriving Pueblo villages.

Key to plate

15: Cylinder jar
AD 900–1130
Ancestral Pueblo pottery was made using the same coil-and-scrape technique that is practised by the Pueblo today. Potters begin with a flattened base and build up from it in clay coils, scraping and shaping along the way. The coils are smoothed and coated with watery clay slip before being decorated and fired on a carefully controlled bonfire. This cylinder jar was discovered at the impressive D-shaped Great Building, Pueblo Bonito, in New Mexico.

16: Mortar with textile designs
AD 900–1100
This stone mortar was also found at Pueblo Bonito. It would have been used with a pestle for grinding pigments to make paint. The mortar itself is painted with a stepped geometric design characteristic of Pueblo weavings and textiles. It probably originated from early Pueblo basket designs, where straight lines and right angles were easier to weave than curves. It is unknown whether the patterns had specific meanings, although some may have signified a particular clan.

17: Jug
Twelfth to eighteenth century AD
Traditionally, Pueblo potters were women. Some Pueblo communities were matriarchal, meaning that property, farmland and clan affiliation were inherited through the mother. Likewise, pottery skills and designs were passed from mother to daughter. Each Pueblo settlement would try to keep the location of its clay deposit a secret, to prevent it from being plundered. Items such as this jug, with its striking geometric patterns, were intended for everyday use rather than display. Only from the late nineteenth century was pottery made specifically for tourists and collectors. Most Pueblo potters today are women and they often refer to the clay as female, with names such as Grandmother Clay or Mother Earth.

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HISTORIUM

Gallery 3

Asia

Ancient India
Ancient China
Ancient Japan
Ancient Korea

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Ancient India

The Indian subcontinent was home to some of the oldest and most influential civilisations in the world.

India gets its name from the Indus River, which runs through modern-day Pakistan. It was along this river between 3300 and 1300 BC that the first great ancient Indian civilisation, the Indus Valley Civilisation, emerged. Protected by mountains to the north, jungles to the east and ocean to the south and west, the Indus Valley provided an ideal place for human society to thrive and the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were built there.

In the second millennium BC, the Indus Valley Civilisation went into decline. It was followed by the Vedic Period, named after the *Vedas*, religious texts composed during that time. The *Vedas* were written in archaic Sanskrit and include hymns recited during rituals that praise a wide range of gods.

Modern Hinduism finds some of its oldest roots in the Vedic religion, continuing some of the Vedic rituals and sharing many of its deities. By contrast, Buddhism and Jainism developed as a reaction against the strict Vedic hierarchy and its elaborate sacrifices. Buddhism was established in the fifth century BC by the teacher Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, meaning 'enlightened one'. Jainism was founded by a contemporary of the Buddha known as Mahavira, meaning 'great hero'. In the first century AD, Christianity was introduced to India and in the eighth century AD Islam arrived via Arab traders.

The diverse beliefs of ancient India are strongly represented in its arts, through dancing, sculpture, painting, epic poetry and architecture. In AD 1193, Afghan armies successfully invaded India, leading to a period of Islamic occupation and the beginning of a new period of cultural history.

Key to plate

1: Statue of Ganesha
Eleventh century AD
The elephant-headed god, Ganesha, is one of the many Hindu deities. He is the son of the god Shiva and his consort, Parvati. At the heart of Hinduism is the belief in a single, divine unity, a supreme truth called *Brahman*. All gods and goddesses are aspects of *Brahman*, some with shifting identities and numerous incarnations. It is believed that a priest named Vyasa dictated epic poems to Ganesha over a period of two and a half years. The result was an important Hindu text, the *Mahabharata*.

The oldest known statues of divinities in India are Vedic and Buddhist. They date from the second and first centuries BC and include the first carved images of Buddha. These early statues owe much to Greek art. Alexander the Great invaded India in around 327 BC, establishing several Greek settlements, and an Indo-Greek kingdom was later founded in the north of the subcontinent.

By the fourth century AD, Buddhist and Hindu art were developing side by side, in strikingly similar, stylised ways. Ever since, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist statues or images have needed to conform to an archetype in order to be suitable for worship. Strict instructions dictate how to execute the artworks and it is very unusual for an individual artist's style to emerge.

Hindu statues are seen as a vessel for the divine. They form part of the belief that the physical universe is an illusion, masking a divine reality. During a ceremony, priests invoke the spirit of the deity to enter the statue, allowing worshippers a glimpse of the divine.

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Key to plate

2: Indus dancing girl
Around 2500 BC
Standing only 10.5cm (4.1in) high, this statue is a remarkable artefact from Mohenjo-Daro, one of the two great cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation. It shows that craftsmen of that time not only knew how to make and cast bronze, but also had the artistic ability to capture a figure in a natural, informal pose. The choice of a dancer as a subject is evidence of a cultural interest in the performing arts, while her bracelets and necklace suggest a desire for adornment.

The Indus Valley Civilisation left no written histories, but archaeological finds point to an organised society, with communal granaries; a grid pattern of city planning; flood defences; artisans working in metals, ivory and wood; and trading links with Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Indus Valley Civilisation flourished for over six hundred years and its disappearance may have been caused by invasion or by a rise in sea level, which damaged the civilisation's trade – or it may have been a combination of the two.

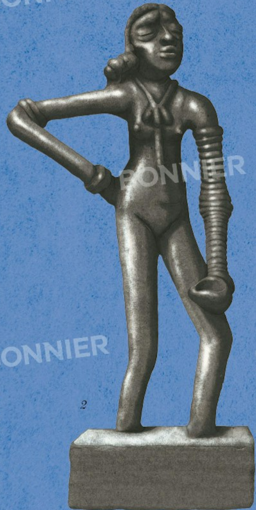
3: Carved steatite seals
2600–1900 BC
These small, square seals have been carved in soft steatite stone (soapstone) and baked so they harden and whiten. They are the first evidence of writing in ancient India, although the meanings of the pictographic symbols have yet to be determined. Thousands of seals have been found in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, as well as in places on the Indus trade routes. The Indus Valley Civilisation is the first culture known to make cotton cloth and evidence suggests that goods ready for trade were wrapped in the cotton then closed with these seals. The symbols were possibly a way of marking the goods.

4: Mother Goddess terracotta figurine
Third century BC
This wide-hipped female figure belongs to a long tradition of worshipping the Mother Goddess. It may have been an icon in celebrations of fertility. Baked clay was widely used for artistic expression at the height of the Indus Valley Civilisation, 2600–2000 BC, as well as during the Mauryan Empire, 325–185 BC. The importance of the Mother Goddess continued in later centuries when the wives and consorts of the major gods were all seen as aspects of the one great Mother Goddess. This figure provides evidence of sophisticated textile production, as the figure's dress is embroidered with floral patterns.

5: Ashoka's pillar
Around 238 BC
This stone block is a fragment of one of the many pillars erected across the Mauryan Empire by Emperor Ashoka the Great. It is carved with a message announcing Ashoka's benevolent policy to all people and all faiths. Ashoka did not start his reign as a tolerant, peace-loving leader. He was a ruthless, military man, seeking to expand his empire, until a particularly bloody assault led him to change his ways. Filled with remorse, Ashoka adopted Buddhism and the concept of *Dharma* – a sense of duty, piety and selflessness. He wanted people across his empire to know about his change of heart and to feel safe once more. So, in an age when mass communication was almost impossible, Ashoka chose to erect stone pillars as a kind of public address system. They stood 9m (30ft) high and bore messages written in local dialects for all to understand.

6: Gold earrings
First century BC
This pair of beautifully crafted gold earrings are so large and heavy – 7.6cm (3in) at the widest part – that they would have distended the earlobes and hung down to the shoulders. The quality of goldsmithing and the use of royal emblems (a winged lion and an elephant) make it highly likely that these earrings were royal commissions. Jewellery had been worn in ancient India for millennia. It was a sign of prestige and wealth. Both male and female deities are depicted wearing earrings, bracelets and necklaces.

7: Buddha head
Fifth century AD
This head would have been part of a seated Buddha statue. It was carved from sandstone during the Gupta Period, which lasted from AD 320 to the early sixth century AD, and shows the Buddha deep in meditation. Despite their earlier divide, Buddhism and Hinduism developed side by side during this time, with some Hindus worshipping Buddha as an avatar of their god Vishnu and some Buddhists revering Hindu deities. The Gupta period was a golden age in Indian history, when the arts and sciences flourished. Learning was encouraged by rulers and a type of Buddhist monastery that functioned much like a university emerged.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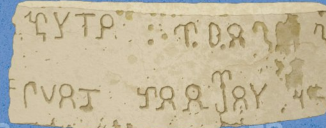
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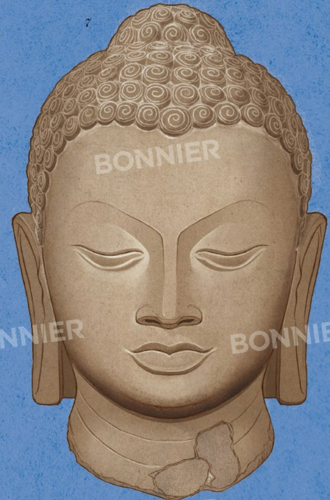
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Ancient China

China has the longest unbroken history of any great civilisation. Its Neolithic age can be traced back to 10,000 BC, when farming settlements began to develop along the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. China's famous pottery and jade carvings first emerged in these times.

From around 2100 BC, China's history was shaped by the rise and fall of various dynasties. Little is known about the Xia Dynasty, but the subsequent Shang and Zhou Dynasties (1600–1046 BC and 1045–256 BC) formed China's Bronze Age. The existence of bronzeware and its ritual uses offers evidence of an organised, skilful society.

Each dynasty varied in duration and in territory, some gaining land, others losing it. The ruling families were continually threatened by internal rebellions and foreign invasions. Consecutive rulers would strive to prove their right to rule. By pointing to their illustrious ancestry and their success on the battlefield, they would claim to have the blessings of the heavens. To show their greatness, they surrounded themselves with magnificent objects, many of which accompanied them to the grave.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, the great sage, Confucius, promoted a system of moral, social and political belief that became known as Confucianism. The philosophy of Taoism was formed in the second and first centuries BC, though its roots go back further. Buddhism was introduced from India in the first century BC.

Most outside influences reached China along the Silk Road, a network of trade routes that linked China with central Asia and Africa. The road was named in honour of China's valued export, silk, the manufacture of which was a Chinese invention. Other significant Chinese inventions included gunpowder, the stirrup, paper and printing.

Key to plate

8: Gold belt buckle
Second century BC
This buckle is one of over two thousand objects recovered from a tomb at Shizishan in western China. The tomb belonged to a Chu king, who ruled during the Western Han Dynasty.

Tombs are by far the greatest source of ancient Chinese artefacts. Important men (and, more rarely, women) were buried with exquisite treasures to accompany them into the afterlife. The expertly executed image on this buckle is of a tiger and a bear attacking a horse.

The Western Han rulers were the first to forge an empire across the whole of China. Their dynasty was a golden age in which the arts and culture flourished. Models of houses and paintings found in the tombs give a sense of the impressive architecture of the time, as do the tombs' vaulted roofs.

9: Wine flask
Around third century BC
This bronze flask, intricately decorated with silver inlay, is from the later years of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, in what is known as the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). Although, as the name suggests, it was a time of much fighting, it was also a period of technological and intellectual development. The craftsmanship involved in making this flask is astonishing. The meticulously designed geometric patterns would have been indented during the casting process from the inside of its clay mould, then filled in with silver.

Bronzes were prized above silver and gold items, but this inlay technique gave the precious metals a place in Chinese metalworking of the period. Vessels such as this flask would have made lavish gifts, dowry offerings or precious burial objects.

10: Gilt bronze Maitreya Buddha
AD 486
Buddhism reached China from India during the Han Dynasty, around the first century AD. Its rules for life and meditation techniques were familiar to many Chinese, as they resembled those of Taoism. As more of the Buddhist scriptures were translated for Chinese readers, the Buddhist faith became more developed and prominent. From the fourth to the sixth centuries AD, various dynasties adopted Buddhism as their state religion. This statue of the Maitreya Buddha, the teaching Buddha of the next cosmic era, is derived from Indian prototypes, but the dramatic folds in his drapery are particular to China in the late fifth century AD. The unusual patterning on the folds can be traced to Kucha, an important centre on the Silk Road.

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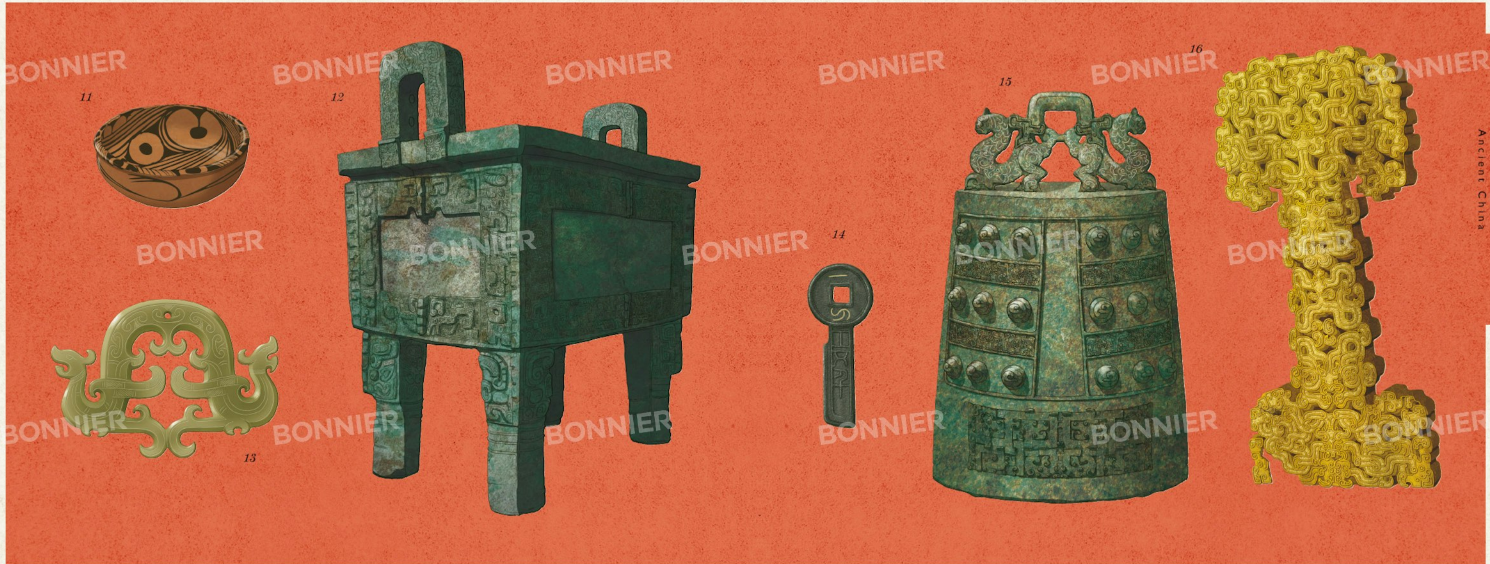

Key to plate

11: Earthenware bowl
3200–2700 BC
Pottery has been made in China for more than 17,000 years. This bowl comes from the late Neolithic time, when the Yangshao culture flourished along the banks of the Yellow River. It was made by stacking coils of clay, then creating a smooth finish with paddles and scrapers. Flowing black lines against the exposed clay are typical of this period. Decorated vessels appear to have been reserved as burial objects rather than for everyday use.

12: Square cauldron
1300–1046 BC
This ritual vessel is remarkable for its size and age. At 133cm (52in) in height and weighing 875kg (138 stone), it is one of the biggest bronze items ever excavated. Making a bronze vessel of these proportions would have taken an astonishing amount of time, effort and manpower. It is all the more remarkable because it was discovered in the tomb of a woman: Fu Hao, a consort of the Shang king, Wu Ding. To treat women with the same respect as men was extremely rare in ancient China, but Fu Hao was an exceptional figure. She was a warrior, a politician and the first known female military leader. In death she was honoured with a rich treasure trove of a tomb.

13: Dragon pendant
Fifth–fourth century BC
The green gemstone jade was valued above all other materials in ancient China and its status in Chinese culture continues to this day. Translucent and extremely hard, to the Chinese it symbolised purity and indestructibility. Expert craftsmen worked it into ornaments, ceremonial weapons and ritual objects. Jade pendants were often strung with beads and worn by important men, hanging from the waist or shoulder. The dragon was also held in great esteem by the ancient Chinese. It was originally a rain deity and was thought to bring gifts from the heavens. The emperors later adopted the dragon as a symbol of imperial power.

14: Bronze knife coin
AD 7
A currency known as knife money, based on the scraper-knives used by fishermen and nomadic hunters in eastern and northern China, was first used in the fourth century BC. In the third century BC, a circular coin with a square hole had replaced knife money. This later coin, from the Wang Mang period, combines both types. Wang Mang was a powerful figure of the later Western Han Dynasty, who then became emperor himself from AD 9–23. He issued 21 different types of coins, including this one.

15: Bronze bell
Early fifth century BC
Music and the harmony it creates were strongly advocated by the great sage, Confucius, and there is a long tradition of bells and drums being used to make music for Chinese court ceremonies and rituals. Bells of this kind were imported into the Zhou lands in northern China from the south at the turn of the first millennium BC. Their new, melodic sounds strongly influenced the rhythm and phrasing of Zhou poetry and writing styles. They were hung as a set, in ascending sizes and timbres, and were played by striking the outside with a hammer. Casting large patterned bells – this one is 38.3cm (15in) high – was a complex and costly process.

16: Gold dagger handle
Sixth–fifth century BC
This elaborate handle was cast in a mould, using Chinese bronzework techniques. Its fine, fragile design makes it impractical for war. Most likely it was only ever intended for display or perhaps for placement in a tomb. Weapons and warfare were ever-present in ancient China. Rulers needed massive armies of infantrymen and carefully organised logistics to maintain authority over vast territories. This dagger hilt comes from a particularly violent time in the Zhou Dynasty, known as the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC). The need for weapons prompted technical advances in iron and steel casting techniques, which had their benefits elsewhere in society, such as the introduction of the iron plough to farming.

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Ancient Japan

The archipelago of Japan stretches west towards the Korean peninsula and north towards China. Its Neolithic period, from 10,000 to 300 BC, is named Jōmon after pottery discoveries from this time. The Jōmon people were hunter-gatherers who lived mainly in pit dwellings around a central open space. Large shell mounds – ancient rubbish heaps – show that much of their food came from the surrounding sea.

From the third century BC to the third century AD, a time known as the Yayoi period, increased contact with mainland Asia saw a change in lifestyle. There was a shift from hunting and gathering to small farming settlements, as wet rice agriculture was introduced from Korea and China. Metalworking and other technologies also arrived, and a more structured society emerged. Regional chiefs fought to expand their territories and increase their power. The first examples of burial mounds and rich grave goods come from this period, including bronze bells and weapons.

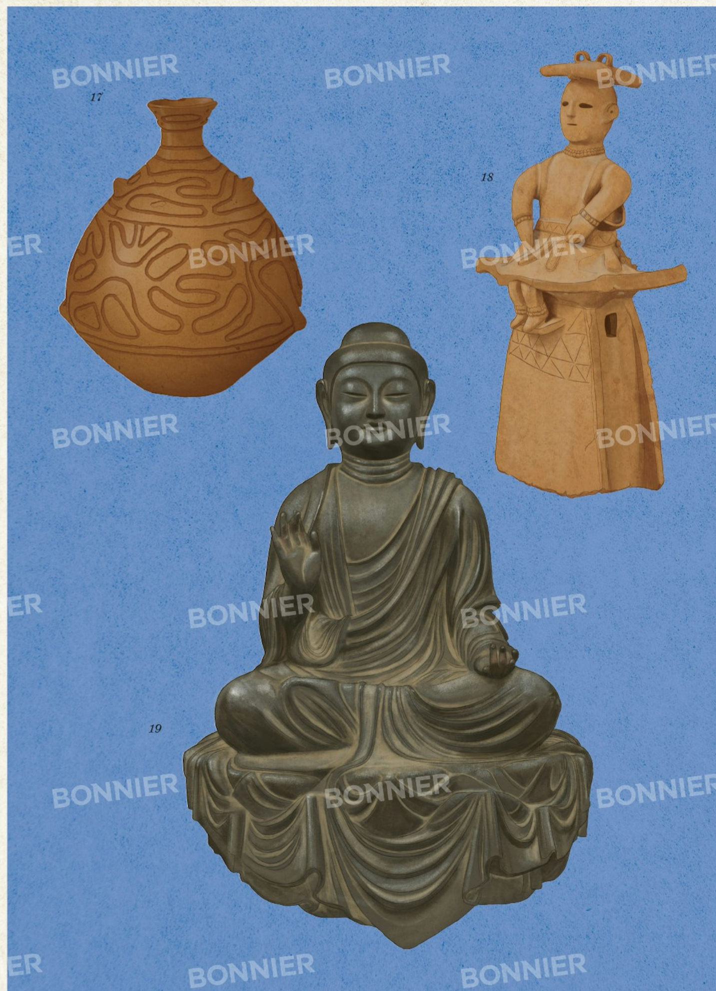
Burial mounds became the defining feature of the Kofun or Tumulus period, around AD 300–710. The word Kofun means 'old mound' and it became common practice to cover tombs of important people with large, keyhole-shaped mounds of earth. During the Kofun period, clan leaders from the Yamato area increased their dominance and became the ruling imperial dynasty. There are no written records until the late Kofun period, when the Chinese writing system was introduced, alongside Buddhism. With Buddhism came the building of temples, which replaced the mounded tombs of the Kofun period and ushered in a new cultural era.

Key to plate

17: **Earthenware bottle**
Around 1500–1000 BC
Japanese pottery dates back to the beginning of the Jōmon period, around 10,000 BC, making it among the oldest in the world. 'Jōmon' means 'cord marked' and the period gets its name from the cord markings on the outside of the pottery. Pots, bowls and bottles were shaped from coils of clay, decorated, then fired in an outdoor bonfire. This bottle comes from the northern Honshu area in the late Jōmon period. It is relatively small and simple in design, with thin walls that indicate an improvement in technique from the early and mid Jōmon periods. Its abstract decoration is an indigenous Japanese style, typical of the northern region. Pottery from the same period in the southern and western areas show early influences from the Korean peninsula.

18: **Kofun tomb figure**
Sixth century AD
This unglazed, hollow terracotta figure would have been one of hundreds of sculptures placed on and around a tomb mound. The sculptures are tomb guardians, called *haniwa*, and were first introduced in the early Kofun period in simple cylindrical forms. The size of the tomb mound and the number of *haniwa* needed to protect it reflected the power and status of the deceased. An emperor's tomb could be several hundred metres across, with thousands of *haniwa*. Figures such as this seated woman are thought to symbolise continued service to the deceased in the afterlife. They varied in height from 30–150cm (1–5ft). This figure is 68.5cm (27in) high and reveals the typical clothing for women at that time. The wrap-around garment; the jewellery on the neck, wrists and ankles; and the use of combs to create an elaborate hairstyle are all shown in detail.

19: **Bronze Buddha**
Eighth century AD
Buddhism and Buddhist art were among the many influences to reach Japan from mainland Asia. This Buddha statue is of the Yakushi (medicine) Buddha, who can grant relief from illness. His upturned left hand would have held a medicine pot and his raised right hand was a gesture meaning 'no fear'. This statue is very similar to Tang Dynasty statues of the Buddha from mainland China, indicating that it was strongly influenced by Chinese culture. When Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to Japan in the sixth century AD, the Japanese already had their own ancient religious beliefs and practices, now known as Shinto. They worshipped many deities and saw divine power in nature as well as in the acts of great men. Their belief system had no founder, no religious texts and originally no name, until it became necessary to distinguish it from Buddhism. The guiding beliefs of Shinto continue to inform Japan's culture alongside Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Buddhism remained the dominant influence on Japanese art until the tenth century AD.



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Ancient Korea

The kingdom of Silla was one of three ancient kingdoms on the Korean peninsula. Founded in 57 BC, it gradually grew in strength, wealth and dominion, annexing other parts of the Korean peninsula and eventually taking control of the other two dominant kingdoms, the Koguryo and the Paekche in AD 668. The Unified Silla Dynasty then lasted from AD 668–935. Its capital, named Gyeongju meaning 'city of gold', was one of the great cities of the ancient world.

There are many similarities between the Silla Kingdom and the Kofun period in Japan, including a tradition of creating large tomb mounds holding sumptuous treasures. Painted scenes inside the Sillan tombs reveal how the rich lived – hunting, feasting and enjoying court entertainment such as music and dancing. Tomb goods showcase impressive artisanry in ceramics, bronze and, in particular, gold. They also reveal contact with foreign cultures, including the nomadic horse-riding tribes of central Asia. Objects found in Sillan tombs even include objects from as far away as the Mediterranean.

The Sillas' main outside influence was China, which had a colony to the north of the Korean kingdoms from 108 BC to 313 AD and continued to have contact with the peninsula thereafter. In particular, the introduction of Buddhism from AD 372 onwards had a profound effect on everyday life. The Silla kingdom officially adopted Buddhism as its religion in the sixth century AD and the Silla rulers became generous patrons of Buddhist art.

Key to plate

20: Gold crown
Fifth century AD
This crown comes from the north mound of the great double tomb of Hwangnam Daechong. It is thought that a king was buried under the south mound and a queen under the north. Silla tombs were built above ground from wood, sealed with clay, then topped with mounds of stone and earth. As a result, they were largely impenetrable and their treasures have been protected until relatively recent excavations. The most prestigious tombs come from the fifth and sixth centuries AD, before Buddhism brought an end to rich burial sites. Extraordinary jewellery, pottery and metal vessels have been discovered in the tombs, as well as gold and silver regalia. The design of this gold crown with its carved jade ornaments most likely resulted from contact with the nomadic peoples of central Asia, as well as the Chinese.

21: House-shaped funeral urn
Eighth century AD
With the adoption of Buddhism came a move away from the construction of massive tomb mounds as the Silla adopted the practice of cremation. Funeral urns were fashioned to carry the ashes of the deceased, and their designs give a useful insight into contemporary life. This earthenware urn follows the design of a grand Silla house from the eighth century, with a complex, tiled roof. The hollow house model would have contained an inner urn to hold the ashes, and doors on hinges to cover the opening. The choice of a domestic house to hold the ashes suggests a hope and desire for a comfortable, homely existence in the next life.

22: Iron horse armour
Fifth century AD
This piece of armour, known as a chanfron, was used to protect a horse's head in battle. It is evidence of the military strength needed to defend a wealthy kingdom. Tomb paintings from this period show warriors on horseback, charging into battle, with both horses and warriors covered in armour. Iron armour was first made and used in Korea in the fourth century AD, as conflict escalated between the three kingdoms. The skill and resources needed to manufacture the armour meant it would only have been available to those with power and wealth.

23: Gilt bronze bodhisattva statue
Late sixth–early seventh century AD
A bodhisattva was originally a portrayal of the Buddha in one of his previous lives, before he reached enlightenment. It later became the name for anyone on the way to enlightenment. As such, the bodhisattvas were seen as accessible figures of the Buddha and were particularly popular when Buddhism reached Korea and Japan. This statue of a bodhisattva is shown in what is known as the pensive pose. It is strongly influenced by Chinese Buddhist art, which in turn took its inspiration from India. A striking example of how Buddhism changed the Silla kingdom is the use of gold here for gilding statues and other religious ornaments, rather than for personal adornment and grave goods.

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Gallery 4

Europe

The Celts
Ancient Greece
Ancient Rome
The Vikings

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The Celts

Over two thousand years ago, Europe north of the Mediterranean was dominated by many different Iron Age tribes and ethnic groups, including the Gauls, Britons and Gaels. Today these peoples are often collectively referred to as the Celts. Famed for being fearsome warriors, the Celts were also farmers, merchants, miners and highly skilled artisans. Their laws, myths and beliefs were passed on orally by druids and bards. Much of what we know about the Celts comes from accounts written by the Greeks and Romans and from the elaborately decorated objects that the Celts left behind.

Celtic art and religion were strongly informed by the natural world. Celtic art took patterns from nature and stylised them in abstract, swirling lines. From 500 BC to AD 100 this art style spread across trade routes from Ireland to Romania. It is now known as La Tène art, after an area in Switzerland where many objects have been found.

From the fourth to the first centuries BC, the Celts came into direct conflict with the Romans and Greeks. At first, the Celts were often victorious in battle, but the increasing might of the Roman armies and the expanding Germanic tribes forced Celtic culture into decline. A final flourish of Celtic-style art came from the Celtic Christians of Ireland and Britain in the seventh and eighth centuries AD. Their gradual conversion to Christianity had enabled them to incorporate elements of Celtic culture into their new faith.

Key to plate

1: The Battersea Shield
350–50 BC
Many Celtic cultures lavished artistic skill on weapons. Warfare was a dominant feature of Celtic life and warriors were highly respected. This shield is too short and elaborate to have been made for battle. With its polished bronze and prominent red enamel studs, it was probably made for display. Its place of discovery, the River Thames at Battersea, London, suggests it may have ended its days as a religious offering.

2: Agris Parade Helmet
Around 350 BC
Parade helmets, usually associated with ancient Gaul, are striking symbols of Celtic warrior culture. The skilful metalwork on this helmet is typical of the early La Tène style and shows strong Mediterranean influences. Discovered in a cave in France, the helmet appears to have been a ritual offering to the spirits of the underworld. The Celts believed that boundaries between the supernatural and real worlds were weaker at certain times and places, and that both the living and the dead were able to pass through them. Offerings of this quality and value show how greatly the Celts revered – and feared – their deities.

3: The Great Torc of Snettisham
75 BC
A torc is a heavy gold or silver ring that was worn around the neck in some Celtic cultures. Celtic deities are depicted wearing them, Celtic warriors are described in battle as naked except for their weapons and torcs, and the famous warrior queen, Boudicca, is said to have worn one. As well as being a display of wealth and status, the torc was probably worn as an amulet to protect its wearer from harm. This torc is part of an incredible treasure hoard found buried in a field in Snettisham, England. It is made from 64 threads of gold mixed with silver, twisted with a craftsmanship and complexity that surpasses the metalwork of other civilisations at that time.

4: Gundestrup Cauldron
First century BC
This silver cauldron was found in a bog in Denmark. The plates it was made from had been carefully taken apart and the cauldron was then left, presumably as a gift to the gods. Cauldrons were prestigious objects in Celtic times, widely used for rituals, as well as for cooking and serving food. The scenes on this cauldron combine Celtic imagery with unknown gods and unusual animals, in a style that is more common to the Thracians (contemporaries of the Celts who lived in south-eastern Europe). This cauldron could have been a gift to a Celtic chief, war booty, or even a collaboration between tribes.

5: Page from the Lindisfarne Gospels
Around AD 700
Lindisfarne was a monastic community on England's north-east coast. It was founded in AD 634 by Irish monks. The Irish Celts, or Gaels, had managed to assimilate facets of Celtic culture into Christian worship. The Lindisfarne Gospels give stunning examples of this fusion. The book's illuminated text is the work of a single artist, possibly a bishop or abbot. The Celtic gods are gone, but each gospel begins with sumptuously decorated pages, combining swirling symbols from Celtic metalwork with Mediterranean and Anglo-Saxon elements in a style known as Insular art.

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Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece was made up of several hundred self-governing city-states, sprinkled around the mainland coast and on islands in the Mediterranean Sea. These city-states began to emerge in 800 BC and each had its own ruler, army, laws and coins. Surrounded by sea, the ancient Greeks became great travellers and traders, exporting their culture to distant shores as well as bringing back influences from Egypt and the Near East.

The Greeks worshipped a host of gods and goddesses, each one representing a different aspect of everyday life. There was a stronger emphasis on the physical world than the afterlife, although proper burial rituals were considered essential. People honoured the gods by demonstrating physical fitness in sporting events, holding grand processions and presenting gifts or sacrifices at temples. They hoped the gods in turn would answer their prayers for health and good fortune.

As the city-states flourished, the Greeks developed their own alphabet, followed by a wealth of poetry, drama, sculpture, painting and philosophy. In 338 BC, the Macedonian king, Philip II, invaded and, for the first time, all of Greece came under the rule of one person. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, led many successful military campaigns. He opened up trade routes with the East, spread Greek culture as far as India and Egypt, and brought back new riches and influences. After his death, Greece gradually became fragmented again and by the second century BC, its power was on the wane. The Romans invaded in 146 BC and Greece became part of the Roman Empire.

Key to plate

6: Bronze figure of a running girl
About 520–500 BC
This bronze figure, measuring only 11.4cm (4.5in) in height, was probably made in Sparta, a city-state well known for its bronze figures as well as its warriors and athletes. It was unusual for female athletes to be depicted in Greek art. In most city-states women were not citizens, but the Spartans encouraged girls to exercise and take part in competitions. The oldest and most famous sporting event was the Olympic Games, held every four years in Olympia. In the fourth century BC a Spartan princess, Kyniska, won several chariot races.

7: Marble temple column
Early third century BC
This ionic column (fluted, with scroll-like swirls at the top) is from the Temple of Artemis at Sardis. Only the top and lower section are shown here. The original would have been nearly 18m (59ft) tall and formed part of a majestic building eight columns wide and 20 columns long. Gods and goddesses were an integral part of Greek culture and every city-state had at least one temple built in their honour.

8: Gold-glass alabastron
First century BC
Fragrance was an important commodity in the ancient world. Small vessels like this one were designed to hold perfumed oils. Perfume was used in the burial of the dead, the worship of gods, for medicinal purposes or simply for personal use as a status symbol.

9: Gold goat-head earrings
200–100 BC
The fashion for gold jewellery exploded after Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in 331 BC and vast quantities of gold became available to the Greeks. Animal heads were popular motifs on earrings, and wild goats were particularly favoured. The intricate designs showed off both the technical expertise of the artist and the wealth of the wearer. These goats' eyes are set with garnets, possibly from India.

10: Dinos (mixing bowl)
Seventh century BC
Many wonderful examples of Greek pottery have survived to this day. The pale clay background colour of this bowl is typical of the Corinth area. The bowl is skilfully painted with goats, panthers, lions and sphinxes. This bowl would have been used to mix water and wine. Winemaking was a major part of Greek life. There was even a god, Dionysus, to oversee the process.

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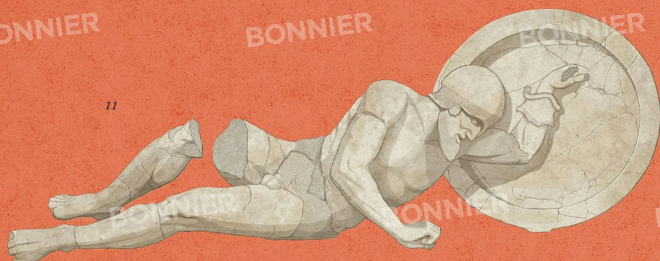

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Key to plate

11: Dying Warrior sculpture
Around 480 BC
This is one of a group of sculptures, depicting a battle between the Greeks and Trojans. The sculptures once stood on the east pediment (the gable above the colonnades) of the Temple of Aphaia on the island of Aegina. This sculpture depicts a wounded warrior, struggling to rise from the ground, his emotions visible in his face and body. Earlier figures in Greek art were more rigid, forward-facing and staged. This statue dates from when the Classical style, with its naturalism and strong focus on the human form, was just beginning.

12: Fragment from the Parthenon
Around 438–432 BC
Still visible in modern-day Athens, the Parthenon is the most famous of the ancient buildings in the Acropolis. This fragment is part of a 160m (525ft) long frieze that ran along the outside wall of the Parthenon. It depicts the procession that took place in the city every year as part of a festival in honour of the goddess Athena. In this scene, a cow is being led to the temple altar for sacrifice. Blood sacrifices lay at the heart of Greek religious rituals. Athena was the goddess of war and, since city-states were often fighting each other, people would make a considerable effort to have her on their side.

13: Black-figured *amphora*
Around 530–520 BC
The ancient Greeks also revered heroes like those found in Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were composed between 750 and 650 BC. The poems provided a rich source of imagery for Greek art. The painting on this wine jar shows a scene from the *Iliad*, where the warrior hero Achilles kills the Amazon queen, Penthesilea. This *amphora* was made in Athens and is signed by the potter Exekias, who most likely painted it as well. Exekias depicted black figures on a clay background, a method known as the black-figure technique, which prevailed in the early sixth century BC.

14: Red-figured *psykter*
Around 520–510 BC
In around 530 BC, a new pottery painting style emerged, known as the red-figure technique. Instead of showing figures in black against a clay background, artists painted the background black, leaving the figures as red clay with some added brushwork. This vase for cooling wine shows young male athletes and their trainers in a gymnasium. The athletes are nude, as was the custom for male competitors. In the centre of this side of the vase, an athlete prepares to throw the javelin. His name, Batrachos, is inscribed beside him.

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Ancient Rome

According to legend, Rome was founded in 753 BC by its first king, Romulus, who with his brother, Remus, was nursed by a she-wolf when the two were abandoned as infants. Archaeological remains date the first settlement of Rome to the ninth century BC. By 246 BC, Rome had conquered the entire Italian peninsula, and at its height, in AD 117, the Roman Empire encompassed lands as far north at Britain and as far south as Egypt.

The Roman army was a highly structured fighting force and was responsible for the empire's vast conquests. Professional soldiers served for 25 years or more and could look forward to pensions and gifts of land at the end of their service.

The Romans were heavily influenced by Greek culture, and studied and imitated Greek art, religion and science. Perhaps the Roman Empire's greatest achievements came from Roman engineers, who built enormous buildings and networks of roads and waterways unlike anything the world had seen before. This large-scale building work, as well as many aspects of farming and civic life, was made possible by a vast number of slaves held captive by the empire.

Religion was important to the Romans and for most of its history, magnificent temples throughout the empire were devoted to many different gods. In AD 380, Rome adopted Christianity as its sole religion. During the fifth and sixth centuries AD, the empire lost control of its western provinces and the city of Rome was sacked by Germanic tribes. The eastern Roman Empire would survive for another thousand years until its captial, Constantinople, was sacked in AD 1453.

Key to plate

15: Augustus of Prima Porta
First century BC
This statue of the Roman emperor, Augustus, was discovered in 1863 in Prima Porta, near Rome. Augustus, who was born Octavian, was Rome's first emperor.

Until the first century BC, Rome was a republic ruled by a senate of prominent citizens, but in 44 BC, Octavian's great uncle, Julius Caesar, became the sole ruler of Rome. While Julius Caesar never called himself emperor, he became supreme dictator. This angered the senators and in 44 BC Caesar was murdered by a group of them. Between 43 and 33 BC, Rome was ruled by three men, Marc Antony, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Octavian, in a union called the Second Triumvirate, but this arrangement dissolved into civil war. Octavian emerged victorious and took the name Augustus Caesar when he became Emperor of Rome in 27 BC.

Augustus needed to establish his authority in all of the empire's far-flung corners. One way of doing this was to make sure his image was ever-present. Many images of Augustus survive. Statues were erected all over the empire and images of the emperor's head also appeared on coins.

This statue shows Augustus as a young man with the traditional proportions of an Athenian Athlete. The image of eternal youth was a classical Greek ideal and no images of Augustus have been found showing him as an older man.

The statue also depicts Augustus as a strong military leader, wearing an ornate breastplate. The statue of Cupid at his feet could be to remind viewers that the emperor is semi-divine; Augustus claimed to be descended from the goddess Venus, Cupid's mother.

After Augustus's death in AD 14, the senate pronounced him a god and his image continued to be used as a symbol of imperial power. This statue dates from that era and is believed to have been commissioned by Augustus's adopted son, Tiberius, who became the second Emperor of Rome.

Throughout the Roman Empire, emperors would commission likenesses of themselves as symbols of power. The emperor Nero (AD 37–68) even had 3m (9ft) bronze statue of himself made. Rome's famous Colosseum is named after this colossus.

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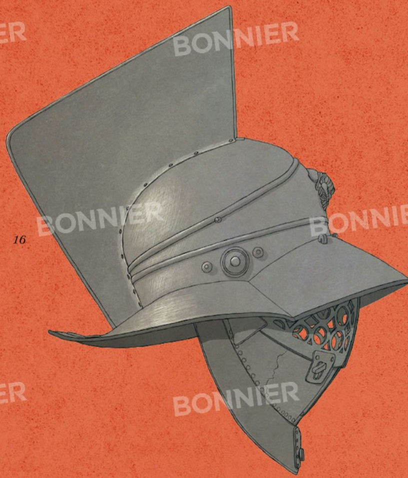

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16: **Gladiator's Helmet**
First century AD
This helmet would have been worn by a Roman gladiator. The gladiators would fight in Roman arenas such as the Colosseum for the entertainment of the Roman people. These were usually battles to the death. Gladiatorial tournaments would be paid for by emperors or powerful citizens wanting to gain the favour of the Roman people. Many gladiators were slaves, and it was a gladiator, Spartacus, who led an uprising of Roman slaves in the first century BC.

17: **The sword of Tiberius**
First century AD
This sword and scabbard, probably commissioned by a senior officer of the Roman army, is decorated with a bronze image of the emperor Tiberius. That it was found in Mainz, Germany, shows how far the Roman legions travelled during military duty. This prestigious, decorated item was probably made to celebrate victory after a long campaign in Germany. Roman legionaries had to be Roman citizens and would serve for 25 years. Legionaries carried two javelins, a sword, a dagger and a shield. The Roman legions were rigorously trained and fought in formation.

18: **Roman coins**
First, second and fourth centuries AD
These three coins show the Roman emperors Augustus, Trajan and Constantine the Great. Roman coins were minted in both Rome and various parts of the Roman Empire: the coin showing Constantine was minted in Germany. The image of an emperor's head on coinage was another way of establishing the ruler's presence throughout the empire. Trajan was a successful general and Trajan's column, which stands in Rome today, is still a dramatic reminder of his victory over a people called the Dacians. Constantine the Great is best known as the first Christian Emperor of Rome.

19: **Fresco from Pompeii**
First century AD
Roman women were expected to be good wives and mothers and had very little political or social power. Some very wealthy women, however, were well educated and managed to exert significant political influence. This wall painting shows a young woman holding a stylus (implement for writing in soft wax) to her lips and holding a *polyptych* (book of wax tablets). The ability to write was a symbol of status in ancient Rome. The city of Pompeii was buried by ash in AD 79 when Mount Vesuvius erupted. Many important Roman artefacts have been discovered, buried in the ash.

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20: Water spout
First century AD
This terracotta water spout in the shape of a lion would have formed only a tiny part of the intricate network of waterways in ancient Rome. Roman engineers built enormous aqueducts that carried fresh water into cities; one example still standing is the Pont du Gard in France, which dates from the first century AD. Only very wealthy Romans had running water in their homes, but poor citizens could get clean water from public fountains and there were even public toilets with flowing water to carry waste away. Eventually, 11 aqueducts were built to carry water to the city of Rome.

21: The Portland Vase
Around AD *5–25*
The Portland Vase is an accomplished example of Roman cameo-glass, which demonstrates the sophistication of Roman glass-blowing. Cameo-glass vessels would have been difficult to make, as the technique required that two different coloured glasses were fused together and that the top layer was carved and polished. Cameo-glass was only produced briefly in Rome and surviving examples nearly all date from between 27 BC and AD 68.

Glass-blowing was invented in the first century BC and the technique meant that large vessels for everyday use could be made in great numbers for the first time. It also meant that the creation of larger luxury vessels was possible. Prior to the discovery of glass-blowing, glass production had been restricted to small luxury items.

22: Statue of Jupiter
Second century AD
This bronze statue shows the chief of the Roman gods, Jupiter, known as Zeus to the Greeks. The Romans endowed their local gods with the personalities of the much more lively Greek pantheon and this statue may be a copy of a Greek original. It is impossible to say how many gods the ancient Romans worshipped because as well as the famous gods of Mount Olympus, most Roman households had their own guardian spirits.

23: (opposite page) Mosaic
Second century AD
Wealthy Roman houses were lavishly decorated and floors were often covered in intricate mosaics. This example was found in Pompeii and it shows detailed images of the sort of Mediterranean seafood that Roman diners would have enjoyed. Banqueting was an important social ritual for wealthy Romans and rare, expensive foods were served to impress.

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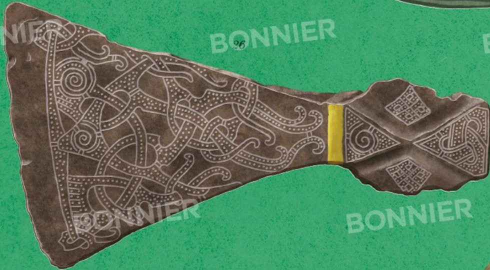

EUROPE

The Vikings

The Vikings are best known for their daring raids by sea and their sagas detailing heroic battles. It was a raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne on the English coast that marked the beginning of the Viking Age in AD 793. Most Vikings were content to stay at home in Scandinavia, farming and trading. The Viking raiders formed only a tiny minority of the Scandinavian people, yet it was their audacity that gave the Viking Age its identity.

The early Vikings were great traders and travellers. Their journeys revealed the rich pickings to be had in foreign places and soon trading turned into raiding. The success of Viking raids owed much to their superior ship technology. No one could beat Viking ships for speed and none of the kingdoms they attacked had large enough armies to stop them.

At first the raids were hit-and-run attacks. Next, raiders decided to spend the winter on foreign shores. Finally, they started settling abroad permanently. The Vikings continued to search for new territories and would eventually have settlements in Russia, the Scottish Islands, Ireland, Iceland and Greenland.

Viking travellers took with them a passion and flair for display, both in their distinctive interweaving patterns and in their love of precious metals. Above all, they took a bloodthirsty determination and a fierce warrior culture.

The Viking Age began with an attack on Christianity and ended some four hundred years later with an acceptance of that religion. The cultural changes brought by this new faith, as well as the centralisation of European kingdoms, brought an end to the Viking Age.

Key to plate

24: Cup from the Vale of York hoard
Ninth century AD
This silver cup is the largest, most spectacular object in the Vale of York hoard, a silver treasure hoard found near York (Jorvik to the Vikings), in 2007. Most of the other objects, including 617 coins, were found inside it. The objects came from as far afield as Afghanistan, Russia and Ireland, showing how widely the Vikings raided and traded. The cup, inscribed with vines and hunting scenes, was probably made in northern France or Germany in the mid ninth century AD. It may well have been looted from a wealthy monastery.

25: Ship brooch
AD 800–1050
This copper brooch would have been used to fasten a Viking's thick woollen cloak at the shoulder. Its detailed design demonstrates the Vikings' skill in metalwork as well as their passion for display. The Vikings were rightly proud of their sleek, swift longships, which cut through oceans and glided up rivers. This brooch shows animal heads shaped into the fore and aft stems of the ship. It was common for ships to be elaborately decorated, in order to make a striking impression as they sped towards a foreign shore.

26: Silver-inlaid axehead
Tenth century AD
Viking culture glorified courageous, powerful warriors. Young men would rally to fight for successful warrior leaders. Vikings were fearsome in battle and excelled in hand-to-hand combat. Men who died on the battlefield were thought to enjoy a lavish, exciting afterlife in Valhalla, the great hall of the underworld. Axes were common Viking weapons. The longsword and the spear were seen as superior, but the silver patterning on this axe marks it out as a treasured possession.

27: The Lewis Chessmen
AD 1150–1200
Chess was a popular game across Europe in the twelfth century AD. These pieces, carved out of walrus ivory and whales' teeth, were found in the Isle of Lewis, off the north-west coast of Scotland. It is likely that the chess pieces belonged to a Norwegian merchant, travelling from Norway to Ireland. Of particular interest are the pieces in the shape of warders, which take the place of modern-day rooks. They are based on mythical Viking warriors who, according to the Viking sagas, worked themselves into a frenzy before fighting, then ran onto the battlefield with their eyes rolling and biting on their shields. Interestingly, these warriors carry shields decorated with a Christian cross. Christian missionaries had been present in Scandinavia from the ninth century AD but conversion was gradual.

28: Vale of York coins
AD 927
Coins were a relatively late addition to the Viking economy. Early Viking traders would travel south to exchange furs, weapons and slaves for Arabian silver coins. It was the silver content they were interested in, though, not the coins themselves. Back home the Vikings melted the coins down and used the silver to create other items. Silver neck and arm rings were made of standard weights so they could double up as currency, or be hacked into smaller weights. When the Vikings settled in England they copied the local custom and began minting their own coins. These coins were also found in the Vale of York hoard.

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HISTORIUM

Gallery 5

The Middle East

Mesopotamia
The Ancient Levant
Ancient Persia
Early Islam

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Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is the name for the ancient region around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that now encompasses modern-day Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Kuwait. Archaeological evidence suggests that it was the birthplace of the first cities, the first system of writing and the earliest known written laws, as well as the wheel, the sailing boat, the seed plough and even the measurement of time in hours, minutes and seconds. Such innovation was made possible by Mesopotamia's location. The rich soil deposited by the rivers enabled farmers to grow surplus produce that fed expanding urban populations.

Ancient Mesopotamia was not one unified culture, but rather multiple civilisations whose influence waxed and waned over thousands of years. Notable Mesopotamian civilisations include the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians. These people spoke different languages and competed for power but learned from each other's cultures and shared beliefs in a multitude of gods. The threat of war was ever present, but the prospect of trade was often more attractive – especially in the south, where there were few natural resources.

The emergence of cities, like the city of Ur in what is now Iraq, began with the Sumerians in around 4500 BC. By the middle Bronze Age – around 2000 BC – the Assyrian kingdom to the north expanded and the city of Babylon rose to prominence. Invasions from outside forces, such as the Kassites and the Hittites, weakened these kingdoms, but new Assyrian and Babylonian empires were established in the Iron Age (1000–500 BC).

Around 500 BC, indigenous Mesopotamian cultures experienced decline as foreign powers became increasingly dominant: first the Persians, next the Greeks, then the Romans. The Arab conquest of Mesopotamia in the seventh century AD led to the spread of Islam through the region.

Key to plate

1: **Royal cemetery, Ur: Standard of Ur**
Around 2600–2400 BC
This wooden box, inlaid with mosaic, is a work of art from the Sumerian period. It was described as a plaque or standard by Leonard Woolley, the archaeologist who discovered it in the 1920s, but its purpose is unknown. It is 58cm (23in) long and decorated on all sides with shells, lapis lazuli and red marble. On the side shown here the agricultural roots of Sumerian wealth are clearly depicted. In the lower two strips, produce is being brought as a tribute, while, in the top strip, members of the elite are feasting. The other side of the box shows the Sumerian army – a representation of the force necessary to defend a prosperous kingdom.

2: **Royal cemetery, Ur: headdress**
Around 2600–2400 BC
These gold beech leaves were found on the head of a female attendant in the royal cemetery of Ur. The leaves are separated by beads of lapis lazuli and carnelian. In total, 16 grand tombs were found in the centre of the cemetery. The rulers buried here seem to predate the first recorded dynasty of Ur, since their names do not appear on the list of Sumerian kings. It is quite possible that they were only local rulers, in which case the wealth of their tomb goods is all the more astonishing.

3: **Royal cemetery, Ur: gold cup**
Around 2600–2400 BC
There were no precious metals to be found in the flat floodplains of southern Mesopotamia. The gold used to make this cup probably came from Iran or Anatolia (now part of Turkey). It would have been created by skilled local artisans for the ruling elite. The Mesopotamians believed that the souls of the dead were doomed to dwell in a dismal underworld. Luxury goods may have been an attempt to make the afterlife less bleak. It is also possible that such items were intended as gifts to appease the deities, especially the queen of the underworld, Ereshkigal.

4: **Royal cemetery, Ur: statuette**
Around 2600–2400 BC
Crafted out of wood and decorated primarily with gold leaf and shell, this statuette shows a goat on its hind legs reaching to eat leaves from a tree. Land for grazing animals and fertile soil for crops were essential to Ur's success.

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5: Royal cemetery, Ur: board game
Around 2600–2400 BC
Examples of board games with 20 squares have been found from the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt across to India and date from 3000 BC to the first millennium AD. This board and several others were found at Ur – some still with their gaming pieces. Like the Standard of Ur, the wooden board games are beautifully inlaid with lapis lazuli, shell and red limestone. The inclusion of board games among the tomb treasures is another clue as to what the people of Ur expected – or hoped for – in the afterlife.

6: Head of a ruler
Around 2300–2000 BC
This heavy bronze head comes from the early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia – probably from the time of the Akkadian Empire (2334–2150 BC). The attention to facial detail suggests it is a true portrait of a king. The Akkadian kings were based at the city-state of Akkad (thought to have been near modern Baghdad). Much of their art was created to glorify their power in southern Mesopotamia. Akkadian people spoke a different language to the Sumerians, but culturally and politically the two kingdoms were closely linked.

7: Sumerian statue
Around 2900–2600 BC
Many statues have been discovered on the site of Sumerian temples. This one was found in the ancient Sumerian (later Akkadian) city of Eshnunna, north of Babylon. These statues all have similar poses of reverence with clasped hands and wide-open eyes. In the centre of every Sumerian city there was a temple that contained a sacred shrine to the city's patron deity. Only priests would have had regular access to the shrine and it is likely that these statues were taken there as representatives of worshippers who could not come in person. This statue, however, may depict a priest, since it does not have the full beard and long hair typical in Mesopotamian images of men.

8: Royal cemetery, Ur: seal
Around 2600 BC
Around 4000 BC, the Sumerians began using personal seals to mark ownership, to prevent tampering and as a form of signature. Cylinder-shaped seals soon emerged – hollow tubes of stone or terracotta that would leave a unique pattern when rolled in soft clay. The green cylinder seal here bears the pattern of a banquet scene, as shown in the accompanying clay impression. Many such banquet-scene seals have been found in the tombs of women, whereas combat scenes are more commonly found on seals in the tombs of men.

9: Lion-hunting panel
883–859 BC
This alabaster relief comes from the Assyrian city of Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), to the north of Mesopotamia, in modern Iraq. The Assyrian kings lined their mud-brick palace walls with stone panels depicting their triumphs. This tradition was initiated by King Ashurnasirpal II, shown here aiming his bow at a lion. Hunting lions was a sport associated with kings, since it symbolised their role as fighters and defenders of the people. Ashurnasirpal II was a ruthless monarch who led many successful campaigns that contributed to the establishment of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (around 911 BC–609 BC).

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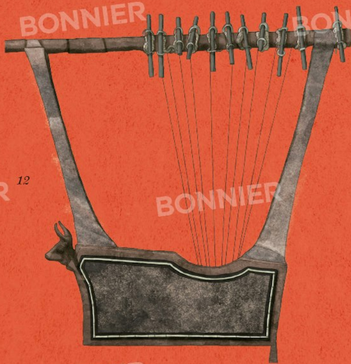

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10: Lamassu
Around 883–859 BC
Standing over 3m (10ft) high and 3m (10ft) long, this imposing stone sculpture, known as a *lamassu*, is one of a pair that once stood as guardians at the palace of Ashurnasirpal II, in the Assyrian capital, Nimrud. The Mesopotamians believed in demonic forces that could bring death and destruction. Hybrid mythical creatures, such as this winged, human-headed bull, were thought to have protective powers. The Assyrians glorified their kings over their gods and their palaces became more prominent than their temples.

11: The Flood Tablet
Seventh century BC
This fragment of a clay tablet, roughly 15cm by 13cm (6in by 5in) recounts part of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the first great epic of world literature, which dates from 2100 BC, over a thousand years before the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. It is written in Akkadian in an early form of writing known as cuneiform. This tablet belonged to the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, who had a library containing many thousands of cuneiform tablets. More than 30,000 of them still survive today, of which the Flood Tablet is the most famous. It tells a story very similar to the biblical account of Noah and the great flood, only it was written down four hundred years before the earliest versions of the Bible. Further tablet discoveries at Ashurbanipal's palace in Nineveh include letters, lists, legal texts and scientific information. Ashurbanipal was the last of Assyria's great kings, reigning for more than 40 years, from 668 to 627 BC. His library was the first of its kind in the Middle East.

12: Royal cemetery, Ur: silver lyre
2600–2400 BC
One of the graves excavated at Ur is known as the Great Death Pit, because it contained the bodies of 74 attendants, mostly women, laid in rows. Whether the women had been killed or had gone willingly to their deaths is unknown, but cups found alongside almost half the bodies suggest they may have drunk poison. The bodies of six men were discovered lying near the entrance with weapons.

Alongside the women were three lyres. They were made from wood that had perished, but two of them were also covered in sheet silver. Lyres like these were probably played at ritual ceremonies.

13: Royal cemetery, Ur: cuff beads
2600–2400 BC
These beads probably formed elaborate cuffs on a long-sleeved garment. They were found on the female bodies in the royal tombs at Ur, along with many other adornments such as rings, pendants, headdresses and earrings. A queen named Puabi even had make-up, tweezers and a tiny earwax spoon with her.

14: Sickle sword
1307–1275 BC
The sickle sword was a symbol of power in Mesopotamia, and Mesopotamian art often depicts rulers and deities with these weapons. This bronze version, around 54cm (21in) long, belonged to the Assyrian king Adad-Nirari I, who ruled in the late Bronze Age. An inscription in cuneiform, announcing his ownership, appears three times on the blade. This sword was probably used in ceremonies by Adad-Nirari, rather than as an actual weapon.

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The Ancient Levant

The ancient lands along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea – now the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan – are collectively known as the Levant. The area is one of the oldest continually inhabited regions of the world. It included ancient Syria and the region known in biblical literature as Canaan.

The Canaanites had a sophisticated urban culture during the middle and late Bronze Age (2000–1200 BC). They developed an early alphabet, from which Phoenician and other scripts derived. The Phoenicians, the greatest seafarers of the ancient world, were an Iron Age people who built on the traditions of the Canaanites. They lived in what is now Lebanon, and their name derives from the purple-red dye used in their textile industry. They were renowned for their quality craftsmanship and were active traders.

Further south, from around 1200 BC, late Bronze Age Canaanite towns were replaced by numerous small villages. The exact reason for this change is unknown, but the emerging people were the Israelites. They had their own distinct culture and their own language, Hebrew, which is closely related to Phoenician and other Canaanite languages. Their societies formed the foundations of the early Jewish kingdoms.

At times, large areas of the Levant were under the control of foreign powers, notably the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians. Alexander the Great conquered the Levant in 332 BC and it later became part of the Roman Empire. It was under Roman occupation that Jesus Christ was born, in the region known as Judea.

Key to plate

15: **Copper sceptre**
4500–3500 BC
This sceptre is one of 442 objects discovered hidden in a cave in the Judean Desert. These objects are from the Chalcolithic period (Copper Age), which predated the discovery of adding tin to copper to make bronze. It is likely that the objects were sacred treasures from a nearby shrine, buried hurriedly for protection. Copper objects from the hoard, including this sceptre, form the earliest known examples of the 'lost-wax' casting process in which a wax model is surrounded by a mould. The wax is then melted and molten metal is poured in to take its place.

16: **Ivory panel**
Ninth to eighth century BC
This ivory panel is one of a nearly identical pair from the ancient Assyrian capital, Nimrud. The panels would have once been parts of a royal chair or throne. Phoenician-carved ivory and other craftwork was highly prized by the Assyrians. This panel was probably made in the Levant and came to Assyria as tribute or a spoil of war. It is decorated in an Egyptian style, with lilies and papyrus plants. Originally it would have been lavishly coated in gold leaf and inlaid with semi-precious stones.

17: **Gold pendant**
1750–1550 BC
From around 2000 BC, the Canaanites gradually moved south-west into the Egyptian delta. By 1700 BC they had seized control of Egypt and established a dynasty that lasted until 1470 BC. This gold pendant depicts a Canaanite fertility goddess. It was found in Tell el-Ajjul, Gaza – thought to be the site of the ancient Canaanite city of Sharuhen.

18: **Statue of Idrimi**
Sixteenth century BC
Idrimi was a king of the ancient Syrian city-state of Alalakh. This stone statue of him is covered in inscriptions. They recount how his family fled their homeland, how he lived among Canaanite nomads and how he then rallied an army and fought his way through ancient Syria to became king of Alalakh, which he ruled for 30 years.

19: **The Great Isaiah Scroll**
Around 125 BC
In 1947, seven ancient scrolls were discovered by a shepherd boy in a cave in the Judean Desert. Extensive searches of the area uncovered 1400 documents, made of animal skin, papyrus and, in some cases, copper. Together they are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they cover nearly all of the Hebrew Bible, as well as other non-biblical books. The Great Isaiah Scroll shown here is the best-preserved document and also the largest, measuring 7.34m (24ft) when unrolled. It contains all 66 chapters of the biblical 'Book of Isaiah', and is written in Hebrew in 54 columns. The Dead Sea Scrolls are remarkable since they predate any other written versions of the Hebrew Bible by over one thousand years.

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Ancient Persia

At its height, the Persian Empire was the largest yet seen in the ancient world. It extended east from Anatolia and Egypt to northern India and central Asia. Founded by Cyrus the Great, who reigned 559–530 BC and was from the clan of Achaemenes, it is also known as the Achaemenid Empire.

In the sixth century BC, Cyrus united the Iranian tribes living in the region south-east of Babylon, known as Persia. He led them on a series of campaigns, conquering the empire of the Medes, the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia and the Greek cities of Asia Minor. In 539 BC his soldiers defeated the Babylonian army, but Cyrus did not take Babylon by force. He presented himself as a Mesopotamian monarch, more respectful of the people's traditions than their unpopular king, Nabonidus. The city gates were opened to him and Babylon became part of the Persian Empire. Egypt was later added to the Empire by Cyrus's son Cambyses II.

The third Achaemenid king, Darius the Great, who reigned 522–486 BC, is credited with stabilising the Persian Empire and expanding it to its greatest extent. He introduced an efficient system of regional governors and an impressive network of roads. He displayed his power through two major building projects: a new capital, Persepolis, in his Persian homeland and a royal palace complex at Susa.

The Persian Empire lasted just over two centuries. Its rulers managed to suppress revolts in Egypt but ultimately they could not hold back the Greeks. In 330 BC, Alexander the Great and his men fought their way across the Persian provinces. Although they faced great resistance, they succeeded in gaining the empire.

Key to plate

20: (opposite page) Frieze of archers
Around 510 BC
The colourful glazed bricks that make up this stunning frieze were discovered during excavations at the site of Darius the Great's palace at Susa. Thousands more glazed bricks have been found on the site, suggesting that processions of archers may have covered hundreds of metres of the exterior palace walls.

The archers may represent Persian elite troops, called 'the Immortals' by the Greek historian Herodotus (484–425 BC). They were said to always number 10,000 men; if one died, he was immediately replaced, giving the impression of immortality. Alternatively, the archers may be idealised images of Persian men.

They wear long, decorative Persian robes, belted at the waist, and laced ankle boots. Their spears, held upright, have a rounded weight at the lower end for counterbalance. This weight earned Persian soldiers fighting Alexander the Great the nickname of 'Apple Bearers'.

This frieze was probably inspired by the Processional Way in Babylon, a stone- and brick-paved avenue that ran from the city's temples to its royal palaces. Centuries after the Persian Empire, glazed brick decoration would become a prominent feature of Islamic architecture.

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Early Islam

The faith of Islam was established by the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century AD. It began in Arabia and spread rapidly across the Middle East through a series of military conquests. Following the death of the prophet Muhammad in AD 632, the Muslim community was led by a caliph (meaning 'successor') and the growing Islamic Empire under his command became known as the Caliphate.

In the eighth to tenth centuries AD, the Caliphate stretched from central Asia to Spain. Islam was more than a religion, it was a whole way of life and it fostered a distinct culture and style of art and architecture. Artefacts from the early Islamic period show how Islamic art emerged from a blend of Iranian and classical influences.

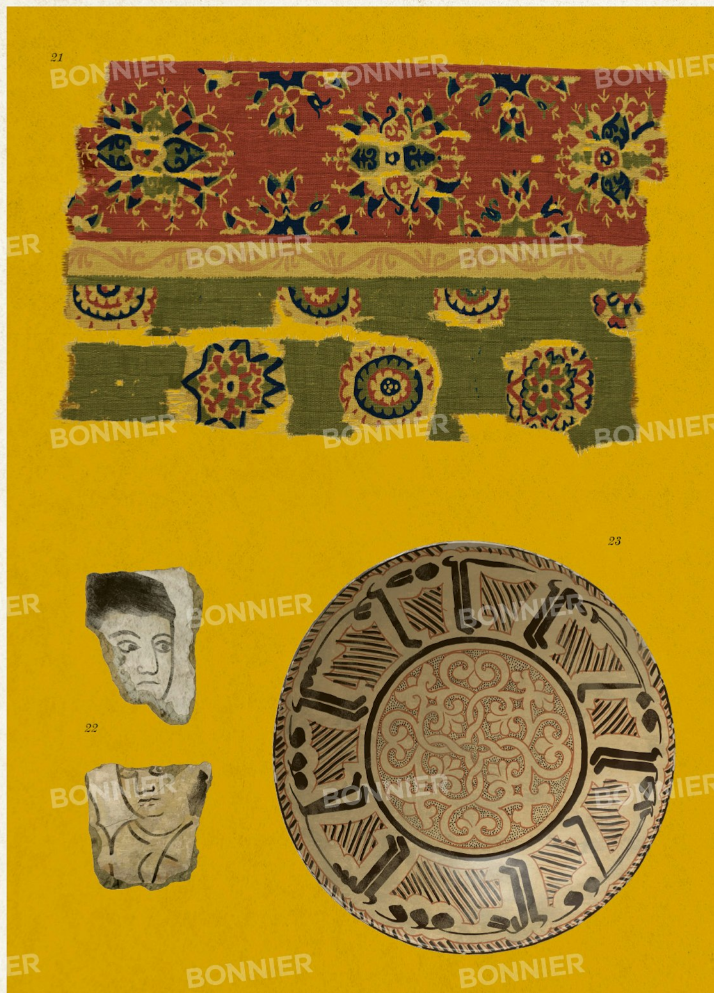
The Caliphate experienced a golden age during the Abbasid Dynasty. This dynasty founded Baghdad as their capital city in AD 762 and it became a prosperous centre of culture and commerce, earning a reputation as the richest city in the world. For a brief interlude in the ninth century AD the caliphs used the city of Samarra as their capital. Although it was abandoned fewer than 60 years later, it is of major archaeological interest, since virtually nothing remains of the Abbasid period in Baghdad, which was sacked and destroyed by the Mongols in AD 1258. The Mongols killed the caliph and their invasion ended the Abbasid Dynasty. Although the Islamic faith and culture continued to spread, the Arab-Muslim empire was at an end.

Key to plate

21: Woven tapestry fragment
Mid eighth century AD
This woollen tapestry fragment is from the Umayyad period (AD 661–750), the first Islamic dynasty. Art from this time was still influenced by pre-Islamic traditions and techniques. Here, the repeat rosette pattern can be traced to Sasanian art. The Sasanian Dynasty followed the ancient Zoroastrian religion and controlled Iran from AD 224–642. The abstract ornamentation of the Sasanians was the precursor to the geometric and vegetal (plant-shaped) patterns of Islamic art. The red border on this tapestry suggests it was used as a floor covering. The manufacture and trade of textiles flourished in early Islamic society. Often made of luxury materials, textiles were symbols of status.

22: Wall painting fragments
Ninth century AD
The city of Samarra was built in AD 836, 110km (70 miles) north of Baghdad, as a new capital for the Islamic Empire. Its name is a shortening of the Arabic for 'he who sees it is delighted' and its vast palaces and barracks were intended to dazzle visitors. These paintings, however, were hidden from view in the harem quarters, where the women of the court lived, and were only intended for the eyes of the caliph and those close to him. The faces most likely depict the women slaves who lived and worked there. They would have been skilled poets, musicians, dancers and singers, and they lived alongside the caliph's wives. These women performed for the caliph and benefited from considerable privileges. Flecks of gold in the paintings suggest they were originally more lavish. These fragments provide examples of the early depiction of figures in Islamic art.

23: Earthenware bowl
Late tenth–eleventh century AD
Arabic is the language in which the Qur'an is said to have been revealed to the prophet Muhammad and is therefore held in great esteem in Islamic culture. The art of writing Arabic is also highly prized and from early in the Islamic era a sophisticated calligraphy developed. This bowl from Nishapur, in north-eastern Iran, features the oldest calligraphic form of Arabic, known as the Kufic script. The words translate as 'Blessing, prosperity, well-being, happiness'. Inscriptions are a common feature on early Islamic pottery. They never state historical facts but often give advice on how to lead a good life.



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HISTORIUM

Gallery 6

Oceania

Indigenous Australians
Melanesia
Polynesia
The Māori

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Indigenous Australians

The Aboriginal people and the Torres Strait Islanders are the indigenous people of Australia and their cultures are amongst the oldest in the world. Aboriginal people settled mainland Australia over 50,000 years ago. They arrived by boat from Asia and were the world's first known seafarers. The Torres Strait Islanders are of Melanesian descent. They arrived in the Torres Strait area when it was still a land bridge linking Australia to New Guinea. Between 15,000 and 8000 years ago the sea level rose, creating the islands.

Over the millennia, there has been frequent contact between Torres Strait Islanders and the Aboriginal people. They share a deep spiritual connection with their natural environment and strong traditions of storytelling, ceremonies and visual arts, but their cultures are very distinct and the Torres Strait Islanders' traditions are more closely related to the Papuan culture of New Guinea.

By 20,000 years ago, Aboriginal people had spread across the whole of mainland Australia and into Tasmania. Different territorial groups adapted to contrasting climates and terrains and developed their own languages. They were traditionally hunter-gatherers and lived in small, nomadic groups, but would come together for ceremonies at sacred sites. The Aboriginal people hold in common a world view, known as the Dreaming, which links the present and the future to a mythical beginning. Art has always been an important medium for expressing the Dreaming and they would decorate any available surfaces, from rocks and sand to their own bodies and pieces of bark.

The arrival of British colonists from AD 1788 decimated the Aboriginal population, through violence, repression and exposure to new diseases. The Torres Strait Islander population also declined. Their numbers have since recovered and today there are over 500,000 Aboriginal people and 50,000 Torres Strait Islanders living in Australia. Their cultures are very much alive and cherished and they continue to evolve.

Key to plate

1: **(opposite page) Rock painting**
500–1500 AD
Rock art in Australia dates back at least 25,000 years and there are over 125,000 rock art sites. The art styles differed over time and place but nearly all the paintings have spiritual meaning. Images of creatures and humans act as intermediaries between the everyday world and the supernatural. Caves and cliff faces bearing rock art are sacred places, with successive generations of artists tasked with touching up the artwork so its spiritual power does not diminish.

This rock painting dates from the Freshwater period (paintings from 1500 years ago or later) and is at Ubirr, in the Kakadu National Park in northern Australia. It shows a hunter, painted in red ochre, holding spears and a goose-wing fan for fanning a fire. Over his shoulder is a bag for carrying food. This hunter is one of many lively figures shown dancing, running and fighting. They are said to be spirit people, called *Mimi*, who live in the rock face.

2: **Torres Strait Islander mask**
Nineteenth century AD
The Torres Strait Islanders have a rich tradition of carving and creating elaborate head masks and headdresses. These are worn during ceremonies and rituals as part of an ongoing relationship with the spirit world. This mask is carved in wood, decorated with shell and natural pigments, and topped with human hair. Many ritual objects were destroyed when Christian missionaries arrived on the islands.

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Melanesia

Stretching in an arc to the north-east of Australia, in the western Pacific Ocean, are the islands of Melanesia. They include the island of New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji. People have lived on New Guinea for over 40,000 years and on the Solomon Islands for over 30,000 years. Around 4000 years ago, seafaring settlers, originally from South East Asia, spread through Melanesia and later Polynesia, taking with them a culture known as Lapita.

Across the islands of Melanesia, people have traditionally lived in small communities based on kinship, although there were also larger villages, especially in coastal regions. Communities were often linked by trade and exchange networks, which could involve canoe voyages over long distances. Shell beads and dolphin teeth were among the valuable exchange items and in some areas shell or feather currency was used. People kept pigs, grew root crops, went hunting and fishing and performed regular rituals. Religion was part of everyday life, not through the worship of gods but through a belief in ghosts and spirits as invisible beings on Earth. Magic and spells were used to encourage a good harvest or a successful hunting trip.

From the seventeenth century AD onwards, Melanesia came under colonial influences which disrupted local networks and traditions. In the late nineteenth century AD, Christianity was introduced, causing significant cultural changes. Some areas, especially in the highlands of New Guinea, remained unaffected by outside influences until the twentieth century AD. Today, many Melanesian cultural traditions still prevail and others are being revived.

Key to plate

3: Ambum stone
Around 1500 BC
Sculpted stone items from the island of New Guinea are among the earliest-known Pacific works of art. Many are shaped as animals and humans and the Ambum stone may well represent a young echidna (spiny anteater). It is one of the most detailed early New Guinean rock sculptures discovered. The purpose of these objects is unknown, but the time and care taken to make them – the hard rock would have taken weeks to shape with stone tools – suggest they were used in rituals.

4: Lapita pottery
1000 BC
These pottery pieces belong to the Lapita culture, which spread to Melanesia around 1500 BC. Lapita pottery is distinctive for its geometric patterns. On this example, found in the Santa Cruz Islands in the northern Solomon Islands, a symmetrical human face is clearly visible amidst the decoration. The Lapita culture reached as far as Tonga and Samoa in Polynesia and its patterns are echoed in modern Polynesian design.

5: Chubwan mask
Fifteenth–seventeenth century AD
This mask from the Island of Pentecost, in Vanuatu, was carved from hardwood using a stone tool or a clam shell, then sanded down using the rough skin of a ray or a shark. The mask's exact function is unknown but most likely it was worn at ritual events, perhaps to scare off the spirits of the dead. Its deep-set eyes and skilfully exaggerated features are clearly intended to intimidate.

6: Paddle
Nineteenth–early twentieth century AD
This beautifully decorated paddle comes from Bougainville Island, north-west of the Solomon Islands. The islanders made special canoes for head-hunting raids. By acquiring human heads a warrior could increase his status in the community. The stylised figures on this paddle depict powerful spirits, known as *kokorra*. The paddle may have been intended to give spiritual protection, or it may have been purely ceremonial. The practice of head-hunting had ended by the early twentieth century AD.

7: Malangan funerary carving
Nineteenth–early twentieth century AD
This 133cm (52in) wooden figure is an early surviving example of Malangan carving from New Ireland, an island north of New Guinea. These figures are used in the Malangan cycle of rituals. There are Malangan rituals for nearly every stage of life, but the most detailed and impressive carvings are made for funerary rites. The figures celebrate the life of the deceased, and animal and human figures may represent myths or be spiritually linked to particular clans. After they have been used, Malangan carvings are either destroyed, abandoned or sold outside the island.

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Polynesia

The islands of Polynesia form a triangle shape in the Pacific Ocean, the largest and deepest ocean on Earth. Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Hawai'i and Aotearoa (New Zealand) mark its three corners. Lapita settlers, identified by their geometrically patterned pottery, reached Fiji, Tonga and Samoa by around 1000 BC. Over the next thousand years Lapita pottery disappeared and new, distinct Polynesian cultures emerged.

Around 100 BC to AD 200, Polynesian people expanded eastward to islands including the Marquesas, the Cook Islands and the Society Islands. It took several hundred years before the more remote islands were reached, with Hawai'i being settled in around AD 500, Rapa Nui around AD 600 and a permanent settlement being established on Aotearoa, New Zealand, around AD 1250 to 1300.

The Polynesians were excellent seafarers. Their expert navigation, which relied on the stars, the flight paths of migratory birds and the patterns of sea currents and wind, meant they were able to travel huge distances. In their wooden canoes they carried everything they needed to survive, including root crops, plant seedlings, Polynesian rats and dogs, and weapons and tools. Their strong sense of cultural identity was conserved over the centuries and across vast stretches of ocean. Before European contact, most Polynesians lived in small family groups, cultivating plantations and fishing. Most islands were divided into chiefdoms, with the chiefs' families making up an aristocracy.

Polynesian people revered many gods and celebrated ancestral heroes. Daily life and ritual were governed by strict protocols, with a strong sense of what was *tapu* (sacred). Tasks were often gendered, with men making most of the wooden or stone objects and women making barkcloth, baskets and feathered cloaks. Polynesian cultures changed radically after colonisation and with the arrival of Christianity, yet Polynesian identities remain strong and many ancient practices continue today.

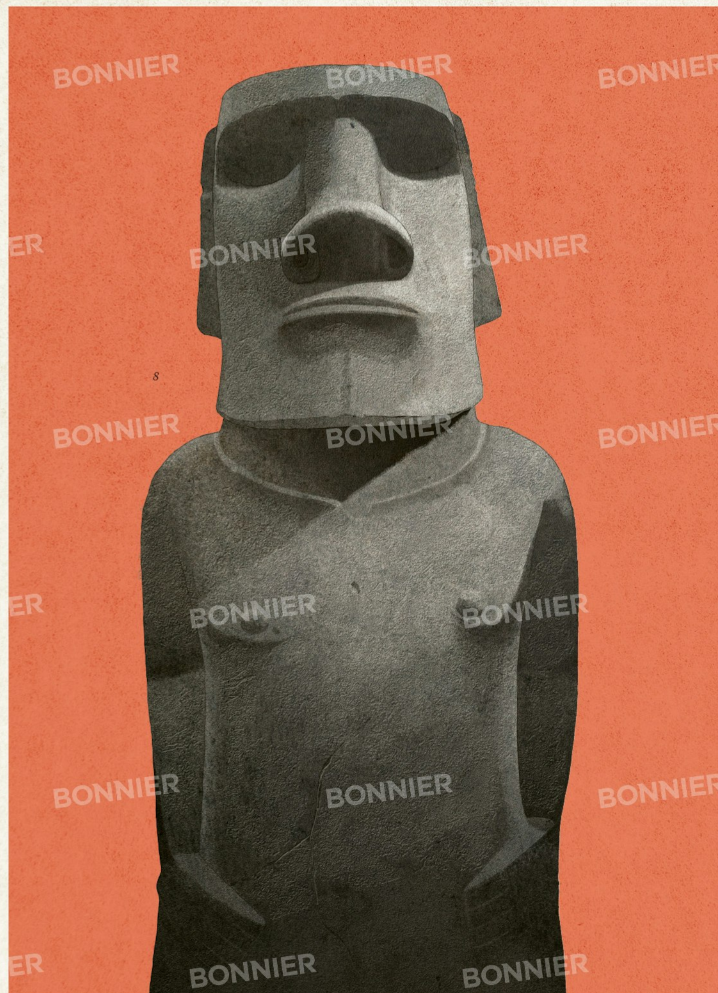
Key to plate

8: **Hoa Hakananai'a, Rapa Nui**
Around AD 1000
Forming the most remote corner of the Polynesian triangle, Rapa Nui, or Easter Island, is 1900km (1200 miles) from the nearest inhabited island, and that Polynesian setters reached it is testament to their navigation expertise. Beyond the initial settlement there is no evidence of continuing contact with other islands.

The population of Rapa Nui grew to around 15,000, and over a period of several hundred years they produced hundreds of astonishing stone statues, known as *moai*. The *moai* are massive. This one towers over a human at 2.7m (9ft) but others are over 10m (33ft) tall. They were chipped out of rock using stone tools, then transported considerable distances to stand in lines along the coast. They were positioned on especially constructed stone platforms with their backs to the sea, facing a ceremonial courtyard area. Each statue is a unique stone being, portraying an ancestral chief who would watch over the living and offer protection.

The immense effort required to create and transport the *moai* suggests they were of utmost importance to life on Rapa Nui, and yet they were no longer constructed after AD 1600. After centuries of habitation, there was a natural decline in the environment of the island and many seabirds – a staple food – had moved away. In response to their changing environment, the islanders adopted a new religious tradition: the cult of the birdman. Each year they competed to be the first to bring back an unbroken egg from a rocky islet. The winner became the birdman for a year, living alone and gaining sacred powers.

This *moai*, Hoa Hakananai'a (loosely meaning 'hidden friend'), played a part in the new cult, too. It was moved to a shelter and its reverse was carved and brightly painted with birdman symbols. In 1868, the *moai* was given to officers of a British ship. By then, the population of the island had plummeted to several hundred people. The islanders had survived and adapted to ecological changes but, from the early eighteenth century, contact with Europeans had brought devastating diseases, civil unrest and the loss of many people to the slave trade. The population of Rapa Nui has since recovered and numbers over five thousand, although fewer than half are native islanders.



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9: God figure A'a, Austral Islands
Eighteenth–early nineteenth century AD
Some of the finest wood carvings in Polynesia come from the Cook and Austral Islands. This carving, from the Austral island of Rurutu, is thought to represent the local deity, A'a, in the act of creating people. Thirty unique little figures appear to be emerging from all over the deity. The carving is hollow, with a removable lid, and it once held many more little figures.

10: 'Akau tau, Tonga
Eighteenth century AD
This finely decorated wooden *'akau tau* (war club) came from Tonga and was possibly brought to England by the explorer Captain James Cook. The detailed geometric designs, characteristic of Tongan war clubs, are reminiscent of the Lapita patterns made by Tongan ancestors. The handle is more roughly carved to give a firm grip while the finer decorations may have been incised with a shark's tooth. Clubs like these often depict tiny figures, animals, birds and plants, and appear to tell stories. They were revered as weapons and as sacred objects, with names and lives of their own.

11: Head of a staff god, Rarotonga
Eighteenth–early nineteenth century AD
Polynesian gods, or *atua*, were frequently carved in wood and looked after by priests. This carving from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands would have formed the top end of a staff god, originally standing 6m (29ft) high. When Christian missionaries arrived in the late eighteenth century AD they rejected the *atua* and suggested they were evil spirits. Many Rarotongan islanders then gave up their god sculptures and burned their religious buildings. The other side of this Rarotongan wooden staff has been violently damaged, with the left eye stabbed repeatedly, perhaps in an attempt to destroy its power.

12: Palāhega, Niue
Eighteenth or nineteenth century AD
Throughout Polynesia the feathers of particular birds were used for the most prestigious of items. The bright plumage of various small parrots was valued for cloaks, girdles, helmets, headdresses and god figures. The tail feathers of the tropicbird were also gathered and used in large quantities, even though each bird has just two of these elegant long quills. This headdress is from Niue. It has tropicbird tail feathers protruding from a shaft wrapped in red and blue feathers, and is bound with thinly braided human hair. Human hair was believed to contain a person's *mana* (prestige or power), and was used in items of high status. This beautiful *palāhega* (pronounced pa-lar-heng-a) was worn at the rear of the head with its long feathers projecting to the sky.

13: Tanoa fai'ava, Samoa
Late eighteenth–early nineteenth century AD
Kava is a ceremonial drink made from the roots of the pepper bush, and it numbs the tongue and relaxes the body. It would be offered as a welcome drink to strangers and passed around during important meetings. This *tanoa fai'ava* (*kava* bowl) is an early example from Samoa. Early Samoan *kava* bowls like this one have four legs, while more recent examples have many more. *Kava* ceremonies still take place in Polynesian communities.

14: Hakakai, Marquesas Islands
Early nineteenth century AD
These exquisitely carved *hakakai* (ivory ear ornaments) come from the Marquesas Islands, now part of modern French Polynesia. *Hakakai* were worn by both men and women. The most prestigious *hakakai* were made of whalebone, which was extremely rare and valuable, since before European contact it was only obtained from stranded whales. Whalebone *hakakai* became more common in the nineteenth century when European and American whalers brought more of the precious material to the islands. This finely crafted pair date from that era.

15: Kapa, Hawai'i
Eighteenth century AD
Barkcloth was made in most parts of Polynesia, and used for sacred and everyday purposes. It is still made today. As well as being used for clothing, bedding and room dividers, it also marked boundaries between the realms of humans and ancestors, keeping people safe from *tapu* and high-ranking people's *mana*. It could be laid on the ground for important people to walk upon or wrapped around them to contain their *mana*. Barkcloth was made from the inner bark of certain trees, soaked and beaten with a mallet upon an anvil into lengths of pliable cloth, then pasted or felted together and decorated with plant dyes. It was also wrapped around some of the most potent god figures. This piece is from Hawai'i, where it was called *kapa*. Hawaiian *kapa* was intricately decorated and scented.

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The Māori

Māori are the descendants of the Polynesians who settled in Aotearoa, New Zealand, in around AD 1250 to 1300. Aotearoa means 'land of the long white cloud' and is thought to describe how the North Island first appeared to Polynesian explorers. New Zealand's two large islands have a colder climate and very different flora and fauna from the small tropical islands the settlers had left behind, but the Māori adapted to their new environment. Plants, animals, birds and seafood were gathered and hunted and the *kūmara*, or Polynesian sweet potato, was cultivated in warmer areas of the country as an important food source.

Māori society divided itself into different *iwi* (tribes), each tracing its roots to one of the settlers' canoes. There was a strict hierarchy, based on ancestry, and a sharp distinction between the aristocrats and the commoners. Wars often broke out between and even within *iwi*. Māori warriors were cunning in their battle strategies and use of fortifications. Fortified villages, known as *pā*, were often built on hills for strategic advantage and their impressive trenches and ramparts can still be seen in the New Zealand landscape.

Art and religion were strongly connected in Māori culture. Expert wood carvers and tattoo artists shared the title *tohunga* with the priests and through their careful design they were thought to give supernatural powers to everyday objects. The most precious material was a hard jade-like stone, *pounamu*. Māori women were also expert weavers and created beautiful mats and ceremonial cloaks.

Metal tools reached New Zealand through contact with Europeans from the seventeenth century AD onwards. They enabled Māori carvings to become increasingly detailed and elaborate. Māori culture, craftsmanship and a strong sense of identity still thrive today.

Key to plate

***16:* Adze blade**
AD 1500–1820
Adzes were a common hand tool across Stone Age cultures. The shape of this blade matches ones made by the earliest settlers in New Zealand and is similar to eastern Polynesian examples. Blades were bound by fibre to wooden handles, then used to cut and carve wood and to hollow out canoes. This blade, made of *pounamu*, is surprisingly large at 44cm (17in) and was probably for ceremonial use by a person of high status, maybe a chief.

***17:* Hand club**
Late eighteenth–nineteenth century AD
Traditionally, the Māori fought using spears and clubs. Warriors carried *patu*, short clubs, in their belts and used them to give their enemies a final blow to the head. The clubs were made of wood, bone or stone, with a hole in the handle for attaching a wrist cord. This club is a particularly fine example. Made of *pounamu* and carved with a head on the handle, it would have been a prized possession.

***18:* Hei tiki**
AD 1600–1850
This pendant, carved from *pounamu*, shows a human-like figure known as a *hei tiki*. The origins of *hei tiki* are unknown, but their curious shape has long been a symbol of fertility and womanhood, perhaps representing an important female ancestor or an unborn child. Another theory is that they are representations of Tiki, the first man. Pendants such as this one have long been treasured and passed from one generation to the next.

***19:* Fish hook**
AD 1750–1850
Fishing was of great importance to Māori. Not only did fish form a major part of their diet, they were also thought of as descendants of Tangaroa, god of the sea, and fishing was seen as a *tapu*, or sacred, activity. According to legend, the whole of New Zealand's North Island was a great fish raised out of the sea on the hero Maui's fish hook. This *pounamu* fish hook is ornamental, to be worn as a pendant or a brooch, probably as a representation of Maui's hook.

***20:* Prow from a war canoe**
Eighteenth century AD
Māori carving was imbued with sacred significance. The sinuous, eel-like decorations on this prow, known as *manaia*, are part animal, part human and are thought to represent the spiritual side of life. The prow is from New Zealand's Northland and would have decorated the front of a war canoe. Particular care was taken when crafting a war canoe. It was a work of art, an efficient mode of transport and a display of power. Often over 20m (66ft) long, decorated with paint and feathers and carrying up to 140 tattooed warriors, it was designed to both impress and intimidate.

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The British Museum, London, UK: Africa; plates 7, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27. America; plates 7, 10, 14. Asia; plates 3, 5, 14, 16. Europe; plates 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 27. The Middle East; plates 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 22. Oceania; plates 8, 9, 11, 17, 20
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