

Welcome  
to the  
Museum

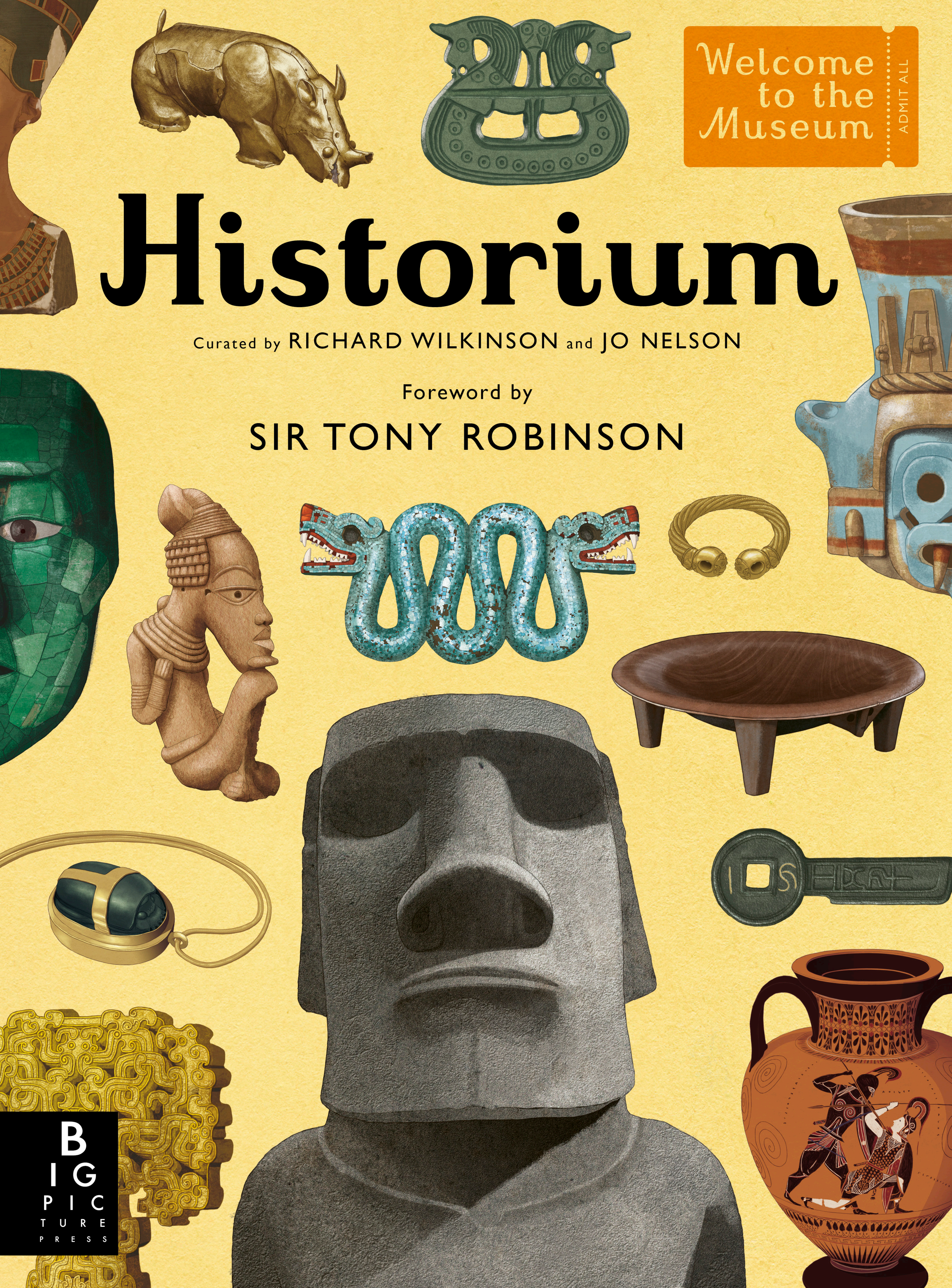
ADMIT ALL

# Historium

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Foreword by

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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.





#### Key to plate

**4: Mapungubwe rhinoceros**  
AD 1220–1290

This gold-fol 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.





# 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.

## Key to plate

S: 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.







9

**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, perched 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

**10: Ivory armet**

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 armet 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.

11

**12: Ivory mask**

Sixteenth century AD  
This mask pendant is thought to represent Ida, 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.

12



15

14