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Striking a balance

We endeavour to offer a mixture of the familiar and the unusual to keep interest alive and the mind open to new possibilities.

Issues of taste in art are notoriously subjective. While the most stolid individuals maintain that they ‘know what they like’ after a short formative period, and then stick to it, most of us find that our tastes change over time. In itself, this might not be good or bad, it may simply show that the individual is questioning what they thought they knew, as well as taking on what they did not know before.

In Minerva we strive to strike a balance by publishing features on familiar subjects, such as Egyptian, Greek and Roman art, as well as ancient art from a variety of other civilisations. Issues of taste as well as outright discovery are covered at the same time.

To start with the familiar, in this issue we have an extended article about Pompeii – not only the ancient site, but the impact it has had on Western art. Clearly this is familiar territory in one sense yet, in another, it breaks new ground by putting objects and ideas together and presenting a synthesis that addresses the issue of ‘what did the artists intend?’. We also hear what the so-called ‘dangerous don’ Professor Mary Beard, has to say about the state of Pompeii today, as well as her forthright views on Western art. Clearly this is familiar territory but what is popular in the market right now.

While some academics hold that the market does not influence scholarship, a link remains. Donations to museums, as well as funding for academic projects, is influenced by tastes that for better or worse, are influenced by the art market. In order to understand what is taught in universities one must also appreciate what people value.

But before going down the well-trodden road of relativism, suggesting that all art is subjective and of equal value or worth, Minerva can show which objects have stood the test of time. There are some objects that many people regard as fine art. The reasons are open to debate, and give life to a field that is about more than just cataloguing the past.
A happy partnership between a Cambridgeshire-based brickworks and the Cambridge Archaeological Unit has led to the uncovering of one of the most significant Fenland finds. Six Bronze Age boats, one of which is thought to be as early as 1300 BC, have been found inside an ancient watercourse.

With further finds of baskets, clothes, beads, swords and fishing apparatus, the site is building up a broad and detailed picture of the ancient community that lived and worked off the River Nene.

Hanson’s brickworks regularly quarries to depths of between 20 and 30 metres, equivalent to reaching Jurassic level in the ground, in order to retrieve the Oxford Clay used in construction, and Cambridge University’s archaeological team make use of this ready-made hole for regular excavations.

David Weeks, PR Manager for Hanson Brick, commented that ‘quarrying has a very important role to play in excavations and we are very pleased to have helped these outstanding findings’. Mark Knight, Senior Project Officer, says that the team is ‘making full use of this opportunity to excavate the site’ and access the soft wet soil that has proved ideal for the preservation of organic material.

The boats range from a little over 6 1/2 feet (two metres) to just over 26 feet (eight metres) long. Each one is hewn from a single tree trunk, with one end sealed up by a plank fitted into a groove. Some of the exteriors of the vessels are profusely carved with designs giving a rare glimpse into the folk art of this Bronze Age society. With 11 eel-traps and the remains of nettle stew found in a wooden bowl on site, a domestic picture of rural society, highly dependent on the waterways dividing the Fenland islands, which have since become towns such as Whittlesey, Fengate and Stanground, is emerging.

The next task for the team is the meticulous cleaning of all the finds, including the boats. Site director Kerry Murrell said that there is a chance the boats will crack when they are removed from the earth, so as much is being gleaned from them as possible while they are still in situ.

Once the boats are out of the ground, they will be transported to York Archaeological Trust for conservation and further tests, one of which entails inserting a nail through the trunk fibres to ascertain how strong the vessels were. It is hoped that dendrochronology will be able to tell a great deal about the trees used for the boats, and specifically when they were felled. The site is also being scanned with lasers in the hope that a 3D model of the waterway can be created.

With 15 years of excavations planned to coincide with the ongoing quarrying of clay planned, there is a very high probability that many more finds of great interest will be unearthed.

The lack of evidence for burial culture at this time has led some to suggest that the rivers became the final resting-place of the dead. At the risk of speculating too much, there can be few sites with a better chance of shedding some light on this.

Geoff Lowsley
Reconstructing Romanisation in Arles

An architect, town-planner and researcher into ancient buildings, Jean-Claude Golvin was involved in restoring the El-Jem amphitheatre in Tunisia. After this he developed a keen interest in amphitheatres – the subject of his thesis in 1985 – and also in ‘adding value’ to heritage sites.

He ran the Centre Franco-Egyptien d’Etudes des Temples de Karnak et Louxor between 1979 and 1990, and worked on other archaeological sites in Egypt. From 1989, he devoted himself to doing reconstruction drawings and watercolours of antique and medieval style monuments and towns.

From 1992 to 2008, he was research director at the French national research centre (CNRS), working on reconstruction and virtual reality in archaeology at Bordeaux III University. He took part in numerous exhibitions and published several books. He is a regular contributor to a number of magazines. In 2011, he donated his collection of some 1,000 watercolours, drawings and sketches to the Arles Antique Museum.

After Egypt, attracted by Arles, Jean-Claude Golvin turned his attention to the Roman world. Before the Arles Antique Museum was even open, he met its team of archaeologists so that he could establish an overview of Arles (Arelate) in the 4th century AD. It was the beginning of a close relationship between the researcher-cum-artist and the new museum. Later he donated his paintings to the museum.

‘I know that these images will be used by the museum with all the respect we owe to our monumental heritage and for passing on this historical and knowledge to the public’. The exhibition of large-format reconstructions of Arelate and other monuments and cities of Gaul and the Mediterranean region complements the museum’s collection illustrating the area’s Romanisation.

Nicole Benazeth

• Jean-Claude Golvin: un architecte au cœur de l’histoire is on show at Arles Antique Museum (www.arles-antique.cg13.fr) until 6 May.

A Roman riverboat from the Rhone

A Roman riverboat from the Rhone

Arles-Rhône 3 had been lying close to the shore, at the bottom of the ancient port of Arelate on the right bank of the Rhone, for some 2,000 years. Well protected under a thick layer of sediment and a tangled heap of port litter, the wreck was first spotted in 2004. Preliminary studies revealed it was a 102 feet (31-metre)-long flat-bottom riverboat dating back to mid-1st century AD. This type of barge was used on all the main European rivers in Gallo-Roman times. Numerous specimens have been found in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and France but this is the first such wreck found in the lower part of the Rhone. It was exceptionally well preserved from stern to bow, complete with its cargo of limestone blocks and on-board material (fittings, tools and pottery).

Three excavation campaigns, starting in July 2008, were carried out by the Arkaeos association, led by Sabrina Marlier, Sandra Greck and David Djaoui. The first two provided a lot of valuable information about the way the barge had been built, its use, area of navigation, and crew. The third, which ended with the lifting of the wreck, was carried out over seven months in 2011. Close to 900 m³ of sediment were examined and 3,000 items forming the ‘port litter’ inventoried before the barge was prepared for being lifted out. The items recovered, dated between AD60 and AD120, include amphorae and other pottery, but also coins, pieces of jewellery, glass, wood, leather and bone objects, such as combs, pins, and dice. Also found and in very good condition were the towing mast, poles and ropes.

After thorough documentation and clearing on location, it was decided to cut the wreck into 10 pieces, each to be lifted on a cradle, then placed on a cart and meticulously documented while being watered regularly. The delicate operation ended successfully. The sections were then sent to the Arc-Nucleart laboratory in Grenoble, which specialises in treating archaeological wood saturated with water, while the metal fixtures are being restored by the A-Corros laboratory in Arles.

In the meantime, an 800-m² extension to the Arles Antique Museum is being built to house the restored barge and existing collections illustrating three main themes: the ancient port and its activities, sea and river trade, and navigation.

Nicole Benazeth

• A Roman riverboat from the Rhone is on show at Arles Antique Museum until 6 May.

Minerva March/April 2012
The Hallaton helmet

It is not often that a significant piece of ancient armour is recovered by archaeologists. Many pieces appear at auction with no provenance, and many of these items are officially listed as being from ‘Eastern Europe’. This makes the find of the silver-gilt Roman helmet at Hallaton in Leicestershire all the more important.

It was recovered about 10 years ago by a team from the Hallaton Fieldwork Group and the University of Leicester who were examining the area in search of an Iron Age shrine. They had been alerted to the site by Ken Wallace, a metal detectorist who found about 200 coins and what looked like a silver ear. He quickly reported his find. The site produced the largest number of Iron Age coins in Britain (about 5,500 coins).

Given the context, it was all the more surprising to find a gilded Roman helmet. Dating to the time of the Roman conquest of Britain, between about AD25 and 50, it shows a woman, probably a goddess, with lions on either side. The head bears a wreath, a clear symbol of victory. Prominently displayed on the cheek-guards are images of a Roman emperor on horseback with what looks like a depressed barbarian underneath. It is unclear whether he is supposed to represent a Briton, as Roman representations of barbarians tended to be generic. The helmet was buried with coins, the remains of a suckling pig, and five extra cheek-pieces. While unprepossessing at first, the helmet has undergone extensive restoration (to the tune of £650,600 for the helmet and associated finds). When found it was in a myriad of fragments, with extensive corrosion.

This is why the helmet was only unveiled on 10 January 2012. It is rare for a helmet found in Britain – with its relatively corrosive soils – to be so well preserved: much of the silver-gilt remains on this one. It is also one of the earliest Roman helmets recovered in Britain. It may also be interpreted as the helmet of a British tribal leader who fought on the Roman side during this turbulent period (Claudius began his invasion in AD43). Could it have been an object seized from a fallen soldier?

The fact that it was an elaborate helmet suggests not, and the extra cheek-pieces may also argue against this interpretation. Perhaps it was a diplomatic gift – many questions remain.

This example demonstrates yet again how successful the Treasure Act, as well as funding for heritage, is in Britain. Both the original finder, Mr Wallace, and the landowner, were paid £150,000. A variety of funding agencies paid for the restoration, which was conducted by the Department of Conservation at the British Museum. The end result is interesting in itself, but the contextual information is even more important.

Murray Eiland

Life in Alauna

The fort at Maryport (Alauna), which is one of the largest (5.4 acres) along Hadrian’s Wall, is a well-preserved earthwork presently under farmland. Excavation has already begun and there are ambitious proposals to extend and develop the site.

The £6 million plan includes the construction of a new museum and the conversion of Victorian farm buildings on the site to make a Visitor Centre.

With £3.5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, £1.5 million from the European Regional Development Fund, and the rest of the funding from other sources, a timescale of three to four years is envisaged, with the development of the new museum starting late in 2014. When it opens it is estimated that it will attract 50,000 visitors, raising £3 million per annum.

Christian Levett, owner of the Mougins Museum of Classical Art, is helping to fund the ongoing excavation outside the fort and the vitally important interpretation of the finds unearthed in this area.

These finds will help build a picture of life in this civilian area around it. Alauna ceased to function as a fort in AD350 and most of the Romans left in AD410, but a few stayed behind, and it is these people whose lives will be examined. Founded in 1599, the existing Senhouse Roman Museum at Maryport contains one of the earliest private collections in Britain. The star exhibits are a collection of stone altars, excavated in 1870, and mostly dedicated to Jupiter, but also to some local Celtic gods.

Lindsay Fulcher

These days hordes of hoards seem to be emerging from British soil with extraordinary regularity – which must be extremely encouraging to amateur archaeologists and enthusiastic metal detectorists. But for anyone who revels in the idea of stumbling upon some tangible link to the past, and something of great historic importance, one of the most exciting stories of the last 12 months must be the discovery of the Silverdale Hoard.

Found by Darren Webster last September, after a mere 20 minutes of hunting around a field which he had surveyed before, the hoard was buried just over 15 inches (40cm) below the surface.

At first Mr Webster’s find seemed unremarkable, as it was enclosed in a lead sheet bent around to form a container. When this was removed from the earth, however, silver pieces began to fall through a hole in the bottom. On seeing this, he knew he had found something significant that was, he says, ‘more than likely Viking’. The hoard comprised over 201 silver items, including 27 coins, arm-rings, finger-rings, ingots and 141 fragments of chopped up silver jewellery, known as ‘hack silver’.

After the Finds Liaison Officer (FLO) for Lancashire and Cumbria was alerted, the hoard was transported to the British Museum, where specialists spent several weeks photographing, examining, cleaning and cataloguing each piece. Following this, it was determined that the hoard was buried around 900AD.

At this time the Vikings had been driven back out of Ireland and were desperately trying to retain control of the north of England in the face of Anglo-Saxon resistance. This historical context, coupled with the fact that the silver had been deliberately placed in a substantial lead container, suggests that it was buried for protection (suggesting that the owner was financially stable) in a time of turmoil and uncertainty. He was clearly a wealthy man, likely to have been a warrior – the arm-rings found are of the kind often given by kings to reward distinguished military service, and the rest of the jewellery would no doubt have been an ostentatious display of wealth.

The time of the hoard’s burial is one period when the sparseness of material evidence means that any find is likely to have a significant effect on our understanding of the past, and the Silverdale Hoard did not disappoint. The most important discovery among the items was a silver coin with the name of a previously unknown Viking ruler on one side. The inscription ‘AIRDECONUT’ to one side is thought to be a corruption of the Scandinavian name of Harthacnut. On the obverse is ‘DNS’ (short for ‘dominus’) and ‘REX’ (‘king’) in a cruciform arrangement, which shows the Viking adoption of Christianity.

The rest of the coins are mainly Anglo-Saxon or Viking, with some Frankish examples, and some from as far away as Islamic lands, showing the far-flung extent of the Viking trade network.

In December 2011 the coroner’s report, informed by the findings of the British Museum, declared the Silverdale Hoard to be treasure trove. This means that, in line with the Treasure Act 1996, the Treasure Valuation Committee will now set a financial value on the finds and, when that sum is raised, it will be split between the land-owner and the finder, Mr Webster. Lancaster City Museum has already expressed an interest in acquiring the collection.

The hoard was displayed in the British Museum for much of December to coincide with the launch of the Treasure and Portable Antiquities Scheme Reports. It is hard to think of a more apt demonstration of how successful these schemes have been in bringing archaeological finds into the public realm. Indeed the reports show that 90,099 finds were recorded in 2010 alone. Who knows what treasures this year may reveal?

Geoff Lowsley
A British pioneer in Carthage

Joann Freed charts the exploits of Nathan Davis who excavated and preserved some stunning Roman mosaics in Tunisia during the 19th century.

A display in the north-west stairwell of the British Museum includes a series of stunning polychrome Roman mosaics from Carthage. The story of how these mosaics (and more in the museum’s store-rooms) came to Britain from North Africa has never been properly told.

In 1856 the Reverend Nathan Davis, an adventurous and enterprising former missionary to the Jews in Tunisia, was searching for employment that would make the most of his abilities and contacts. He therefore proposed himself to the British Foreign Office and to Antonio Panizzi at the British Library as an archaeologist at Carthage, with the intention of unearthing Punic finds to enrich the British Museum’s collection.

At this time Davis, who had been living in Tunisia intermittently since 1841, had already written *Evenings in My Tent* (1854); he would tell the story of his excavations in *Carthage and Her Remains* (1861). He had no training as a scholar or archaeologist – at this period archaeology scarcely existed as a discipline – but, on the other hand, he was well placed to make the most of a delicate moment in relations between Europe and the Barbary States. Britain and France were vying to gain influence with the Bey of Tunis, demanding guarantees of human rights in his country in order to advance their economic interests.

Davis was a personal friend of Mohammed, the Bey of Tunis from 1856 to 1859, who was pleased to give him the opportunity to gratify the British with finds for the British Museum. In return, the Foreign Office paid Davis a salary and expenses for the three and a half years in which he excavated at Carthage. At the time he was digging there, stocking the British Museum with prestigious ancient objects was a matter of interest to a number of British statesmen, including the Foreign Ministers Lord Clarendon and Lord John Russell.

CT Newton, a contemporary of Davis, was excavating at Cnidos and at the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus for the British Museum at the same time, and sending home his bulky finds in the same British naval vessels that carried Davis’s finds. The public was able to follow the highlights of these exploits in journals such as *The Illustrated London News*. The scholars Augustus Franks (for the mosaics) and WSW Vaux (for the Punic stelae) would publish Davis’s finds more or less immediately, although RP Hinks’s definitive catalogue of the mosaics...
did not appear until 1933.

In Tunis Davis reported to the British Consul, Richard Wood; despite his adopted name, Wood was a Syrian and, like Davis, had crucial language skills in English, Arabic, Italian and French. Davis hosted many distinguished persons during his excavations, including the novelist Gustave Flaubert, Lady Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin, and Prince Alfred, the young son of Queen Victoria.

In 1858 Davis cleared an area of mosaic floor on a site that he called the ‘Carthaginian House’, near the Theodosian Wall on the north side of the city. There he gave a party for Lord Lyons, admiral of the British Mediterranean fleet, and his officers. Davis eventually lifted four geometric mosaics from this site. At this time, Carthage was almost completely unpopulated and only the outlines of some of the ancient monuments remained.

Davis relied on the plan of Carthage drawn by the former Danish consul CT Falbe (1833), which revealed remains of the Roman city over an area of about one square mile, including the harbours, the circus, the amphitheatre, and two great cistern complexes.

Davis’s excavation sites at Carthage were mainly within the city suggested by this plan. Nevertheless, he was to a certain extent digging blind, so that when he first came down on a simple, but solid, mosaic in a great ruin along the seashore, he imagined that he had discovered a church. Today we know that the structure was, in fact, the great south-west latrine of the Antonine Baths. The French had built a chapel on the summit of the Byrsa Hill in 1841, in the middle of the site of Carthage, as they believed it was the place where their Crusader king, Louis IX (1214-1270), had died. After several months of frustration in his excavations, Davis found out that Touzon, the guardian of the chapel, had discovered a fragment of mosaic showing a figure with a sistrum (a rattle used in the worship of Isis).

Although Touzon was regularly involved in clandestine excavation and the sale of antiquities, he at first refused to sell Davis the fragment. But Davis had the persistence to follow up this find and excavated the surviving sections of the Mosaic of the Months and Seasons, digging through 14ft of overlying soil. This polychrome figural mosaic had busts of the Seasons in its corners. Modestly robed figures, which Franks, arguing from the Codex-Calendar of 354, demonstrated to
have attributes of the Months (the figure with the *sistrum* signified November), were arranged in a circle within a square.

The original mosaic measured about 26ft (8 metres) along each side. Its subject matter would prove unusually intellectual for Carthage, where hunting scenes were by far the most common theme.

The site of the mosaic is immediately adjacent to the most impressive house known at Carthage, the Late Roman ‘House of the Horses’. The Mosaic of the Months and Seasons is, of course, also Late Roman (from the last quarter of the 4th century AD) and not Punic, as Davis believed.

As the mosaic had a friable mortar base, Davis spent a sleepless night devising a new method of lifting the mosaics. This required gluing canvas directly to the *tesserae* (the stone cubes of which the mosaic is composed), placing the result canvas-side-down in a prepared, shallow wooden case, filling it with mortar backing, closing and reversing the case, steaming off the canvas and removing the glue. His method had the crucial advantage of preserving the exact relationship of the *tesserae*.

It even allowed him to lift works such as the Mosaic of the Muses, a delicate carpet mosaic of the second century AD that he found in a villa on the seashore at Gammarth, a few miles north of Carthage. The mortar of the Mosaic of the Muses had deteriorated from battering by the sea and could never have been recovered with the older methods used in those days.

Before Davis’s excavations, Franks knew of only two surviving mosaics from Carthage in museum collections: one was a marine mosaic from a bathhouse on the seashore (the Mosaic of the Mask of Ocean in the British Museum was the central motif of this mosaic), the other a carpet mosaic, now almost entirely lost except for small fragments in the Louvre. The carpet mosaic came from great baths, probably of Vandal date (AD 439-534), on the south side of the Byrsa Hill. Once Davis decided to dig for mosaics in higher areas of the ancient city that he thought suited to luxury housing, he was able to recover 21 mosaics from Carthage itself, of which 19 were most probably from private houses. Three more mosaics came from the luxurious Early Roman villa at Gammarth. In the three years in which he excavated at Carthage, he demonstrated the great importance of polychrome mosaics in the domestic decoration of the Roman city.

Although Davis dug at more than 30 sites in Carthage, he never excavated to Punic levels; Punic tombs, the Tophet, and Punic housing would be excavated by later archaeologists. Nevertheless, he discovered a trove of about 90 Punic votive stelae that were being reused as *spolia* in the construction of a much later building. These *stelae* date from the fourth to the middle of the second century BC and are identical in type to those later found *in situ* in the Tophet of Carthage.

Nathan Davis illustrates the great variety of skills that were deployed by early archaeologists. Despite the fact that he was not a scholar and lacked an educated critical sense in the evaluation of his finds, he had tremendous energy and practical intelligence. He was extremely well-read, knew the necessary languages and had all the right political and scholarly connections.

Happily, he also managed his men well in tough times and worked conscientiously to excavate and retrieve some stunning finds for the British Museum – and, of course, he had an enormously good time doing it.

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Mark Merrony savours the richly sensual Neo-Classical paintings – inspired by the excavation of a ruined Roman city during the 18th and 19th centuries – and compares them with how the site looks today.
Writing at the time of the first excavations in Herculaneum, at the end of the 16th century, in his Third Law of Motion Sir Isaac Newton stated that: ‘Every action has an equal and opposite reaction’. This proto-archaeology entailed the removal of the volcanic debris from the cataclysmic eruption of Mount Vesuvius on 24 April, AD 79. It is curious that the physical quantification of Newton’s Third Law can be applied to the realm of the natural world and the disasters that have afflicted it: the gravest volcanic eruption of antiquity that sealed the mortal fate of so many people, also created the best preserved sites of the Roman world. Their tragic loss was our gain, providing us with a unique resource
that sheds more light on the antique world than would otherwise be possible. The impact of later excavations at Pompeii – during the 18th and 19th centuries – had an especially powerful cultural effect on the higher echelons of society right across Western Europe. The rich tapestry of understanding furnished by the art and buildings unearthed there, permeated the artistic fabric on the Continent to a hitherto unprecedented extent.

This is clearly manifest in the design of the Boudoir of Marie Antoinette in the Château of Fontainbleau, near Paris; the furniture of the Bourbon court in the Villa Favorita in Resina, near Naples; and bronze objects found in the Baden-Baden Neues Schloss in Germany. These are just a few examples from a widespread phenomenon that was the Neo-Classical revival in Europe.

Thanks to the Grand Tour this influence also reached Britain; as can be seen in the interior design of Robert Adam for the Red Hall of Syon House and the Etruscan Room at Osterley Park – both in London.

The artistic revelations of the Pompeian excavations did not escape the eye of many talented painters, and it is this sphere that bears witness to the most fertile imagination. The works that feature in this article all relate to the ominous volcano before, during, and after the cataclysm.

In Rome, Naples, and Florence (1817), the French Romanticist Stendhal wrote: ‘The strangest thing I saw on my travels was Pompeii, where you feel as if you have been transported back into the ancient world; even if you normally believe only proven facts, here you feel as if, just by being there, you know more about the place than any scholar. What a great pleasure it is to come face to face with antiquity, when one has read so many books about it.’

The perception of past and present facing one another at Pompeii inevitably encouraged painters to people the ruins. It is an interesting exercise to look at a small selection of some of the finest works in this context and juxtapose these with the extant remains in Pompeii.

This is expressed by an exceptionally beautiful painting by another French Romanticist, Théodore Chassériau. His Tepidarium of the Baths of Pompeii (5) is the foremost example of the artistic undercurrent of sensuality of the second half of 19th century French painting. It was painted for the Salon in 1853 and purchased by the French state on behalf of the Musée du Louvre. Presently on loan to the Musée d’Orsay, it is hung relatively near that other sensual classic: Les Romains de la décadence, painted six years earlier by Thomas Couture.

The hallmark of this painting – set in the Baths of Fortuna – is unambiguous, expressing nonchalant and highly sensual body language evocative of a harem, essentially reflecting the continuing concept of Roman voluptuousness in the Arab sphere – Chassériau was familiar with Algeria in the manner of innumerable French adventurers.

The symmetrical arrangement of the figures echoes Raphael and Poussin, the smooth and refined character smack of Ingres – Chassériau’s teacher, and the influence of Delacroix, although the later work of the latter – The Turkish Bath – hints that Delacroix may, in this instance, have been inspired by Chassériau.

In the catalogue The Second Empire (1852-1870): Art in France Under Napoleon III (1978), Théophile Gautier aptly described Tepidarium of the Baths of Pompeii as ‘an antique fresco stolen from the wall of Pompeii’, and it is an extraordinary experience to view it in the Musée d’Orsay and, later, to visit the actual tepidarium in which it was imagined (6). Tepidarium betrays the innocence
of luxury in a society of decadence, but this was, of course, short-lived. This feeling of luxury plays centre-stage in another beautiful work: Rehearsal of the ‘Flute Player’ and the ‘Wife of Diomedes’ by Gustave Boulanger (3). This painting is set in the atrium of Prince Napoleon’s Maison Pompéienne in Paris, designed by the architect Alfred-Nicolas Normand in a distinctive Pompeian style. This work belongs to the Musée National du Château de Versailles.

The architectural configuration of a house in Pompeii is well portrayed (4). In this scene of everyday luxuriant living the two characters on the left of the picture peer upwards into the open space of the atrium as if they have heard a volcanic rumble – a hint of the menace yet to come. The
terrible events that subsequently unfolded were spectacularly but tragically witnessed by Pliny the Elder, Admiral of the Roman fleet at Misenum, a short distance to the south-west of Naples. Pliny the Younger described what happened in a letter to the Roman historian Tacitus: ‘...The ninth day before the Calends of September [24 August], in the early afternoon, my mother drew to his [Pliny the Elder’s] attention a cloud of unusual size and appearance... As he was leaving the house he was handed a message from Rectina, wife of Tascius, whose house was at the foot of the mountain so that escape was impossible except by boat...

‘He hurried to the place where everyone else was hastily leaving, steering his course straight for the danger zone... Ashes were already falling, hotter and thicker as the ships drew near, followed by bits of pumice and blackened stones, charred and cracked by the
flames... For a moment my uncle wondered whether to turn back, but when the helmsman advised this he refused, telling him that Fortune stood by the courageous and they must make for the home of Pomponianus at Stabiae...

Meanwhile on Mount Vesuvius broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points, their bright glare emphasised by the darkness of night...'

The death of Pliny that ensued – and the explicit description of the eruption – are dramatically portrayed in a painting by Karl Pavlovic Brjullov entitled The Last Day of Pompeii, now in Saint Petersburg in the Russian Museum. Amid the mayhem of crashing monuments, two people on the right of the picture attempt to carry Pliny to safety.

This fine portrayal appears to have been inspired by the setting in the area of the Street of the Tombs in Pompeii, rather than the location where the tragedy is known to have taken place (Stabiae). This reminds us of how synonymous Pompeii is with the eruption of 79, eclipsing the other cities that were destroyed and preserved by the event (Herculaneum, Oplontis, and Stabiae).

Some 13 years after Chassériau painted his Tepidarium Paul-Alfred de Curzon, a close friend, accompanied him on another visit to Pompeii. Here, the House of the Faun provided the inspiration for de Curzon to interpret the aftermath of the disaster in his painting A Dream Among the Ruins of Pompeii, now at Bagnères-de-Bigorre in the Musée Municipal. Rather than depict a sterile mound of compacted ash – Pompeii in its post-eruption state of burial – he chose to represent the city in its excavated semi-ruined state populated by the ghostly inhabitants of the House of the Faun on a starry night. In the background Vesuvius is still active, but appears to be receding in its ferocity; in the foreground some of the figures are imbued with a sense of melancholy, not least the woman sitting in the impluvium (water-basin), who appears to be mourning the event in her black robes.

The House of the Faun once contained the Alexander Mosaic, the Late Hellenistic floor depicting the epic battle between its namesake and Darius III. Oblivious to the fact that this splendid floor now adorns a wall in the National Museum in Naples, many visitors find the eerie ruins of the villa sufficiently captivating devoid of its artistic treasures. It is curious to the extent that de Curzon was able to tap into the morbid curiosity of visitors to Pompeii, and this is still true today.

For me, these four paintings represent the key ways in which Pompeii acts on the human psyche to reproduce timeless feelings: opulent sensual living (fantasy and pleasure – Chassériau), a sense of foreboding (anxiety, fear – Boulanger), cataclysm (death and bereavement – Brjullov), despair (depression, lament, and wishful thinking – de Curzon). Together, they take us full circle through what was, what happened, and what is, in the timeless allure of a timeless place.
The dangerous don’t

Professor Mary Beard talks frankly to Lindsay Fulcher about Pompeii and Pink Floyd, Berlusconi and the brothel token, and what the Romans really did for us.

Straight talking, highly intelligent and extremely entertaining, Professor Mary Beard is as well-known for her blog, A Don’s Life, as for the dozen or so books she has written on Classical civilisation and her television documentary series on Pompeii. On a good week her blog draws up to 40,000 hits. Her forthright views, on topics as diverse as rape and Roman jokes, attract a considerable response (even hate mail) – her blog has been described as ‘the web’s most erudite gossip forum’, while the posts on her message board read like ‘a heady mix of Horace and Heat magazine’.

Although holding the post of Professor of Classics at Cambridge since 2004, Mary Beard has singlehandedly shattered the image of the absent-minded, tweedy, academic male grey-beard. Far from living in the past, or in an ivory tower, her posts on everything from the Eurozone to the Olympics prove that she is not only on the ball but can kick it straight into the net.

When I talk to her she has just returned from Italy. What does she think about recent reports that, among his many other failings, Berlusconi has let Italy’s glorious heritage slide into ruination?

‘I would like to blame him – and I’m glad that he’s gone – but not for the fact that Pompeii is falling down. It was jerry-built in the first place and it is 2,000 years old! Pompeii was not only destroyed by the volcano: the British bombed it during the Second World War. So, we have no right to get upset about it now.

‘Pompeii has a constant struggle to keep standing upright, it is fighting gravity and nature. There is a law about ruins you know, they get more and more ruinous as time goes on! The state of the House of the Gladiators was in the news last year, but the wall that actually fell down was part of the post-war reconstruction of the city.

‘Berlusconi may have been penny-pinching as far as spending money on conservation goes but he knows about private enterprise and hiring out sites helps raise money to preserve them.

‘There was a Pink Floyd concert in Pompeii in the 1970s and it was wonderful. I am not a purist about thinks like this – it’s a great place for a pop concert. For me the most important thing for the responsible preservation of these sites is generous public investment. Pompeii already has a vast EU grant but it needs more money and private enterprise may be able to provide it.’

Back to Berlusconi, bribery and bunga-bunga parties – is his behaviour just a throwback to the decadence of Ancient Rome?

‘Ancient Rome has always been a byword for excess, the let’s do it Roman-style attitude. There’s always a gap between political reality and the private persona. It’s very, very easy for the British to laugh at Berlusconi but I think we should be careful about over-simplifying Italian politics.’

This leads us neatly on to the so-called brothel token found recently in London.

‘No one really knows what it is,’ says Mary. ‘It could be a fake and it may have nothing to do with Roman Britain – a traveller could have dropped it while visiting London. As for the brothel token idea, it seems that every time something with an image of two people bonking is found, we assume it must be something to do with a brothel. It might just as well have been a gambling token.

‘People always associate Rome with decadence, orgies etcetera, and the Romans are good at making us look at excess and its results, as if to say don’t model yourself on this, but they also showed us other things like how law and politics operate.

America’s founding fathers established their constitution using a Roman model, taking on board a state without a king or king.
bloodline, the rule of law and the rights of the citizen. The Romans teach us to think about the nature of politics.’

Speaking of what we learnt, the topic of teaching Latin in schools comes up.

‘I think it’s a hugely good idea. Learning Latin verbs is hard but what it allows you to do is brilliant. It opens up to you some of the greatest literature in the world. It’s great reading Virgil or Ovid in English but it’s even better in Latin. It’s worth learning Latin just to do that. Of course it’s hard. A lot of kids are very keen on Latin at first – what I want to see is that they are encouraged to continue with it when it gets really difficult. I wish Latin was on the National Curriculum but we shouldn’t be over nostalgic about it. I mean studying Latin (and still more, Greek) has always been a minority option. And we shouldn’t underestimate the difficulty of teaching Latin either.

Mary is insistent that Classicists have always been nostalgic about a time when people knew the Classics better. ‘Classicists were nostalgic about the good old days in AD200 and, in the early 20th century, The Times reported: “The Classics are dead!”’

So apart from Latin and law, what did the Romans do for us?

‘They are the main way that we know about ancient Greece. The Romans selected, changed and reworked Greek ideas, they were the first to filter or reinterpret them whether in the arts, architecture or law. How do we know what the Acropolis looked like? Pausanias, who lived in the Roman Empire, tells us. The Romans were nostalgic, they looked back and thought everything was better then. In my view, the Romans are the first post-Modernists.’

So how did Mary come to go down the Roman route? It all began, she tells me, when she joined a dig at Wroxeter when she was a 16-year-old schoolgirl.

‘I’m afraid that I did it primarily to escape from Mum and Dad [she was an only child] and to earn some money so I could go down the pub and meet boys!’ she admits.

Later, in the 1970s, when she went on to study at Cambridge she had to toughen up to survive in what was still very much a man’s world. Luckily, her feisty character and sense of humour, not to mention her brilliant intellect, got her through. It was while she was an undergraduate that she paid her first visit to Pompeii and was, she says, ‘blown away by it’. She has been studying the ruined city ever since as well as writing books and articles and making television programmes about it.

In 1985 she married fellow academic, art historian and Byzantinist Robin Cormack. They have two children, now grown up: their daughter, currently in Southern Sudan, is studying for her PhD at Durham; their son read Classics at Oxford and is now doing his Master’s in Arabic.

So far we have chatted amicably about the past and the present and how they reflect one another – which is what Mary is good at – but, in all this, I have not seen her ‘dangerous’ side. Why is she described in this way and is it only by men?

‘Probably because I am a woman who speaks frankly. I’m not dangerous – for goodness sake, I spend most of my time sitting in libraries.’

When she is not in a library or writing her books or blog, she is busy making television documentaries. In 2010 her BBC2 programme Pompeii: Life and Death of a Roman Town pulled in 3.5 million viewers, but some critics concentrated more on her appearance than on what she was saying. One said: ‘Why doesn’t she go to the hairdresser’s?’ – a personal remark which Mary took in her stride. ‘If I’d gone off and had my hair done differently it wouldn’t have been me – this is me!’ she says with uncompromising exasperation.

Her next projects include a television series on ancient Rome which, she says, ‘is not about the posh people who lived there in great style but about the everyday life of the citizens’. It will be shown on BBC2 later this year. She is also working on a book about Roman laughter that she hopes to finish next year. There have, of course, been modern interpretations of Roman humour. Did she find Frankie Howerd funny in Up Pompeii?

‘Yes, he was great,’ she says, ‘Absolutely on message, Plautus couldn’t have done better himself!’

To read more of Professor Mary Beard’s views visit A Don’s Life at timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life
The Roman fort of Maryport (Alauna) occupies a high bluff to the north of the mouth of the River Ellen on the Cumbrian coast where the plan of the fort survives as a prominent earthwork enclosure of 2.07 hectares. The fort lies close to the southern extremity of the line of forts, mile-fortlets and towers that formed an extension of Hadrian’s Wall down the western seaboard. To the north-east of the fort, an extensive extramural settlement featuring structures and enclosures on both sides of a road running from the north-east fort gate has been revealed by geophysical survey. In 1870 a large cache of Roman military altars was reported after a stone fouled a plough. The removal of this stone revealed the first altar.

The landowner – one Humphrey Senhouse – then launched a hunt for more objects, which resulted in the recovery of 17 altars contained in nine pits, some 6½ft (2 metres) deep. In all, 57 pits were identified and many of the others contained fragments of inscribed stones though some were empty. The altars, most of which were dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus by successive units in residence, were thought to have been buried as part of an annual ritual in which a new altar was dedicated on the occasion of the renewal of the oath of allegiance to the emperor.

In 2011 the Trustees of the Senhouse Museum commissioned a team from Newcastle University under Professor Ian Haynes (Project Director) and...
Tony Wilmott (Site Director) to re-excavate the spot where the altars were found to test the traditional interpretation of their burial.

It soon became apparent that the long-standing theory was wrong. The altars had not been interred as part of an annual ceremony but rather, more mundanely, to act as packing round the main vertical posts of one or more substantial timber buildings. These appear to date to the fourth century and to stand within a circular or oval ditched enclosure. The location of such a substantial Late Roman building, or buildings, at this, the highest point in Maryport, is of considerable interest. Work on the site also allowed the team to study the methods used by antiquarian excavators and demonstrated that Roman material had been recovered from the site and incorporated into private collections long before the famous discoveries of 1870.

The fort at Vindolanda lies about 2 1/3 mile (1km) south of the Wall on the line of the east-west Roman road known as the Stanegate built about 20 years before the mural barrier. Standing in the central sector of the frontier-zone Vindolanda is of course world-famous because of the collection of wooden writing-tablets recovered in recent years that provide insights into the everyday functioning of the fort and, to some extent, the lives of the soldiers stationed there in the years either side of AD 100. But there is far more to Vindolanda than these objects.

The site has the most stupendously complex history of military installations, with, at the latest count, no less than 11 separate forts or compounds. At one stage it seems there were two forts side by side; perhaps one containing a cavalry unit and the other an infantry cohort, or one an auxiliary unit and the other legionaries.

All phases of Vindolanda are fascinating, but one phase in particular has been the subject of a greater than usual amount of speculation. This is a very brief episode in the early years of the third century. Lying beneath and extending beyond the defences of a conventionally shaped fort are the remains of a series of small round structures belonging to the next phase. These average 16ft (5 metres) in diameter and are arranged in rows back to back, facing out onto narrow streets. It has been estimated that there are between 250 and 300 in total. No more than two courses of masonry survive and it seems likely that their superstructure was of timber roofed with thatch, turf or some other organic material. The floors were variously of clay, brick-mortar or stone flags, with a hearth beside the doorway.

These buildings are most plausibly interpreted as dwellings rather than some form of industrial buildings, and they do conform to the local native architectural tradition of roundhouses. Accompanying this collection of buildings on the west side of the site was a small military compound. No comparable group of structures has been found anywhere else in Britain and their purpose is a mystery. Various explanations have been proposed, most bound up with fact that this episode at Vindolanda appears to coincide with the years AD 208-211, when the Emperor Septimius Severus was leading campaigns against the tribes of central and northern Scotland. One suggestion is that they housed
prisoners of war; another that they held hostages taken from the tribes conquered by Severus; another, refugees from the warfare in the north; and yet another, native militia or conscript labour.

About 12 miles (20km) east of Vindolanda, on the north bank of the River Tyne, lies Corbridge (Corstopitum in the Antonine Itinerary), located at the point where Dere Street, the road running north from the Roman province into Scotland, crossed the Stanegate. The earliest Roman military presence here consisted of a large base founded circa AD72, approximately 10 hectares in size and containing legionary barracks and store buildings or workshops. This was succeeded by a smaller fort built circa AD88 a little under 1km to the east, and this in turn was replaced by a small fort 2.8 hectares in size around AD103.

With various alterations and rebuildings, this survived down to the 170s, when the fort was demolished to make way for an entirely different arrangement. This included an enormous courtyard building measuring 220ft x 213ft (67 x 65 metres). The northern corners of the building were of greater than usual size, indicating the intention to construct arches connecting it with another building to the north. A new aqueduct and fountain were also provided next to the east side of the building terminating on the frontage of the main street. The function of the building is uncertain, as work was stopped when the walls had only begun to rise above ground level, but the plan is most plausibly interpreted as the forum and basilica of a new town.

Although the grand scheme was abandoned, Corbridge did go on to develop into a sizeable town in the third and fourth centuries, with a continuing military presence in the form of two separate walled compounds housing detachments from the Second and Sixth Legions.

The reason for cessation of work on the grand scheme at the heart of Corbridge was almost certainly the serious outbreak of warfare that happened early in the 180s. There is evidence of destruction by fire at Corbridge and several other forts nearby at this time. As the Roman historian Dio Cassius tells us in describing events during the reign of Commodus (180-192):

‘The greatest war, however, was in Britain. For the tribes in the island crossed the wall that separated them from the Roman army and did a great amount of damage, even cutting down a general together with his troops...’ (Epitome LXXII, 8).

The ‘wall’ in question must be Hadrian’s Wall, as the Antonine Wall had been abandoned 30 years earlier. The ‘general’ could well have been a legionary commander, most probably of the Sixth Legion based at York.

This brings us to one of the lesser-known but extremely impressive features of Roman Corbridge – the mausoleum at Shorden Brae, on the north side of the Stanegate about half a mile (700 metres) west of the main Corbridge site. The superstructure disappeared long ago, with much of its fabric, including fragments of the rich architectural decoration of its façades, being incorporated in the crypt of the late-seventh-century church of St Andrew at nearby Hexham, later Hexham Abbey.

Excavated in 1958, the concrete foundation of the mausoleum was
... the tribes in the island crossed the wall that separated them from the Roman army and did a great amount of damage, even cutting down a general together with his troops ...
Archaic and Classical Greece, the period from 750 to 350 BC, was made up of many city-states who, despite sharing a common language and culture, were fiercely independent and often in conflict with one another. The Greeks, however, were a pragmatic people who sought to confront problems in a direct and practical manner, in much the same way that they waged war. Their tactics and the design of their armour and weaponry reflect an ideology which focussed on decisive confrontations and conclusions.

Central to Greek warfare was the hoplite, a heavily armed infantryman who fought hand-to-hand using a spear and round shield as part of a close-ordered battle formation called a phalanx. The term ‘hoplite’ means literally an ‘armed-man’ and the panoply was the array of arms and armour with which he was equipped. Only a shield and spear was needed to fight as a hoplite within the phalanx but, depending on his individual wealth, he might also be equipped with a

Dr Mike Burns constructs a picture of what measures the amateur citizen soldiers of Ancient Greece took to protect themselves in battle and inflict harm on the enemy

1. Corinthian helmet, hammered out from a single piece of bronze, with perforations for the attachment of a leather or textile lining. Late 7th century BC. H. 23.5cm. Photograph © Studio Hughes Dubois, Paris-Brussels.
In most city states the hoplite was expected to pay for his armour and weapons, which was regarded as a significant expense. It has been estimated that, during the fifth century BC, the price of the complete panoply of hoplite armour was between 75-100 drachmas, the equivalent of three to five months’ pay for a skilled artisan.

Other types of troops such as cavalry and light infantry were used in a supporting role, scouting, skirmishing and protecting the flanks of the phalanx. Light infantry or psiloi were recruited from those too poor to serve as hoplites, they fought with javelins, slings, bows and even stones. Greek cavalry men, on the other hand, were enrolled from wealthy citizens who could afford the cost of a horse and its upkeep. But their numbers were never great and few city-states fielded cavalry forces before the fifth century BC.

Every citizen of a Greek city-state or polis was liable to be called up for military service from the age of 17 to 60. For the most part the hoplite was an amateur citizen-soldier who returned back to his estate, farm or trade after a campaign had ended, most of which were short seasonal affairs. The only full-time professional soldiers in Archaic and Classical Greece were the Spartans.

In Sparta, citizens were forbidden from learning a trade or engaging in any money-making activities as they were expected to devote all their time to training for war. As Xenophon observed: ‘only the Spartans are true experts in warfare, while other Greeks in military matters make things up as they go along’ (Spartan Constitution, 13.5).

Formal military training was alien to most Greeks, and it was widely accepted that exercise through agricultural labour, or at the gymnasium, was adequate preparation for war. Specialised training in the use of weapons and tactics was not mandatory although an individual citizen could pay for these privately. The philosopher Socrates scolded a young Athenian for being physically unfit: ‘the fact that our country does not conduct military training at public expense is no reason for individuals to neglect it’ (Xenophon Memorabilia, III.12.5). It was the duty of each citizen to be prepared for war not only by providing his own arms and armour but also by making sure that he was fit to fight.

The Greeks regarded body armour as protection for the individual, but ‘the shield was carried for the common good of the whole line’ (Plutarch Moralia, 220A). The hoplite’s primary means of defence was a round, slightly convex shield with a flat rim called an aspis. It had a diameter of around a metre and was constructed from a hard wood core covered with leather and sometimes a very thin sheet of bronze.

The whole thing weighed approximately 6-8kg and was carried by a central bronze armband (porpax) and a flexible leather handgrip (antilabe). The shallow bowl design of the aspis enabled the hoplite to put his weight behind the shield, to push against the enemy and break up their formation – a tactic the Greeks referred to as othismos, or ‘the shoving’. A wide variety of blazons were painted or applied in bronze sheet to the face of the shield to aid their recognition on the battlefield.

The main weapon of the Greek hoplite was the dory, a spear two to
Greek warfare

three metres long, with an iron head and bronze butt-spikes, designed specifically for hand-to-hand combat. Its tapered shaft and heavy butt-spikes allowed the spear to be held further back, giving the hoplite greater reach and penetrating power when thrusting. The hoplite also carried a sword as a secondary weapon which he would draw if his spear was broken in combat.

The historian Diodorus describes what happened at the battle of Mantinea in 362: ‘the Spartans and the Boeotians struck at one another with their spears, but because of the frequency of blows, the majority of the spears shattered and they then engaged each other with swords’ (Siculus 15.86.2).

The Greeks used several different kinds of helmets. The most common, during the seventh and sixth centuries, was the Corinthian type which covered much of the head and face. Although an effective form of protection, this design impaired hearing, vision, and ventilation. Subsequent helmet types, such as the Chalcidian and Attic, were lighter and had a much more open-faced design, with apertures for the ears and hinged cheek pieces. Horse-hair crests were attached to helmets to give the hoplite a more impressive and warlike appearance.

Those who could afford body armour used either a bronze muscle cuirass or a non-metallic corslet called a linothorax. The bronze cuirass consisted of a breastplate and back-plate, moulded in imitation of the male torso. Early cuirasses had highly stylised anatomical features but, by the fifth century, advances in metal-working techniques enabled armourers to manufacture armour that was form-fitting, with more realistic musculature. Custom-made cuirasses were expensive and a cheaper alternative was the linothorax which was made from layers of stiffened linen or leather. The linothorax was lighter and more flexible than the bronze cuirass. Along the bottom edge of the corset were overlapping rows of stiffened linen flaps called pteryges designed to protect the lower abdominal area without hindering movement. The hoplite might also use bronze greaves to protect the lower legs which were not covered by the shield. These were clamped on the leg and held in place by the elasticity of the bronze.

Previously, the Greeks had fought in a much looser style of warfare in which warriors armed with spears, javelins and bows were mixed together. Towards the end of the eighth century they began to group the heavily armed spearmen into a more disciplined and organised formation which, eventually, evolved into the hoplite phalanx. By the period of the Persian Wars at the beginning of the fifth century, the hoplite phalanx was a close ordered formation, eight to 16 men deep. The phalanx was formed of numerous files of hoplites and each file of eight men had a leader in front and a file-closer at the rear. The Athenian mercenary Xenophon advised that ‘you should post the best troops in front and rear and the worst in between’, the concept being that those hoplites who were not as experienced or well-equipped would be led by the bravest and best-equipped men and encouraged or pushed forward by reliable veterans. In battle the phalanx would advance towards the enemy while maintaining a rigid formation in which overlapping shields provided the hoplite with additional protection. The Athenian general Thucydides observed that ‘fear makes every man want to do his best to find protection for his unarmed side in the shield of the man next to him on the right, thinking that the more closely the shields are locked together, the safer he will be’ (Thucydides V.71).

The phalanx was most effective when fighting on level ground, as difficult or uneven terrain could easily disrupt the formation and create gaps into which an enemy might charge. As the phalanx neared the enemy, the hoplites would break into a run the last 300 metres or so
while singing the paean or battle hymn, which was meant to bolster their confidence and fill the enemy with dread.

The Spartans were the only Greeks who did not sing the paean when going into battle. It was their custom to maintain their discipline and advance silently, keeping step to the sound of flute players so that their formation did not become disordered. When battle was joined there would have been a terrible crush and clash of arms as one phalanx sought to rout the other. Xenophon described how at the battle of Coronea in 394BC the Spartan phalanx ‘crashed against the Thebans front to front, and setting shields against shields they shoved, fought, killed and were killed’ (Hellenica IV.III.19).

The willingness of the Greeks to fight at close quarters was unnerving to many non-Greek peoples, who preferred to wear down their enemies from a distance with massed archery or thrown javelins. The Persians were ill prepared when it came to fighting at close quarters and, at the battle of Plataea in 479BC, Herodotus states that ‘their destruction was due to the fact that they wore no armour: it was a case of light-armed soldiers taking on hoplites’ (Herodotus IX.62-63). The Greeks were contemptuous of those who fought with missile weapons, believing that a man should meet his foes face to face and defeat them in a decisive battle of hand-to-hand combat.

The finality of Greek warfare is perhaps most evident in the aftermath of battle. There was rarely any ambiguity about who had won and who had lost. After the enemy had been routed, it was customary for the victors to erect a trophy (a panoply of enemy armour nailed to a tree) in honour of the gods and as an inviolate symbol of victory. Then, as metal was an extremely valuable commodity in antiquity, which could be reused or sold, the dead were systematically stripped of their arms and armour.

A portion of the spoils (usually a 10th) was often sent to sanctuaries, such as those at Delphi or Olympia, where it was displayed as a dedication to the gods and as a declaration of the victor’s martial prowess. A great deal of Greek armour, some bearing dedicatory inscriptions, has been recovered from these sanctuaries. Soon after the battle a herald was sent by the vanquished army to ask for a truce so that they could bury their dead – this was a formal acknowledgement of defeat rarely denied by the victors.

It is perhaps ironic that the same spirit of intense rivalry between Greek city states, that fostered the development of the hoplite and his brutal form of warfare, also gave rise to the first Olympic Games in 776BC.
Inspired by the past

Diana Bentley pays tribute to CP Cavafy, the great Alexandrian poet whose poem *Ithaca* has become an international favourite in a body of work which has a strongly Classical flavour.

He was, said his friend and fellow writer EM Forster, ‘a gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe’. Forster first met the now renowned Greek poet CP Cavafy when he was stationed in Alexandria during the First World War and, in him, he found not only a kindred spirit but an artist of enduring talent and appeal. At the time few people had heard of Cavafy who was producing his poems while working in a lowly paid position for Alexandria’s Irrigation Service. Remaining consistently reluctant to promote himself, Cavafy never offered a collection of poems during his life. It was only in 1935, several years after his death, that an anthology of his poems was published. After this Cavafy began to gain a world-wide following and became known especially as a poet much inspired by the ancient world.

A man of simple tastes, Constantine P Cavafy was born in Alexandria in 1863 and, apart from brief spells in England and Constantinople when he was young, remained in the city until his death.

In his day, Alexandria was a melting-pot in which different nations did business: Greeks (Cavafy’s family ranked among the elite of the Greek community), Italians, French and British thrived in what was then a global centre for the cotton trade. It also provided the perfect base for a poet who was endlessly absorbed and fascinated by the Classical past.

Cavafy took as his subjects many real or invented characters, and incidents from ancient Greek, particularly Hellenistic, and Roman times and also from the Byzantine era. Through these he explored the challenges and vicissitudes of life, finding in them direction and enlightenment. The world of the pharaohs, however, held little appeal for him. Speaking of the legacy of ancient Egypt, he admitted: ‘I don’t understand those big immobile things’.

For Cavafy the long homeward voyage of Odysseus became a journey through life itself; in his celebrated poem *Ithaca* he exhorts us to savour the experience:

If ever you set out for Ithaca, pray that the journey may be long, full of adventures and discoveries. Neither the Laestrygonians nor the Cyclops nor an enraged Poseidon need you fear; these on your journey you will never find, provided that your thought remains lofty, and rare emotion touch your body and your spirit.

In *Thermopylae*, he gives the Spartan ideal of sacrifice wider significance:

Honour to those who in their lives have chosen their Thermopylae to guard. Unwavering always in their duty; upright and just in all their dealings, not without pity or compassion, though

Many poems relate to specific personalities of the ancient world, especially those who had featured in the dramatic history of his native city, which proved a rich source of inspiration. Friends recalled that Cavafy would often talk about these characters in a conspiratorial tone, as though they were people well known to him who might, at any moment, come into the room or walk around the corner. He was stirred and inspired by the flamboyant lives and tragic ends of Julius Caesar, Marc Antony and Cleopatra.

In *The Ides of March*, Cavafy warns us in general, and Caesar in particular, to beware of the dangers of unbridled ambition:

Of grandeur you must be afraid, O soul. And if you cannot conquer your ambitions, you should pursue them with misgivings and precaution. And the more that you advance, the more suspicious, the more cautious you must be.

Forster’s first book on Alexandria contains Cavafy’s fine poem about Marc Antony’s end in the city (see the box opposite in a more recent translation by Anthony Hirst), which is said to have been prompted by Plutarch’s story. He told how on the night before his death, Marc Antony heard the choir of the god Bacchus, his divine protector, passing in the street below his window and leaving the city. This was an omen of his impending end.

A sense of loss and of the inevitable decline of things pervades Cavafy’s work and may have reflected not only his feelings about
the decay of his beloved Greek civilisation, but the trajectory of his own life. His father, who had been a successful trader, died when Cavafy was a child, leaving the family to live in much reduced circumstances.

Cavafy’s spare, free-form style was once described by the poet George Seferis as ‘where poetry met prose’. It is direct and often conversational in tone, but all the more powerful for being so. His fellow poet WH Auden noted that it was particularly distinctive and said that, no matter who translated Cavafy, his work was always unmistakable. He developed his poems slowly, often working on them over a long period; Ithaca is said to have taken some 16 years to create. Of this process Cavafy said: ‘By postponing and re-postponing to publish, what a gain I have had!’

His friend Yannis Sareyannis commented: ‘Cavafy was not born a poet, he became one with the years... Cavafy himself told me he never managed to write a poem from beginning to end. He worked on them all for years, or often let them lie for whole years and later took them up again’. Cavafy published poems privately, distributing them to friends and family and occasionally, had some published in literary magazines. Some suggest that his reluctance to publish allowed him time to continue his work on his poems, but it was also possibly due to the fact that his love poems revealed his homosexuality; well-known among his canon of work are poems addressed to, or about, young men.

Later in life, when Cavafy’s friend, the businessman and philanthropist Antony Benaki, founder of the Benaki Museum in Athens, was leaving Alexandria, he urged the poet to settle in Greece, too. But Cavafy refused to move, remaining faithful to the city whose exotic past so enthralled him and whose streets and cafés were so dear to him. ‘Mohammed Aly Square is my aunt. Rue Cherif Pacha is my first cousin, and the Rue de Ramleh my second. How can I leave them?’ he asked.

Cavafy spent his last 25 years in an unpretentious apartment on the Rue Lepsius, recently renamed CP Cavafy Street. He died there in 1933 on his 70th birthday. Now a museum, the apartment has been kept much as it would have been in his day and is managed by the Alexandrian office of the Hellenic Foundation for Culture.

Cavafy was said to have been a generous host and a good conversationalist, and many artists of the day were frequent visitors. He kept in touch with EM Forster, who wanted to bring his work to the attention of the English-speaking world. But Cavafy was not particularly keen on gaining a wider audience and it was left to others, after his death, to publish the first anthology of his work. Later, Lawrence Durrell and TS Eliot championed his poetry.

During his life, Cavafy remained a quiet, unaffected civil servant, but his work displays unique wisdom and imagination, communicated with contained and unmistakable elegance, and he is now rightly recognised as one of the great poets of the 20th century.

All translations used here are by Anthony Hirst, one of the editors of CP Cavafy: The Collected Poems (Oxford World’s Classics, 2007).
The golden road to Samarkand

Dalu Jones takes in some of the wonders – architectural and artistic – that are the Silk Road’s legacy in Uzbekistan

The international airport at Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, is a modern caravanserai, a stepping stone for those who want to explore the Central Asian section of the Silk Road, which, over the centuries, linked the Mediterranean to China, Korea and even Japan. What strikes anyone arriving from the West is the ethnic diversity of fellow passengers and local people who await them: Tajiks, Kirghiz, Turkmen, Kazakhs and Mongols, hefty Russians, Southern and Northern Europeans, Indian and Chinese peoples.

These are the descendants of the same people who came here to trade along the Silk Road, slowly moving through inhospitable deserts from one oasis to another, and who now travel on crowded buses or in cars and vans for hire outside the small airport. Their faces but, alas, no longer their garments, are those represented in Sogdian wall paintings and textiles (4th-10th centuries AD), Tang terracottas (618-906) and Timurid miniatures (14th-15th centuries AD).

They are bound for Sogdiana, Ferghana and Khorezm, regions whose names resound through history from the time of Alexander the Great onwards, but gone are their magnificent silk robes and kaftans, the trademark of these regions, which identified them and provided clues as to their religion and status. Today, like their clothes, the goods of all kinds carried in huge bundles and cases are mostly made in China, as are most of the objects sold in the bazaars.

The once-mythical Cathay of Marco Polo (1254-1324) is now the kingpin of the former Silk Route. Once again China has become the major player in the Great Game that made Uzbekistan a pivotal pawn in the struggle for supremacy between...
East and West over centuries. Tashkent is a modern capital with wide, tree-lined avenues in a local modernistic style that blends 19th-century Tsarist colonial architecture with Soviet and post-Soviet government buildings, alongside gracious Islamic monuments, some ancient and well restored, others modern but inspired by Timurid models.

The Museum of Applied Art is housed in a mansion built at the end of the 19th century for a Russian diplomat, named Alexandrovich Polotsev, in an elaborate traditional style, complete with painted stuccowork, carved wooden ceilings and pillars ornate with calligraphy recording the verses of the Persian poet and polymath Omar Khayyam (1048-1131). Here you can enjoy a pleasant introduction to the wealth and variety of Uzbek arts and crafts. The museum has a pretty courtyard and garden and a teashop. There are good-quality textiles – the famous embroidered *suzanis* and brightly coloured *ikats* – as well as ceramics and jewellery for sale. A halt here also gives a preview of the charm of some of the most pleasant bed-and-breakfast places to be found in Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva where ancient private houses have been turned into comfortable *auberges de charme*.

Among the imposing government buildings that celebrate the new Republic of Uzbekistan, the State Museum of History of the Academy of Sciences gives an overview of the complex history of this country. Like all the present museums in Uzbekistan – newly built with a profusion of grand marble staircases (but no lifts) – the State Museum lacks curatorial expertise, and the displays are much too often a mixture of old-fashioned dioramas, objects pertaining to folklore and political propaganda, and glass cases where it is difficult to distinguish copies made for didactic purposes from the real objects. In this melee a first-century white marble Buddha, found near Termez, fragments of Sogdian mural paintings and a number of Islamic objects stand out.

It is a great shame that Uzbekistan has not as yet found the resources to create a museum truly worthy of its glorious artistic past, especially the Hellenistic and Sogdian periods (4th century BC to 8th century AD). The Samarkand State Museum of History and Art, on the site of Afrasyab, the royal capital of Sogdiana, represents a missed opportunity to gather under one roof all the material – the magnificent and unique wall paintings especially – excavated here and in other important Sogdian sites such as Varaksha in the Bukhara oasis. Sadly and of necessity, reproductions would have to serve to illustrate the murals from Pendzhikent, another Sogdian site just over 43 miles (70km) southwest of Samarkand, now in Tajikistan.

Properly manned and organised, such a museum would function as a hub for Central Asian studies and would do justice to an extraordinary flourishing of the arts whose role as crucial
intermediary between the Graeco-Roman world and China is still not sufficiently comprehended.

At present the centrepiece of the museum is the reconstructed mid-seventh-century Hall of the Ambassadors, lined with wall paintings which by themselves warrant a trip to Uzbekistan for all those interested in the cross-fertilisation of motifs and ideas that developed along the Silk Route in pre-Islamic centuries. The Sogdians, an Iranian people who inhabited and ruled city-states in the most crucial part of Central Asia, were consummate merchants who sustained the Silk Route during its most prolific period, from the 2nd to the 8th centuries AD. Afrasyab, originally an outpost of the Persian Achaemenid empire (3rd to 5th centuries BC), was abandoned and never rebuilt after the Mongols destroyed the city in 1230.

The paintings come from the reception hall of a palace discovered accidentally in 1965 during construction work for a new road linking the site of Afrasyab to the old city of Samarkand. A bulldozer destroyed part of the walls bearing the frescoes, but enough remained to be transferred and mounted in the museum, where they have been exhibited since 1985. The hall reproduces faithfully the dimensions and orientation of this extraordinary find. The palace was probably the family residence of King Varkhuman, who ruled in the third quarter of the seventh century AD. The king’s own palace is believed to have been located on the north side of Afrasyab, at the bottom of the citadel. The western wall of the hall bears an inscription of 16 vertical lines in Sogdian, an East Iranian language, which mentions the reception of ambassadors by King Varkhuman.

Different interpretations are given to the various scenes featuring ambassadors, attendants and musicians accompanying a Sogdian princess who came to be married to the ruler of Samarkand. They ride on camel and horseback and bear gifts, including a flock of sacred swans. A white elephant carries a palanquin with a person of high rank, possibly a king’s wife. Ambassadors from China wear black caps and carry armfuls of fruit and rolls of silk. There are even emissaries from the Korean kingdom of Koguryo, incorporated into the Tang empire in 699 AD.

The elaborate scenes might also represent the celebration of the Zoroastrian New Year, with a procession of members of the Sogdian court. The delicacy and precision in the rendering of details allows for the study of motifs whose patterns were transposed to Byzantine, Islamic and Italian silks used for kingly burials and for wrapping relics in church treasuries, and ultimately inspired the ubiquitous bestiaries of Romanesque art in Europe.

But it is the monuments of the fabled cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, where the arts and sciences came together to flourish under
Islamic rule from the 8th century onwards, that lure most visitors to Uzbekistan. Following the process of expansion of the Moslem armies of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) from Syria into Central Asia, Samarkand was taken in 711. By the middle of the 8th century – after the battle of Talas (751) in present-day Kazakhstan – the issue of which of the two civilisations, the Moslem or the Chinese, would dominate these regions was resolved by the defeat of the Chinese army.

The craftsmen taken as prisoners at this time brought to the West a wealth of skills, including the craft of paper-making. By the 10th century Buddhism, Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity had virtually ceased to exist in Central Asia and Islam had become the predominant religion in the region.

The most important of the early Islamic monuments in Uzbekistan is the mausoleum of Ismail the Samanid (892-907) in Bukhara, capital of the first independent Moslem state in Central Asia. The 10th-century tomb is a strikingly and deceptively simple cubic building with inset columns surmounted by a dome. It is entirely made of bricks laid at different angles, making intricate geometric patterns that altogether give the impression of a tightly woven texture. It is here that one can see an early example of squinches, an architectural device of Persian origin that allows a building to move from a square base to a round dome.

Bukhara and Samarkand were rich centres of trade and learning in the vast empire of Timur – the Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction of the Planets, known in the West as Tamerlane, who ruled from 1370 to 1405. Born in the fertile Ferghana valley, he was buried in Samarkand, and was succeeded by a son, Shah Rukh, and a grandson, Ulug Beg, both discerning patrons of the arts. Great attention was paid to the study of all the sciences, astronomy and astrology especially. Ulug Beg, a learned astronomer in his own right, built an observatory on top of a hill commanding a splendid view of Samarkand of which unfortunately little remains.

Even though Russian and Uzbeki specialists have rather over-restored the glorious Timurid mosques, madrasas and mausolea, which had fallen into ruin, these monuments still daze with the beauty of their glittering inlaid tile decoration and the harmony of their proportions.

The ruins of Timur’s summer palace, the Aq Saray at Shahrisabz, still present an imposing sight. The magnificence of the Timurid buildings makes up for the lack of contemporary objects of importance in the place where they were originally manufactured. The outstanding manuscripts with their miniatures – masterpieces of Islamic painting – the carpets, the textiles, the metalwork are all dispersed to museums around the world. It is left to one’s imagination to recreate a moment in history when artistic excellence and intellectual tolerance prevailed.

A visit to a chaikhana (tea-house) makes a welcome stop during long journeys by road. Often found in pleasant surroundings in the countryside, they provide wooden platforms with padded cushions and carpets where customers lounge-comfortably, or sit cross-legged, and drink black or green tea, or eat kebabs and yoghurt at low tables. Getting good, safe, food in Uzbekistan is no easy matter, regardless of the class of restaurant.

Despite the long delays and considerable expense involved in acquiring a Kazak visa in Tashkent, it is also worth making a journey by car from Tashkent to Kazakhstan to see – after a long drive – the 15th-century Timurid mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and the ruins of Otrar, where Timur died.
Along the Via Domitia

Christopher Follett follows a section of the first Roman road in Gaul – built to link Rome via the Languedoc with Cadiz – from Provence to the Pyrenees.

The Via Domitia was the first Roman road built in Gaul, linking Rome with Spain, much of the highway passing through what is today the southern French province of Languedoc-Roussillon. Most of the route that the Romans regularised, paved and bridged some 2,000 years ago, was already ancient when they set out to build it; there had been tracks stretching along substantial tracts of the same ground since Neolithic times.

Legend has it that Heracles, son of Zeus, having erected his eponymous Pillars at the mouth of the Mediterranean, made his way on his 10th Labour along what was once known as the Via Heraclea through Iberia with the red cattle of the triple-headed monster Geryon, passing the Pyrenees by the coast. There, he had a fatal affair with the mountain Princess Pyrene, then crossed the Languedoc (Liguria) via Nîmes, where an infatuation with a nymph resulted in the birth of a son, Nemausus. Hannibal (probably) used a very similar route on his way to the Alps in 218 BC at the head of a vast army including war elephants. The most accurate idea of the extent of the Via Domitia and its Spanish and Italian extensions can be gained from the 2,000-year-old Vicarello goblets – four silver goblets found in the mid-19th century north-west of Rome. The goblets, votive cups shaped like cylindrical milliary columns, are engraved with the exact itinerary of the two highways – the Via Augusta and the Via Domitia – connecting ancient Gades (Cadiz) to Rome, listing all 33 staging posts (mansiones) along the route and the distances between them. Strabo, the Greek geographer, and Polybius, the Arcadian historian, also write extensively on the Via.

It was the Roman consul Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus who...
constructed the Via Domitia in 118 BC, around the time that the first Roman colony in Gaul, Colonia Narbo Martius (Narbonne), was founded. Linked to the Via Aurelia – one of the main road networks in Italy – the Via Domitia crossed the Alps at the Montgenèvre Pass near Briançon, hugged the valley of the Durance through Provence, crossing the Rhône by wooden bridge at Beaucaire before passing through Nîmes (Nemausus) and pursuing the coastal plain southwards along the Gulf of Lion.

At Narbonne, it met the Via Aquitania, which led off to the west towards the Atlantic coast. After passing the ruins of the oppidum of Château-Roussillon/Ruscino, near modern Perpignan, the Via peels off further south at, or in the vicinity of, Eline in two different directions, although the exact location of the road is in places confusing to trace and experts are often in disagreement about its exact course.

The eastern route follows the Mediterranean coast down via Port-Vendres (Portus Veneris), a former Massaliot trading post or comptoir established by the Phocaeans, the Greeks from Asia Minor who established Massalia (Marseille) around 600 BC and set up similar outposts along the western Mediterranean; the alternative route crosses into today’s (Spanish) Catalonia by the inland pass of Le Perthus via Le Boulou.

During the 600 years of its existence, the Roman Empire created an impressive, network of roads stretching 62,000 miles (100,000km) across Europe, Asia and North Africa, and the Via Domitia was one of the most important. Engineered largely by the army with the help of local labour, the road marked the conquest of southern Gaul, running some 348 miles (560km) from the Alps to the Pyrenees, complete with its own system of hostelries and relay points – mansiones or statio-nes – where chariot wheels could be repaired, horses fed or changed and travellers provided with food, drink and accommodation, and where the cursus publicus, the state-run courier and transport service of the Roman Empire operated.

Built originally for military purposes to protect the new Roman colonies in the region and in Iberia (Spain and Portugal), the Via Domitia became a major route for trade, commerce and communication, allowing the distribution of agricultural land to Roman colonists and the development of new towns and settlements – and creating new local economies – all along the highway.

The Via is built largely on a base of beaten earth, gravel or pebble-work, running absolutely straight and resembling a track in appearance, though there are stretches of rutted, cobbled road (4). The highway owes its relatively good state of preservation to the fact that it was in use until the Middle Ages. Sections of the original road today often lie under or closely parallel to modern motorways, which – along with natural factors down the ages such as erosion, flooding or silting – means that traces of the original Via are sometimes difficult to discern or lost to archaeologists.

Some of the best-preserved sections of the Via Domitia are to be
found in the Languedoc-Roussillon region, from Beaucaire on the Rhône to today’s Spanish border, where surviving stretches of the road pop up all the time. At intervals along the route the Romans placed two-metre-tall milestones engraved with the name of the Roman emperor known as **bornes milliaires**. Three fine examples of these gaunt monoliths (1) – nicknamed ‘Caesar’s Columns’ – can be seen 1.2 miles (2km) to the west of Beaucaire, near the Mas des Tourelles, a Gallo-Roman villa and museum. Along the entire Via, archaeologists have come across more than 90 of these milestones, which are often on display in local museums or parks.

Reaching Nîmes, the Via enters through the Porte d’Auguste (2), with its two central arches reserved for chariots and the military and two smaller side passageways for pedestrians, continuing down along today’s Rue Nationale before making a sharp left turn to exit at the Porte de France, near the Roman amphitheatre.

In June 2011 a new museum opened at one of the most spectacular Via Domitia sites: the Oppidum of Ambrussum at Villetelle, near Lunel, north-east of Montpellier. It is at Ambrussum that the one remaining arch of an impressive 11-span Roman bridge (3) straddling the River Vidourle romantically stands sentinel. The bridge was still usable in the Middle Ages, with all its original arches in place, but when it was painted by Gustave Courbet in 1857, only two arches remained extant, and one of those was lost in serious flooding in the area in 1933.

On the hillside at Ambrussum (Ambroix), an impressive 1,968ft (600m) paved stretch of the Via, dramatically indented with deep chariot ruts, can be followed up to the scattered ruins of the Gallo-Roman settlement’s fortress, ramparts and related habitations, while down by the riverside near the new museum, the foundations of urban buildings and accommodation for travellers spread across low-lying fields, a sort of Roman service or way station. Set an archaeological park, the modernistic museum at the entrance to the site houses artefacts from 40 years of excavations at Ambrussum, with interactive displays and information boards.

Located south of Montpellier at Pinet, a deep cut-out section of the Via Domitia illustrates the road building techniques used by the Romans, in the different layers of stones, rocks and pebbles that lay under the paving slabs; here one can walk unhindered along the Via for five miles (8km), while at Loupian, on a hillside overlooking the Thau Basin, there is an impressive Roman villa where mosaics and murals have been unearthed.

Nearer Béziers (Baeterrae), one of the most splendid segmental arch Roman bridges along the Via crosses the River Hérault at Saint-Thibéry (6), while the elegant nine-arched 12th-century Pont Vieux traversing the River Orb at Béziers itself has been built on the infrastructure of an earlier Roman construction which originally bore the Via Domitia; up in the old town archaeologists have yet to fully excavate the remains of a modest Roman amphitheatre.

At Narbonne (Narbo), capital of Gallia Narbonensis, the first significant Roman territory outside Italy, whose boundaries stretched from the Mediterranean to the Alps, the Via Domitia enters through the Place du Forum, with its scattered Roman columns, before proceeding down the Rue Droite (cardo maximus) to the Place de l’Hôtel de Ville, where in 1997 road workers accidentally uncovered a heavily rutted section of the Via, now exposed to public view.

The Archbishop’s Palace houses...
the Archaeological Museum, with its fabulous collection of 1st-century BC Roman paintings (7, 8, 10) discovered on a local villa site. Further up the street is Narbonne’s main surviving Roman attraction – the Horreum (9), an impressive underground granary with storage chambers set off a dark passageway. A Regional Archaeological Museum, drawing on material currently in the Louvre, is scheduled to open here in 2015. The Via moves south out of Narbonne over the Pont des Marchands, which crosses the Canal de la Robine, a branch of the River Aude, in Pont Vecchio style, with shops and buildings on a street astride one of the last of the seven original arches of a Roman bridge.

High up in a mountain pass in the eastern Pyrenees, a team of French and Spanish archaeologists has excavated the scant foundations of a once-mighty edifice – the crumbling remnants of the Trophée de Pompée, a triumphal monument erected to mark the final victory of the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey) over an uprising in Hispania (Iberia, today’s Spain and Portugal) in the year 71 BC. The monument originally consisted of two triumphal pillars and an arch of 98ft by 49ft (30 x 15 metres) straddling the point in the Col de Panissars near today’s Franco-Spanish border town of Le Perthus. Here, at Summa Pyrenaem, the Via Domitia is 16ft (5 metres) wide and forms a junction with the Via Augusta to continue its way towards Cadiz, possible site of the mythical Pillars of Hercules, 932 miles (1,500km) away in the very south of Spain.

On the Trophée were engraved the names of 876 towns in Hispania where the Iberian rebellion was crushed by Pompey, but all that remains today is the base of the monument in the form of solid slabs of stone on a hillside commanding panoramic views over the Pyrenees into Spain. The original monument is believed by archaeologists to have been an impressive 131ft (40 metre) tower-like construction astride the Via, surmounted by a statue of Pompey, according to Pliny, similar to the Trophée des Alpes erected to the glory of Augustus at La Turbie, above the Bay of Monaco. At the Col de Panissars site, 1083ft (330 metres) above sea level, where excavations started in the 1980s, one can clearly see the junction of the two Roman roads hewn out of the rock, with the tracks of carts incised into the rocky highway in Roman times still clearly visible (11).

The Roman Via and the remains of the Trophée are located at what, in antiquity, used to be the most important pass across the Pyrenees, amid the romantic ruins of the (much later) 11th-century Priory of Sainte Marie, a Benedictine monastery and stopover for pilgrims on the way to Santiago de Compostela. At the nearby village of Les Cluses, the scant remains of two Roman forts can be made out in the mountain gorge, controlling traffic along the Via, complete with portorium, a sort of gated customs post, where taxes were imposed on goods in transit. Artefacts from the Col de Panissars site are displayed in exhibition rooms in the nearby Fort de Bellegarde, an impressive hilltop fortification built in the 17th century by Vauban, Louis XIV’s master military engineer.

Far below, the modern A9 autoroute speeds south across the border from France into Spain, running parallel to the Via Domitia – as it does virtually all the way from Nîmes – still a major international traffic artery.

Site archéologique d’Ambrussum, Chemin d’Ambrussum, 34400 Villetele (053 4 67 02 22 33; www.ambrussum.fr)
The fascination of life everlasting
The National Museum of Scotland opened its redesigned Ancient Egyptian display last summer. The museum has collaborated with the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden to present a new temporary exhibition on the rituals surrounding mummification. Murray Eiland investigates.

The National Museum of Scotland’s artistically brilliant display of important anthropoid coffins begins with that of the estate overseer Khnumhotep, son of Nebtu. This is one of the earliest sarcophagi made for a senior provincial official (2). It was recovered from Deir Riefeh in Middle Egypt in 1907. The outer case was also recovered at the time, but it was too degraded to preserve. It is unfortunate that more detailed records were not kept, though, as the dating would be more exact if we knew more about the outer coffin. Dating to the 12th Dynasty (late 19th and early 18th century BC) and excavated by the great Egyptologist WM Flinders Petrie, it might be easy to overlook this coffin when compared to later, more elaborately decorated examples. Part of reason is that, over time, sarcophagi became stand-alone objects and outer cases were no longer used. Burial practices, once reserved for members of the royal family, were increasingly appropriated by other social groups, demanding maximum opulence at low cost. This is illustrated by the coffin of the Theban priest Amenhotep (1), on loan from Leiden’s Museum of Antiquities.

The National Museum of Scotland was formed by an Act of Parliament in 1985 and was largely the result of the merger of the National Museum of Antiquities Scotland and the Royal Scottish Museum (RSM). Two major Egyptologists, Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) and Cyril Aldred (1914-1991), assembled the collection, but many fine exhibits can be traced back to the work of Alexander Rhind (1833-1863), a lawyer from Caithness who is now recognised as a pioneer in field archaeology. Rhind died at the early age of 29 but not before publishing his well-illustrated book Thebes: Its Tombs and Their Tenants Ancient and Present, in which he outlines his methods of digging and recording finds. For three winters (from 1836 until his death) he was in Luxor partially for reasons of ill health – he suffered from pulmonary disease – but nevertheless he was overseeing excavations all the while. Rhind recovered three or four coffins from a cemetery in the district of El-Khoka in Thebes and also burial goods from a tomb, now lost, that is known today as ‘Rhind’s Tomb’. He quickly established himself as an expert in Egyptian antiquities and as a collector. One of his acquisitions, the so-called Rhind Papyrus (also known as the Ahmes Papyrus, after its Egyptian scribe), which he bought in 1858, was sold to the British Museum after his death. Both this and the similar Egyptian Mathematical Leather Roll, purchased in the market at Luxor, may have come from the Ramesseum. When decoded they show that the Egyptians had computed the value of \( \pi \) as 3.1605 long before Archimedes. This is now known to have a margin of error of less than one percent. Another of Rhind’s acquisitions was a unique coffin designed to hold the mummies of two boys, Petamun and Penhorpabik (9). On the lid the figures are drawn in a funerary pose, holding the crook and flail of Osiris. Inside are two images of the sky god Nut (who is usually depicted alone). It is thought to date to the last quarter of the 2nd century.

At the time the Egyptian authorities realised the pull antiquities had on Westerners. No better example can be found than the ‘discovery’ of a large nest of coffins by HRH Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) during his visit to Luxor. It is thought that a large number of coffins were planted in advance by the local authorities in a tomb that was known to be on the royal visitor’s itinerary. Some 30 sarcophagi were ‘discovered’, 20 of which were distributed to museums.

While the dispersal of antiquities in this way is now regarded as a relic of the colonial past, the Egyptian authorities were no doubt trying to encourage tourism by exporting objects that were thought to be of no particular importance. But in some cases they were wrong: one, that went to the RSM, is what appears to be the only intact ‘royal’ burial group on display outside Egypt.

The group was the result of a £100 payment. In 1908 Petrie was excavating the northern part of Western Thebes (usually known as Qurna; modern El Khor). The coffins of King Kamose and Queen Amhotep were recovered nearby. Petrie recovered the remains of mother and child, along with a range of lavish grave goods. Although these were buried in a simple pit, the assemblage included the largest amount of gold that had ever left Egypt. Petrie offered the group to the RSM because he had pledged to keep the group together. The gold was by weight valued at £30 at the time, so it had to go to a museum that had a night watchman.

While the evidence is far from clear, there are indications that the occupants were not from Egypt, although the coffins were locally made.

In style the coffin is of a distinctive rishi decoration developed in Thebes during the 17th century to mid-16th century BC (3). This style of decoration is associated with Thebes. Rishi is Arabic for ‘feathered’; this refers to the decoration on the outside of the coffin. It had a religious significance, as the deceased could then be seen as a human-headed ba-bird (7) representing the released soul. Osiris (who was of course resurrected) can also be represented in the protective embrace of winged Isis. Feathered decoration would remain the royal standard until at least the reign of Pasebkhanut I, who died in about 1000 BC. For the majority of the population coffins of this type went out of fashion by the reign of Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC).

The so-called ‘Querna Queen’ was only about 150cm tall, but her coffin was much larger and the burial was accompanied by distinctive Keramare pottery, suggesting a link with the kingdom of Kush. After examining the woman’s skull, Petrie suggested that she was not from Egypt. Analysis of carbon and nitrogen isotopes in her skeleton.

During and after the 18th Dynasty, the mummy mask reappears as an independent element of anthropoid coffins.
suggest that she falls somewhere between Egyptian and Nubian populations. It was likely that she originated in Nubia, then moved to Egypt while young.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the coffin of Tairtsekher, the daughter of Irtnefret (4). The coffin was purchased by the RSM in 1884, which was only three years after the tomb of Sennedjem was discovered at Deir el-Medina. It is likely that this sarcophagus was from that site and part of a family group, perhaps of the craftsman Sennedjem. It dates to a narrow period between the reigns of Horemheb (1320-1291) and Rameses II (1279-1212). During this period there was a brief flowering of naturalistic decoration on coffin lids. In this example, the model appears to be taken from life and she is not in a burial pose. The girl is dressed in white linen and wears a bracelet and wristlet on each arm.

Perhaps the most typical sarcophagus of ancient Egypt was the yellow coffin. The colour clearly imitates gold. Coffins of this type first appear in the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1353 BC), and the style remained in use until the 22nd Dynasty, although there is a trend towards growing complexity and elaboration.

During the Middle Kingdom, anthropoid coffins were generally used instead of mummy masks and, by the 17th Dynasty, a burial would usually involve the use of a mask or an anthropoid coffin. During the 18th Dynasty, the mummy mask reappears as an independent element of anthropoid coffins. Over time both the hands and arms began to be incorporated. Good examples of this style include the coffin of a chantress of Amun, Tjentweretheqau called Tamut (5) and the mummy cartonnage of the Priest Nehemsumut (9).

Interestingly, and somewhat counter-intuitively, burials of the late period (6th to 1st centuries BC) are not well understood. Many from this period have been disturbed, and there have been hardly any scientifically excavated assemblages. Of these, hardly any contain royal names and none can be dated via other monuments.

There seems to be little change in form from the Saite Period (6th century BC) to the 30th Dynasty (4th century BC). There is a move away from previous decorative patterns, and a movement of the collar downwards. Faces also tend to become larger. Under Roman rule there was a definitive break with the past – mummies were elaborately wrapped, but instead of a relatively stylised mask, the coffins bear a realistic portrait of the deceased.

No other museum presents such a systematic display of ancient Egyptian coffins, and spotlit against a dark background, they are close enough together for easy comparison.

Recently the National Museum of Scotland has teamed up with the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden to create a spellbinding exhibition called Fascinating Mummies, which opened in February and provides a visual introduction to the afterlife. Together, the new display and exhibition make a trip to Edinburgh a must for all lovers of ancient Egypt.
Selling well in New York

Dr Jerome M Eisenberg reports on an explosive art market that produced record prices at Sotheby’s and Christie’s antiquities auctions in December

_Leda and the Swan really takes off at Sotheby’s_

The 8 December sale of Sotheby’s New York featured a recently rediscovered 2nd-century AD Roman marble group of Leda and Zeus in the guise of a swan (1), h. 135.2cm sold in Rome by Colon Morison (1732-1810) to Sir Thomas Dundas (1741-1820) of Aske Hall, later Lord Dundas, through his son Lawrence in 1788/89, thence by descent to the present owner of Aske Hall, the 3rd Marquess of Zetland. First published in 1833, it is the finest and most complete of the several versions known at present with the original head and right arm still attached and much of the left arm and drapery remaining. The estimate of $2 million to $3 million meant nothing to two determined bidders who drove the price up to an astounding $19,122,500 (£12,179,161). In the end it went to an anonymous telephone bidder, with an on-line participant (up to $16,500,000) as one of the four active under-bidders.

A striking Roman marble head of Zeus Ammon (2), circa AD120-160, h. 48.2cm recorded as being on the art market in Rome in 1931, from the collection of the philanthropist and style icon Dodie Rosekrans, estimated at $800,000-1,200,000, sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a surprising $3,554,500. The museum had briefly exhibited it in 2007/08.

A marble head of a bearded Hellenistic prince (3), 1st century BC/AD, h. 45.7cm, sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, on 20 May 1982 for just $22,000. Published in RRR Smith’s _Hellenistic Royal Portraits_ and now estimated at $200,000-300,000 it sold for a stunning $602,500 to an American collector.

Another Roman marble head of Zeus (4), AD150-189, h. 27cm, that appeared in Harvard’s _Ancient Art in American Private Collections_ in 1954/55, brought a telephone bid of $206,500, well over the $40,000-60,000 estimate. From the collection of Giuseppe, Marchese Rondinini

In the saleroom sotheby’s

Lot 16: Roman marble group, Leda and the Swan  Lot 13: Roman marble head of Zeus  Lot 12: Roman marble head of Zeus Ammon  Lot 8: Marble Cycladic figure of a goddess  Lot 35: Egyptian basalt head of a king  Lot 23: Marble head of a Hellenistic prince
(1725-1801), a Roman marble head of Antonia the Younger (5), circa AD50, h. with bust (not belonging) 33cm, estimate $80,000-120,000, brought $194,500 from a telephone bidder.

A Roman marble torso (6), 1st-2nd century AD, after a mid-5th century BC work by Polykleitos, h. 68cm, from an Argentinian collection, was also estimated at $80,000-120,000 and brought the same $194,500 from another telephone bidder.

A Roman marble, strigillated sarcophagus with three Dionysiac panels (7), 3rd century AD, l. 196.8cm, from the collection of Charles T Barney (1851-1907), was sold at Christie's East, New York, on 19 June 1985 for a mere $3300. Now bearing an estimate of $50,000-80,000, it went for a strong $206,500 to the telephone bidder who bought the marble torso.

A fine Cycladic idol of the early Spedos type (8), circa 2600-2500BC, l. 27cm, acquired by Allan D Emil in 1963 from KJ Hewett and exhibited in the Katonah Museum's Ancient Art of the Cyclades in 2006 (published in Minerva, vol. 17 (2006), p. 11, fig. 8), sold to an American telephone-bidder for $362,500, within the estimated $300,000-500,000.

An elegant Greek gold diadem (9), 4th century BC, l. 34.6cm, was first shown in the Exhibition of Greek Art in Edinburgh in 1943 and in London in 1946. The estimate of $60,000-90,000 did not deter the buyer of the torso and the sarcophagus from acquiring it for $218,500. He also paid a stunning $146,500 for a 25.4cm Attic red-figure lekythos by the Cartellino Painter (10) that bore an estimate of just $20,000-30,000. It depicted a seated youth reading from a scroll inscribed ‘I sing of Hermes...’ and had been well published by Sir John Beazley and others.

The three best Egyptian sculptures were bought by just one on-line bidder, a private collector. A black basalt head of Tuthmosis III (circa 1479-1426BC) from early in his reign (11) 19.7cm, from the Dodie Rosekrans collection, originally from the collection of the movie director Rex Ingram (1893-1950), sold at Sotheby's, New York, 23 June 1989, for $88,000. Estimated now at only $150,000-250,000, it brought in a healthy $602,500.

An early Ptolemaic head of a king (12), circa 304-200BC, h. 26cm, also from Rex Ingram and Dodie Rosekrans, brought $30,800 at Sotheby Parke Bernet on 16 May 1980. Estimated at $100,000-150,000, it reached $392,500. Finally, an Egyptian 26th Dynasty greywacke bust of a man (13) from the reign of Psamtik I (664-610 BC), h. 26.1cm, acquired by Jack Josephson from CD Kelekian in 1969, estimated at $150,000-250,000, realised $206,500.

This very successful sale of just 69 lots realised $27,588,375 (£17,571,094), with 84.1% of the lots sold by number and 99.6% sold by value (due to Leda and the Swan). A total of 17 lots sold for $100,000 or more and no high-value lots were bought in. There was unusually active and successful telephone and on-line bidding.

• All prices quoted in these reports include the buyer’s premium.
Cleopatra Selene rules at Christie’s

A stunning Roman partial gilt-silver emblema of a young woman wearing an elephant-head headdress, attributed as Cleopatra Selene, daughter of Cleopatra VII and Mark Antony and queen of Mauretania (14) – late 1st century BC–early 1st century AD, h. 17.4cm – was the most successful object at Christie’s antiquities sale in New York on 7 December. A winning bid of $2,546,500 secured it for a European collector, comfortably within the estimate of $2,000,000-3,000,000. A lion, lioness, scorpion and cobra are depicted on her himation, relating it to the emblema of a young woman on a Boscoreale bowl also now attributed as Cleopatra Selene and formerly as Cleopatra VII.

The same collector acquired an East Greek gilt-silver roundel of an eagle in high relief gripping the winged thunderbolt of Zeus (15) 3rd-1st century BC, diameter 11.1cm, another emblema, estimate $200,000-300,000, for a resounding $662,500. A finely engraved depiction of a galloping Thracian horseman on a gilt-silver stemless kylix (16), late 5th century BC, diameter 13.6cm excluding handles, estimated at $900,000-1,200,000, was won by another European collector for $1,022,500.

A monumental headless Roman bronze figure of an emperor (17), late 2nd-early 3rd century AD, h. 182.9cm, from a 1960s Belgian collection, was acquired by John W Kluge from Royal-Athena Galleries in 1988. Now, sold by his estate to benefit his alma mater, Columbia University, it went to yet another European collector, bidding by phone for $1,426,500, well beyond its estimate of $800,000-1,200,000. An elegant bronze figure attributed to Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus (18), circa early 1st century BC, brought $187,000 when sold at Sotheby’s New York on 17 December 1992. Now estimated at just $250,000-350,000, it went to a New York collector for $362,500. A large (l. 38.1cm) Roman bronze reclining nymph holding a jar (19), also from the Kluge estate and exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1996, estimate $150,000-250,000, brought a telephone bid of $218,500. The forepart of a lively Roman bronze triton emerging from a tubular fitting (20), probably a ship fitting, circa 2nd century AD, l. 29.8cm, was with Eli Borowski, Basel, in the late 1960s. Estimated at $180,000-220,000, another telephone bidder won it for $170,500.

A monumental Apulian volute krater (h. 100.3cm) by the Virginia Exhibition Painter (21), circa 330-300BC, from the Kluge estate, shot far beyond its surprisingly low estimate of $30,000-50,000 to achieve $158,500 from a telephone bidder.

A Roman marble statue of Silenus attempting to fill his (missing) wine-cup (22), 1st century AD, h. 113cm, acquired by an Austrian collector in the 1960s, estimate $200,000-300,000, was sold for $314,500 to yet another European telephone bidder.

An American institution, as an absentee bidder, purchased a Roman marble portrait bust of the emperor Septimius Severus (r. AD193-211) (23), h. 38.1cm, for $266,500, even though the hair, the forehead, and
part of the beard were restored; they were forewarned by publication in the catalogue of the missing parts and by the estimate of only $60,000-80,000. It had sold at Sotheby's New York on 8 December 1995 for $46,000.

A Roman marble head of Agrippina Minor (or the Younger), wife of Claudius and mother of Nero (24), h. 36.8cm, first sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet on 9 December 1981 for $12,100; then at Sotheby's New York on 17 December 1996 for $34,500, both times as the Empress Livia. Now reattributed and estimated at $120,000-180,000, it sold to a telephone bidder for $242,500. Another Roman marble head, this time of the sun god Sol (25), h. 38.7cm, from a late 19th century Roman collection, then a French collection circa 1900, estimated at $150,000-250,000 sold by telephone for $182,500.

A very large (57.2cm) squatting Egyptian lion-headed goddess wadjet on a papyrus umbel platform supported by a small kneeling male figure with arms upraised, perhaps Heh, the god of eternity who supports the heavens (26), also from the John W Kluge estate, previously in a French collection in the 1970s-early 1980s or earlier, was acquired by Mr Kluge from Royal-Athena Galleries in 1990. This, the cover piece of the sale, estimated at $500,000-700,000, was purchased by a North American collector for $578,500. An Egyptian obsidian alabastron of the 18th-20th Dynasty (27), h. 11.7cm, said to have been found in Lebanon before 1955, estimated at $150,000-250,000, was acquired by the buyer of the Roman bronze triton for $182,500. The same bidder also bought an Early Dynastic Egyptian hippopotamus ivory lion for $116,500. A powerful Hittite bronze bull with an undulating dewlap (28), circa 14th-13th century BC l. 16.2cm, first appeared with N. Koutoulakis prior to 1970, and was later in the Michael Steinhardt collection. Although it was estimated at $250,000-350,000, the European collector who acquired the two Greek and Roman phalerae, had no qualms about paying $602,500 for it. A Celtic gold torque with stylised scrolling palmettes (29), late 5th-early 4th century BC, l. 17.4cm, in the following same-day sale of ancient jewellery, from a South Bavarian collection, acquired before the early 1970s, shot up to a hefty $338,500, far beyond the estimate of $70,000-90,000, from a European client. Also in the jewellery sale, a Celtic gold bracelet (30), w. 14.2cm, of the same date and from the same collection, estimated at just $40,000-60,000, sold to the same bidder for a healthy $230,500. A very rare Celtic bronze mirror (31), 1st century BC/AD, h. 31.2cm, in the antiquities sale, acquired by a Dutch collector in the 1960s, was estimated inexplicably at only $25,000-35,000, but climbed to $170,500.

With 379 lots, the two sales brought in $14,868,413, with just 70% sold by number of lots and only 62% by value, due primarily to the failure of the two major pieces, an Egyptian red jasper head of a pharaoh and a Roman basanite statue of an Egyptian queen. An unusually large number of pieces, 26 in all, surpassed $100,000.
Dr Jerome M Eisenberg reports on an explosive art market that produced record prices at Sotheby’s and Christie’s antiquities auctions in December

**Leda and the Swan really takes off at Sotheby’s**

The 8 December sale of Sotheby’s New York featured a recently rediscovered 2nd-century AD Roman marble group of Leda and Zeus in the guise of a swan (1), h. 135.2cm sold in Rome by Colon Morison (1732-1810) to Sir Thomas Dundas (1741-1820) of Aske Hall, later Lord Dundas, through his son Lawrence in 1788/89, thence by descent to the present owner of Aske Hall, the 3rd Marquess of Zetland. First published in 1833, it is the finest and most complete of the several versions known at present with the original head and right arm still attached and much of the left arm and drapery remaining. The estimate of $2 million to $3 million meant nothing to two determined bidders who drove the price up to an astounding $19,122,500 (£12,179,161). In the end it went to an anonymous telephone bidder, with an on-line participant (up to $16,500,000) as one of the four active under-bidders.

A striking Roman marble head of Zeus Ammon (2), circa AD120-160, h. 48.2cm recorded as being on the art market in Rome in 1931, from the collection of the philanthropist and style icon Dodie Rosekrans, estimated at $800,000-1,200,000, sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a surprising $3,554,500. The museum had briefly exhibited it in 2007/08.

A marble head of a bearded Hellenistic prince (3), 1st century BC/AD, h. 45.7cm, sold at Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, on 20 May 1982 for just $22,000. Published in RRR Smith’s *Hellenistic Royal Portraits* and now estimated at $200,000-300,000 it sold for a stunning $602,500 to an American collector.

Another Roman marble head of Zeus (4), AD150-189, h. 27cm, that appeared in Harvard’s *Ancient Art in American Private Collections* in 1954/55, brought a telephone bid of $206,500, well over the $40,000-60,000 estimate. From the collection of Giuseppe, Marchese Rondinini
The Copan Sculpture Museum: Ancient Maya in Stucco and Stone
Barbara W Fash
Peabody Museum Press, 2011
216pp, 198 colour illustrations, 34 line drawings, 35 half-tones, 2 maps
Paperback, £25.95

With the dawn of the year 2012, there has been renewed interest in the ancient Maya. To some degree this draws upon a deep-seated public perception that the Maya were peaceful calculators. Archaeology presents a more complicated picture. While the accuracy of the Mayan calendar is well known, it is a myth that they were peaceful. And while much of their art may appear to be strange or even extra-terrestrial at first, they follow long-standing artistic conventions, just as other cultures do. A good place to start a journey of discovery is presented in the book by Barbara Fash. Copan is located in western Honduras, and was a lavish city of the Classic Maya period of the 5th to 9th centuries AD. It was located in the extreme south-east of the Mayan cultural zone, and was surrounded by non-Mayan peoples. However, the art of the city reflects the elite tastes of the ruling class. Although known to colonial authorities, the city received detailed attention from European explorers in the 19th century. In the 20th century the site was explored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, and later the Carnegie Institution played a role in both excavation and restoration. Copan was made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1980, and it has been the subject of special attention by foreign and Honduran funding. No better example of a successful project can be found than the Copan Sculpture Museum, which opened on 3 August 1996. This museum preserves otherwise delicate sculptures as well as presenting reconstructions. The most impressive reconstruction is the so-called Rosalila (rose-lilac). This Early Classic period temple commemorated Copan’s 10th ruler, called Moon Jaguar, who ruled from 533 to 578.

The first temple was buried beneath later structures, and only accessible via tunnels. The reconstructed structure has been meticulously researched so that the colours are correct. When the colours are revealed, the otherwise confusing welter of designs resolve. The temple represents a place of creation with water, which gives rise to maize. In the sky above are two-headed dragons, and the lower parts of the temple bear representations of the sun god. The lowermost register bears representations of hybrid quetzals and macaws. This is likely a reference to the founder of the Copan dynasty, K’iminich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ (Sun-faced Green/New/First Quetzal Macaw).

Reading Maya Art
Andrea Stone and Marc Zender
Thames & Hudson
248pp, 335 line and black and white illustrations
Hardback, £19.95

Ancient Mayan art is difficult to interpret, as there is a rather diffuse line between art and their distinctive writing system. During the transition between the Late Pre-Classic and Early Classic periods in about AD 200, Maya writing took on calculiform or pebble-like shapes. When sculpted the shapes could be rendered in three dimensions. Both text and image can interact, as some logographs appear as abstract as the result of scribal standardisation over time. The result is that logographs can be embedded into pictorial art, although syllabographs seem to have been set apart.

The Maya also used visual metaphors that are totally different from what they represent. For example, water can be represented by a flowering plant (a water lily) and rain could be represented by a shell. In both of these cases the artistic conventions can come together in a way that can be easily understood. A good example is presented by the so-called Resurrection Plate, which shows the birth of maize from the earth: ‘The earth, itself, is represented as a turtle carapace, aptly symbolising the earth as a flat plate surrounded by the primordial sea. The water on which the turtle floats is shown under the turtle’s belly as a water lily, with flower to the left and pad to the right. Below this is a dotted water scroll – a shell like device also signifying water – and the aforementioned water stacks symbol for rain’ (p23). There can be other metaphorical allusions that are more difficult to understand. The Resurrection Plate also has a maize plant emerging from the back of the turtle. The seed of the plant is represented as a scull. The emergence of plants from bones is a common one in Maya art; a number of Mayan languages can metaphorically refer to seeds as bones. A smoking torch represents sprouting maize. The bundle of sticks and smoke may, with an artistic eye, be similar to a stalk and sprouting leaves. There may also be a mythological background that would make this symbol more meaningful.

The book is arranged to make it a good read from cover to cover, as well as to facilitate easy reference. The format of the majority of the book presents drawings of particular glyphs (on the upper right corner of the page). The other side shows the glyph in action, in several cases marked in a separate colour. Many glyphs are cross-referenced, as the themes are interlinked. A pithy text draws readers into a deeper appreciation of the background.

Breaking the Maya Code
Michel D Coe
Thames and Hudson, 2012
304pp, 113 black and white illustrations
Paperback, £14.95

At first sight Breaking the Maya Code may appear to be a textbook of little interest to a general reader. This is a happy misapprehension, as it is a surprising page-turner. After a potted introduction to writing systems, it gets cracking with a story that is billed in the book as one of the greatest intellectual...
The reconstruction of the archaeological and historical pasts of ancient European societies has often been tainted by modern nationalistic conceits. Christopher Krebs, has undertaken a correction. The appropriation of Tacitus' Germania as an adjunct to the construction of a German national identity was not merely the work of a handful of National Socialists in the 1920s and 1930s but a long running process that began with the rediscovery of the minor works of Tacitus in the first half of the 15th century and continued through the Renaissance and into the modern era. Krebs explains how the ancient Roman work, which, with its list of tribes appended to a description of geography, customs and mores and reads like an intelligence briefing prepared for the Flavian bureaucracy, was twisted by its future readers into something more sinister.

The author has, in fact, written three works, any one of which is deserving of fuller exposition. He first explains what is known about Cornelius Tacitus and his literary career. This is the shortest part of the work. Krebs then takes up in exquisite detail the re-emergence of Tacitus' minor works, including the Germania during the Renaissance. Though an account of researches by Italian humanist manuscript collectors in old monastic libraries may not seem a promising subject, the characters involved are sufficiently colorful and dubious to make the tale seem like a hard-boiled detective story.

Krebs thus opens his narrative with a scene that could come straight from any Indiana Jones movie. Towards the end of World War II, SS agents raid and ransack the villa of an Italian count in a desperate bid to seize the 15th-century Codex Aesinas, containing the surviving manuscript of Tacitus' work on the Germanic tribes outside the Empire. In a similar vein, Krebs examines in depth the rediscovery of Tacitus in the light of the larger efforts of the Italian humanists of the 15th century.

Far from being ivory tower academics, one gets the sense that the manuscript hunters of that era, men like Petrarch, Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolo Niccolini were not so much cloistered academics, but rather men of action, quite willing to resort to dubious methods in their frantic pillaging of European monastic libraries for manuscript copies of Classical works. The bulk of Krebs' work, however, consists of German efforts to appropriate Tacitus in the service of creating a national identity. While Krebs' interest is primarily literary, and the history of ideas, these chapters could benefit from an expansion to consider both some of the other academic endeavours being carried on at the same time in archaeology, for example, and from comparison to some of the other national identity rationalisations going on elsewhere in Europe.

Krebs thus carefully traces the use of the Germania, first as a means by which Italian Renaissance thinkers, like Piccolomini, conflated the existing population of the northern part of the Holy Roman Empire with the population that existed in classical times in the same region. Whatever might actually have occurred during the migrations, for the humanist thinkers of the era, it was highly convenient to see this group as a unified, monolithic population with a continuous line of descent. This was an effort to try to rouse the Holy Roman Empire to a reaction against the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. Subsequent events would take a radically different turn.

German scholars, beginning in the 1500s and working forward into the 1700s took the idea planted by Piccolomini, of a Germanic identity, very much to heart in an era which found the Germanic ethnic group fractured into many states. From this political situation, which was viewed as a decadent decline from a glorious Classical past an ideological concept of the German nation arose. On the whole, A Most Dangerous Book is both a most informative book and an ideological concept of the German nation.