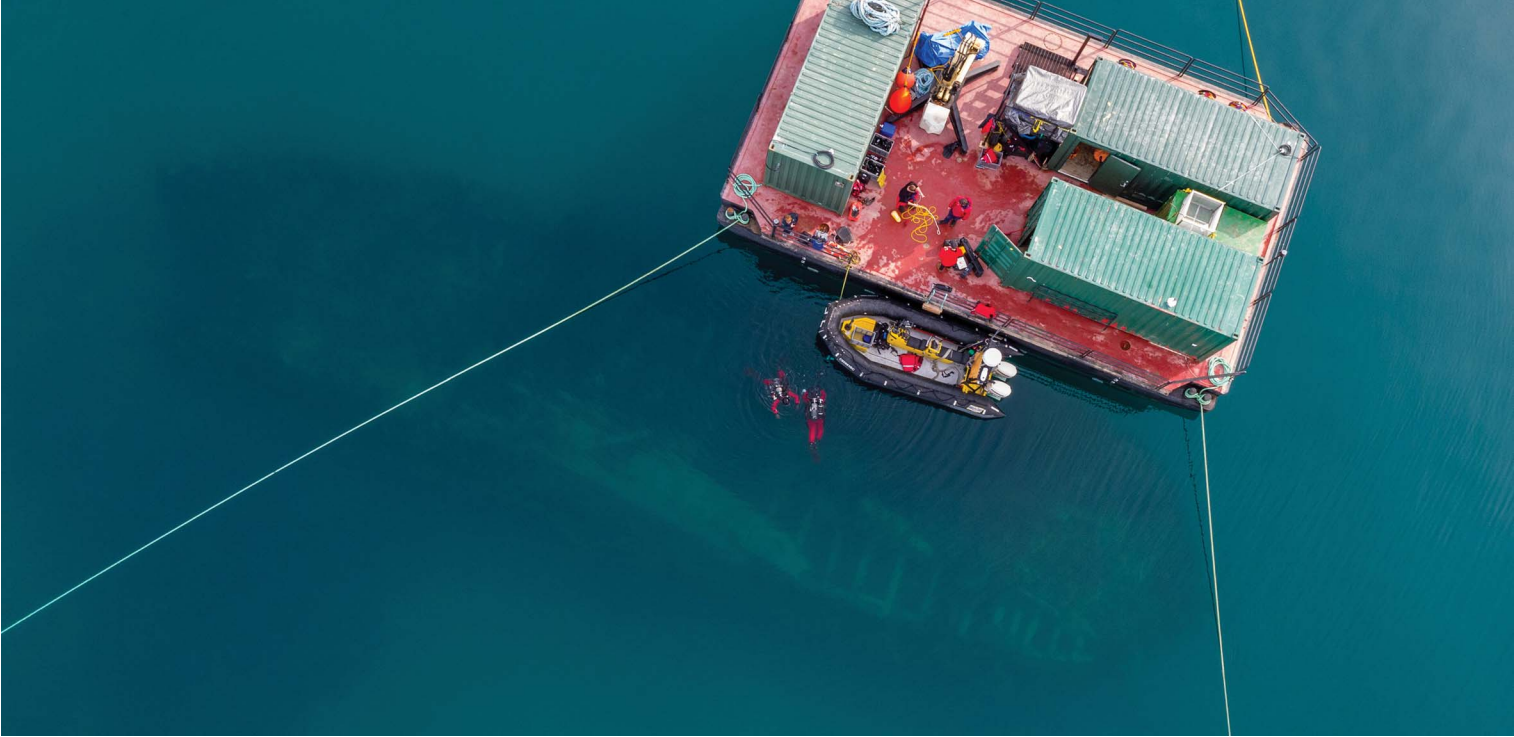




Frontispiece 1. A mosque of the mid twelfth to mid thirteenth centuries AD under excavation in the terraced landscape surrounding Harlaa, Ethiopia. Located at 1700m asl in the Afar region (midway between modern Addis Ababa and the Red Sea), Harlaa was a significant centre of population, production and trade from the mid first to mid second millennia AD. The site's importance is reflected in the archaeological evidence for its extensive exchange networks reaching into North and sub-Saharan Africa, across the Middle East and Indian Ocean, and as far as China. Investigations underway since 2015 have identified substantial and varied evidence for medieval Islamic communities at the site, including Arabic inscriptions and burials, and the site appears to have played an important role in the Islamisation of the region. Photograph © Timothy Insoll.



Frontispiece 2. Drone photograph of a diving-support barge moored above the wreck of HMS Erebus in Nunavut, Canada. Over three weeks in 2019, the Parks Canada's Underwater Archaeology Team, working in collaboration with Inuit Heritage Trust, made 93 dives to map and photograph the wreck and to recover artefacts including a set of officer's epaulettes and personal possessions such as a lead seal stamp. HMS Erebus and HMS Terror set sail in 1845 from England under Sir John Franklin in search of the Northwest Passage. The wreck of the Erebus was located in 2014, and Terror in 2016. Both are now protected as National Historic Sites, the first to be managed cooperatively with Inuit in Nunavut. Photograph © Parks Canada's Underwater Archaeology Team.



EDITORIAL

Empty tombs

In 181 BC, a peasant digging on the Janiculum Hill in Rome came across two stone chests. An inscription on the first chest declared itself to be the tomb of Numa—the second king of Rome—while the other was labelled as a library of his books. Upon opening, the king's coffin was found to be empty, but the book chest contained seven tomes in Latin dealing with religious law, and seven in Greek on Pythagorean philosophy. At the start of the second century BC, Rome was embarking on a period of military expansion into the Hellenistic world of the Eastern Mediterranean, and some, such as the austere Cato the Elder, saw the Greek way of life—from philosophising to eating gourmet foods and a penchant for nudity—as a fundamental threat to Roman identity. With the approval of the Senate, Numa's books were taken to the Comitium, the meeting place of Rome's popular assembly in the Forum, and duly burnt. The people were not to be trusted with such arcane and foreign knowledge; an example had to be set if the existing social order were to be maintained.

Over two millennia later, in 1899, the archaeologist Giacomo Boni was excavating in the area of the Comitium. He did not find the ashes of burnt books, but he did discover the so-called Lapis Niger, or Black Stone, a site of paramount if muddled mytho-historical significance. In one tradition it is the tomb of Numa's predecessor, Rome's first king, Romulus; in another, it is the spot where Romulus' adoptive father Faustulus was killed in battle; yet further traditions link the site to other figures associated with the earliest city. With such a remarkable find to hand, it is understandable that when Boni uncovered a rather unremarkable stone chest nearby containing a few shells and sherds of pottery, the discovery merited only a brief report before it was more or less forgotten. Indeed, there was a strong possibility that the chest and associated features were destroyed in the 1930s during the construction of a new set of steps leading up to the Curia or Senate House.

Over 80 years later, in 2019, the dismantling of the 1930s works led to a surprise. The stone chest had survived *in situ*, thanks to a brick chamber built to protect it before the steps had been installed (Figure 1). This time, however, the discovery—or rediscovery—has attracted much more attention. An initial reassessment of the stone chest, roughly the size and shape of a sarcophagus, and an associated cylindrical stone similar to the base of an altar, suggests that they correspond approximately with late sixth-century BC levels, and the location can now be recognised to be aligned with the Lapis Niger and in agreement with one of the traditions recounted in the ancient texts. As such, in late February, the Italian authorities announced the find to be an empty tomb, or cenotaph, for the celebration of the cult that had developed around Romulus within only a couple of centuries of his death, in the late eighth century BC. Such heroic founders were venerated at shrines in cities elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean, such as the heroon at Greek Paestum in southern Italy. None, however, founded a city destined to grow as powerful and influential as Rome. New

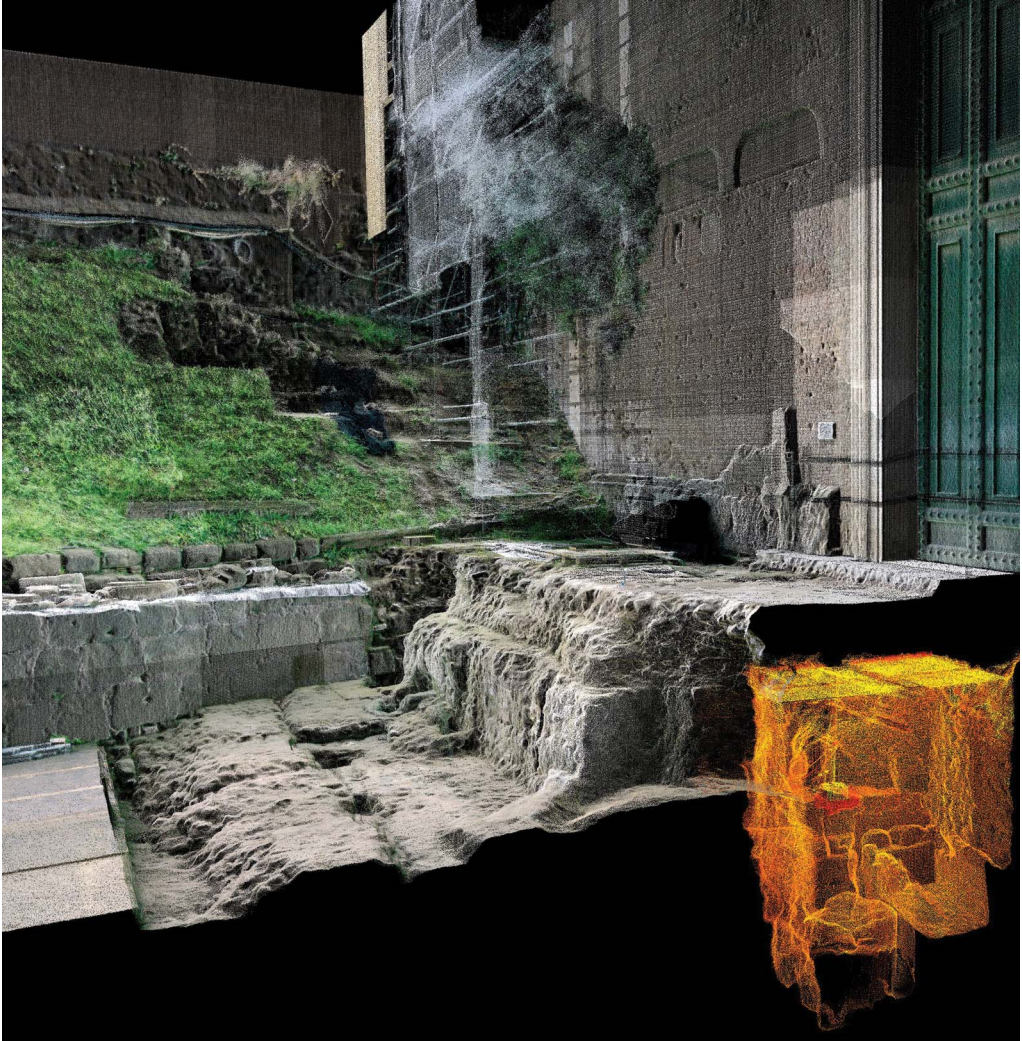


Figure 1. A 3D laser-scan image showing the relationship between the brick chamber built around the putative Tomb of Romulus (in orangelyellow) and the façade of the Curia Julia, or Senate House, following the dismantling of the steps built by Alfonso Bartoli in the 1930s. Image © Parco Archeologico del Colosseo.

excavations are now planned to establish the stratigraphic context of the putative tomb/cult shrine and to investigate its significance in more detail.

The figure of Romulus has always held a powerful allure for the inhabitants of his eponymous city. For example, both Dionysius and Plutarch describe how the ancient Romans maintained the hut of Romulus, repeatedly rebuilding it for at least seven centuries down to the age of Augustus. Archaeologists have long sought the location of this structure on the Palatine Hill, and the foundations of an Iron Age hut discovered in the 1940s are one possible contender. Since then, the name of Romulus has also been attached to the discovery of a late eighth-century BC wall around the foot of the Palatine, defining the limit of the first city,

and to an elaborate grotto discovered beneath the House of Augustus, said to be the site of the Lupercal, the cave where Romulus and his brother Remus were suckled by the she-wolf. In this way, the Roman Forum and the surrounding hills are part of a storied landscape where myth and history have been entangled from the outset, and where all archaeological finds are preceded by earlier narratives. The latest developments in the Forum echo the discovery of Numa's tomb and his chest of books in 181 BC. Two kings; two empty tombs. But the questions arising remain the same: why were the tombs empty? And what do these absences symbolise? Such questions are not confined to the Roman Forum.

Easter eggs

At this time of year, the symbolism of the empty tomb discovered by Mary Magdalene at Calvary is a potent one for Christians. In this biblical context, absence represents resurrection and, from an early date, eggs—symbolic of new life and fertility—have been associated with the story of Easter. Indeed, eggs have featured in the beliefs and rituals of many cultures and religions, long pre-dating Christianity.

Archaeologically, the discovery of chicken bone is relatively common, and finds of eggshell are far from unusual; a recent review of rural settlement in Roman Britain, for example, identified dozens of sites reporting fragments of eggshell.¹ Much less common, however, is the recovery of complete eggs—partly because of their fragility and partly because, well, you can't make an omelette without breaking them. It is therefore unsurprising that when complete eggs are found in the archaeological record, they tend to come from ritual or religious contexts. For example, developer-led excavations at the recently published Berryfields site in Buckinghamshire, discovered four intact chicken eggs deliberately deposited along with a variety of other items, including coins and leather shoes, in a waterlogged pit dated to the third century AD.² The precise significance of these rituals, and any specific symbolic meanings, may elude us. But the special preservation conditions of such watery places provide a valuable window onto what Linda Hurcombe has called the “missing majority” of the archaeological record³—that is, the perishable materials and material culture that we know dominated pre-modern life, but which we systematically omit from our thinking about the past.

Due to their extreme fragility, only one of the Berryfields eggs was retrieved intact—one has to feel for the excavators, and not only because of the sulphurous smell reported! Not all eggs, however, are as fragile as chicken eggs. About a century after King Numa had been interred (or not) with his books on the Janiculum, the wealthy urban elites of Etruria, to the north of Rome, were burying their kin with increasingly large and luxurious assemblages of grave goods. The Polledrara (or Isis) Tomb excavated at the Etruscan city of Vulci in 1839 is a good example. Dated to c. 625–550 BC, the tomb included a rich collection of bronze

¹ MALTBY, M., M. ALLEN, J. BEST, B.T. FOTHERGILL & B. DEMARCHI. 2018. Counting Roman chickens: multidisciplinary approaches to human-chicken interactions in Roman Britain. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 19: 1003–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2017.09.013>

² BIDDULPH, E., K. BRADY, A. SIMMONDS & S. FOREMAN. 2019. *Berryfields: Iron Age settlement and a Roman bridge, field system and settlement along Akeman Street near Fleet Marston, Buckinghamshire*. Oxford: Oxbow.

³ HURCOMBE, L.M. 2014. *Perishable material culture in prehistory: investigating the missing majority*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315817729>

vessels, Egyptian scarabs, objects of gold and faience—and a set of five decorated ostrich eggs. In fact, such carved and/or painted ostrich eggs first appeared in elite funerary contexts as early as the third millennium BC in Mesopotamia and the Levant, with the practice gradually adopted farther west in Greece and Italy during the first millennium BC. The inclusion of such eggs in these aristocratic tombs may point to ideas about the afterlife—of rebirth or fertility. But their symbolism extended far beyond that associated with humble chicken eggs. Not least, these were objects of high economic value and social capital. Sourced from distant places, worked by skilled craftspeople and decorated with precious materials, these eggs were a way of signalling membership of a global elite group with a shared international style and a commitment to conspicuous consumption.

Yet we know remarkably little about these eggs. To date, attention has focused largely on the rich iconography used to decorate these ‘designer goods’: lotus flowers, hoplites and mythical beasts. But where, precisely, did these eggs come from? Were they from wild or captive birds? What tools were used to incise the motifs and images on the eggs? Were they decorated to order or produced en masse? Who decorated them and where? In this issue, Hodos *et al.* set out to answer some of these questions, presenting the results of a project that applies microscopy and isotope analysis to advance the study of these objects. Analysing eggs from a number of museum collections—including one from the Polledrara Tomb in Etruria and others from Iraq, Sudan and Turkey—the results demonstrate the great potential of such multidisciplinary research to extract new details about the *chaîne opératoire* of these objects and, in turn, to reassess their wider cultural and economic significance.

Mythical metals

It is not only eggs and empty tombs that afford symbolic value and mythical associations. Any number of other materials and phenomena can be imbued with allegorical significance and meanings. Metals, whether precious or base, attract particular attention because of their unusual and varied properties such as strength, lustre or the ability to change state. Myths also accrue around gold, silver and other precious metals through their conceptualisation as treasure. At Petra, for example, there is an old myth that a carved stone urn high on the façade of the mausoleum of one of the Nabataean kings contains gold; tellingly, the mausoleum is better known as Al-Khazneh or the Treasury. Similar stories of concealed wealth are found around the world. In the Philippines, for example, tales of hidden treasure, from bronze bells to silver dollars and gold bars, are widespread, and the search for these riches has sometimes been directed towards archaeologically sensitive contexts, such as cave sites, where stratigraphy can be easily damaged. A recent study has sought to understand the deep-rooted origins and persistence of these stories in the Filipino imagination, arguing that they should be understood in the context of colonialism and dispossession. Hence, tales of the loss or concealment of valuable objects reflect the confiscation of resources during periods of occupation or repression, and their delayed recovery speaks to the post-colonial national psyche.⁴

⁴ KELLY, P. 2016. Excavating a hidden bell story from the Philippines: a revised narrative of cultural-linguistic loss and recuperation. *Journal of Folklore Research* 53: 86–113. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.53.2.04>

But when does a literal interpretation of these stories—a belief in their veracity that motivates individuals to act—tip over into the larger-scale, systematic or organised pursuit of financial gain? In February, the Turkish authorities announced that one of the monumental aqueducts built in the fourth century AD to supply the newly founded city of Constantinople had been ‘dynamited’ by treasure hunters motivated by an urban legend of gold concealed within the structure’s stone arches. The full extent of the damage at Çatalca is not yet clear and an investigation is underway, but first reports suggest a sustained and systematic campaign of criminal destruction.⁵ Meanwhile, English Heritage recently reported that between 2017 and 2019 the number of ‘nighthawking’ incidents (illegal metal detecting on protected sites) doubled, affecting places including Old Sarum in Wiltshire and the Hastings AD 1066 battle site.⁶ Both of these examples, and many others besides, point to the scale of heritage crime and its damaging impact on our understanding of the past and the preservation of the archaeological record for the future.

Whether gold or iron, myths about metals are nothing new. For example, ancient playwrights, ethnographers and historians, from Aeschylus to Xenophon, linked the region around the southern and eastern shores of the Black Sea with early iron metallurgy. In particular, a group known as the Chalybes are identified by Strabo and others as some of the earliest blacksmiths. In this issue, Erb-Satullo *et al.* present new research on the long history of ironworking in the Black Sea region. Through their study of the archaeological evidence for iron production, including archaeometallurgical analysis of slags, the authors document smelting techniques of both the Classical and medieval periods, and in doing so shed light on the repeated mytho-historical association made by ancient Greek and Roman authors between the inhabitants of this region and iron production.

In this issue

As well as ostrich eggs and ironworking, this issue also features our usual diverse mix of archaeological research from around the world, extending chronologically from the Palaeolithic through to the twentieth century. We travel across plains, revisiting the mammoth-bone structures of Kostenki in southern Russia and redating key sites on the Konya Plain near Çatalhöyük; we take to the high ground to explore the archaeology of a mountain pass in Norway, the evidence from an Alpine ice core for events in Angevin England and the nature of farmer/forager relations on the high Tibetan Plateau. We also saddle up for a game of donkey polo in Tang China.

Among our other articles, we also feature research on an Ancestral Pueblo community close to Mesa Verde in south-western Colorado. In their article, Palonka *et al.* report the results of a long-term project focused on the thirteenth-century AD Castle Rock Pueblo to document, date and assess the organisation of an entire community at a landscape scale. In particular, they consider towers within and around areas of habitation and the role of

⁵ Available at: <http://www.aktuelarkeoloji.com.tr/1600-yillik-tarihi-kemer-defneciler-tarafindan-dinamitlerle-patlatildi> (accessed 5 March 2020).

⁶ Available at: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about-us/search-news/rise-in-illegal-metal-detecting-at-english-heritage-sites/> (accessed 5 March 2020).



Figure 2. A view looking west from Mesa Verde across the Montezuma Valley to Sleeping Ute Mountain. Photograph by R. Witcher.

these structures in connecting and protecting the community. They also investigate a series of circular stone shrines, interpreted as community boundary markers, carefully positioned to reference key points in the landscape. The shrine on the northern boundary, for example, features a single opening through its southern wall aligned with the highest peak in the region, Sleeping Ute Mountain (Figure 2), a location of great historical and contemporary significance for Hopi, Ute and other groups. These shrines, alongside the towers and cliff dwellings, were integrated into an animate landscape, as richly imbued with cultural and spiritual meaning as the architectural spaces of the Roman Forum or the Athenian Acropolis.

As the first European settlers moved west across North America, this holistic understanding of the cultural and ecological value of the South-western landscape as an integrated and interdependent whole came up against the economic logic of capitalism. The recent confirmation that the U.S. government's Bureau of Land Management is advancing with its plans to open up areas to grazing and mining that until recently were part of the Bears Ears National Monument speaks to the same clash of worldviews.⁷ News of this decision to move forward with the plans comes despite the fact that lawsuits against these developments are outstanding. Meanwhile, it has been reported that construction work on the extended USA-Mexico border wall adjacent to the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona has damaged environmentally and culturally sensitive areas, including archaeological sites. Here, under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security, the REAL ID Act of 2005 has allowed for federal statutes such as the National Historic Preservation Act and the Antiquities Act to be suspended in order to accelerate the construction work.⁸ Whether the illegal actions of treasure hunters or the short-sighted and expedient actions of political authorities, threats to the archaeological record remain as significant as ever.

ROBERT WITCHER
Durham, 1 April 2020

⁷ Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/02/06/trump-administration-will-allow-drilling-logging-sensitive-federal-lands-utah/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

⁸ Available at: <https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/saa-news/2020/02/11/saa-protests-destruction-of-archaeological-and-native-american-cultural-sites-at-border-wall> (accessed 5 March 2020).