

Our Creative World

Stories, Poems, Documents,
Art, and Architecture from World History



Our Creative World
Edited by John Notgrass

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Many people think history is a lot of names, dates, battles, faraway places and flat pictures of stiff people who never smile. That is not history. History is vibrant color, strong feelings, hopes, dreams, losses, and mysteries. Even the people who are famous in history are still people: normal, interesting, regular, important people, like us. Did you ever stop to think that YOU are a person in history, too? What would you want the student of the future to know about you and your time?

History records Julius Caesar's rise to power, but also the memory that he was bald and embarrassed about it (see page 26). The Ming Dynasty of China is part of history, but so is the woman of that day who left us a wistful poem about parting with loved ones (see page 69). London's Great Fire is an important historical event, but a real person who was there took time to notice and write down the impact the fire had on the city's pigeons (see page 93). Yes, history calls Florence Nightingale the mother of modern nursing, but she also wrote letters to friends when all she could find to write with was a pencil (see page 115).

These pages let the people of history speak for themselves. These are the letters, stories, art, games, sports, recipes, poems, speeches, structures, and memories that were part of their normal, interesting, regular, important lives. Listen to what these voices from history have to say to you and find those stiff, flat people from history come suddenly to life.

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Bull-Leaping Fresco

Minoan (c. 1400 BC)

This restored fresco painting is from the Palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. One person is shown leaping over a bull with two other people participating in the action. Archaeologists have debated the origin and purpose of this dangerous practice. Some scholars have suggested that the image is symbolic rather than a depiction of actual events. However, it has some similarities with a sport that still exists in southern France and northern Spain. Known as course landaise, the goal is for athletes to jump over a charging cow or bull. Unlike modern bullfighting, the animal is not harmed.



Four Remarkable Things in England

Henry of Huntingdon (c. 1130 AD)

Henry of Huntingdon (c. 1088-1157) was born in England after the Norman conquest of 1066. His father was a Norman church officer. Henry compiled a history of England that included this description of Stonehenge, the earliest known written description of it.

There are four things in England which are very remarkable. One is that the winds issue with such great violence from certain caverns in a mountain called the Peak, that it ejects matters thrown into them, and whirling them about in the air carries them to a great distance. The second is at Stonehenge, where stones of extraordinary dimensions are raised as columns, and others are fixed above, like lintels of immense portals; and no one has been able to discover by what mechanism such vast masses of stone were elevated, nor for what purpose they were designed. The third is at Chedder-hole, where there is a cavern which many persons have entered, and have traversed a great distance under ground, crossing subterraneous streams, without finding any end of the cavern. The fourth wonder is this, that in some parts of the country the rain is seen to gather about the tops of the hills, and forthwith to fall on the plains.



This illustration of Stonehenge is from a 1645 Dutch atlas of the world.

Hymn to the King Wu Ting

Chinese (c. 700s BC)

Wu Ting was a member of the Shang dynasty who ruled from about 1250-1192 BC. This poem comes from a collection honoring Shang rulers. It was apparently written by the 700s BC, though it may be older. This translation is from The Book of Chinese Poetry (1891) by Clement Francis Romilly Allen. Allen was a British diplomat in China.

'Twas by a decree of heaven that a swallow was sent to this earth
That the race of Shang might spring from a wondrous and mystic birth,
To dwell in the land of Yin, and mightily rule the land,
Till the people from north to south were submissive to their command.

Then heaven called forth King T'ang, a monarch war-like and bold,
To govern and settle the folk, and to guide them in days of old.
To aid him in this he chose as princes the men of skill,
And regions nine were his vassals, obeying his sovereign will.

Since the first Shang reigned, we trusted that nothing should snatch away
The God-given power bestowed on Wu Ting's offspring to-day.
This scion of Wu Ting's line can fearlessly hold his own.
No foe may dare to assail his crown, or disturb his throne.

With their dragon-blazoned banners above them then princes bring
The mighty bowls of millet to grace this our offering.
The Royal domain itself holds a thousand of miles, and none
Of the folk therein is distressed, and thence do our frontiers run

To the oceans four which surround us, and men from the shore of the seas
Will come to our Court in crowds to share in such rites as these,
And to gaze on the mountain which forms a defence and a fortress meet
For our city girt by the river, which flows at the mountain's feet.

When a King maintains his State and earns all his subjects' love,
We say how wise is the choice of the far-seeing powers above.

Lucky and Unlucky Days

Egyptian (c. 1200 BC)

We believe that God guides what happens each day, not luck. However, the ancient Egyptians believed that certain days were lucky or unlucky. A papyrus written in Egypt around the time of Ramses II has a list of these days. Below are some of the statements from the list. This translation is from The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians by E.A. Wallis Budge (1914).

1st day of Hathor. The whole day is lucky. There is festival in heaven with Rā and Hathor.

2nd day of Hathor. The whole day is lucky. The gods go out. The goddess Uatchet comes from Tep to the gods who are in the shrine of the bull, in order to protect the divine members.

3rd day of Hathor. The whole day is lucky.

4th day of Hathor. The whole day is unlucky. The house of the man who goes on a voyage on that day comes to ruin.

6th day of Hathor. The whole day is unlucky. Do not light a fire in thy house on this day, and do not look at one.

18th day of Pharmuthi. The whole day is unlucky. Do not bathe on this day.

20th day of Pharmuthi. The whole day is unlucky. Do not work on this day.

22nd day of Pharmuthi. The whole day is unlucky. He who is born on this day will die on this day.

23rd day of Pharmuthi. The first two-thirds of the day are unlucky, and the last third lucky.



One of the Egyptian gods, Apis, had the form of a bull. Some specially-selected bulls that served in religious rituals were mummified on their death.

The Iliad

Homer (c. 800 BC)

This brief excerpt is from the translation of The Iliad by English poet Alexander Pope (1720).

Meantime the Grecians in a ring beheld
The coursers bounding o'er the dusty field.
The first who mark'd them was the Cretan king;
High on a rising ground, above the ring,
The monarch sat: from whence with sure survey
He well observed the chief who led the way,
And heard from far his animating cries,
And saw the foremost steed with sharpen'd eyes;
On whose broad front a blaze of shining white,
Like the full moon, stood obvious to the sight.
He saw; and rising, to the Greeks begun:
"Are yonder horse discern'd by me alone?
Or can ye, all, another chief survey,
And other steeds than lately led the way?"



This statue of Homer is located at the Bavarian State Library in Munich, Germany.

Gold Mining

Diodorus Siculus (c. 30 BC)

The Book of Job talks about mining for metals underground (Job 28:1-11), which indicates that it has a long history. Diodorus Siculus was a Greek historian who compiled a forty-volume collection called Library of History between 60 and 30 BC. He described the terrible conditions of miners. King Solomon imported gold from Ophir (1 Kings 9:28), an unknown location that might have been in Africa. This translation by C. H. Oldfather is taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

At the extremity of Egypt and in the contiguous territory of both Arabia and Ethiopia there lies a region which contains many large gold mines, where the gold is secured in great quantities with much suffering and at great expense. For the earth is naturally black and contains seams and veins of a marble which is unusually white and in brilliancy surpasses everything else which shines brightly by its nature, and here the overseers of the labour in the mines work to recover the gold with the aid of a multitude of workers.

For the kings of Egypt gather together and condemn to the mining of the gold such as have been found guilty of some crime and captives of war, as well as those who have been accused unjustly and thrown into prison because of their anger, and not only such persons but occasionally all their relatives as well, by this means not only inflicting punishment upon those found guilty but also securing at the same time great revenues from their labours.

And those who have been condemned in this way—and they are a great multitude and are all bound in chains—work at their task unceasingly both by day and throughout the entire night, enjoying no respite and being carefully cut off from any means of escape; since guards of foreign soldiers who speak a language different from theirs stand watch over them, so that not a man, either by conversation or by some contact of a friendly nature, is able to corrupt one of his keepers.

The gold-bearing earth which is hardest they first burn with a hot fire, and when they have crumbled it in this way they continue the working of it by hand; and the soft rock which can yield to moderate effort is crushed with a sledge by myriads of unfortunate wretches. And the entire operations are in charge of a skilled worker who distinguishes the stone and points it out to the labourers; and of those who are assigned to this unfortunate task the physically strongest break the quartz-rock with iron hammers, applying no skill to the task, but only force, and cutting tunnels through the stone, not in a straight line but wherever the seam of gleaming rock may lead.

Now these men, working in darkness as they do because of the bending and winding of the passages, carry lamps bound on their foreheads; and since much of the time they change the position of their bodies to follow the particular character of the stone they throw the blocks, as they cut them out, on the ground; and at this task they labour without ceasing beneath the sternness and blows of an overseer.

Illustrations of the Dodo

(1600s)

Dutch Admiral Jacob van Neck led an expedition that stopped in Mauritius in 1598. A report of the expedition, published in 1601, contained this illustration of Dutch sailors collecting food on the island. In the middle near the left edge is the first known published image of a dodo.



Emperor Rudolph II of the Holy Roman Empire kept two collections of exotic animals. He employed the Flemish artist Jakob Hoefnagel to illustrate the creatures. Hoefnagel's illustration of a dodo, shown at left, is evidently based on a stuffed dodo brought back from the Indian Ocean rather than on a live bird. It is dated circa 1602.



Emperor Jahangir of the Mogul Empire had a large collection of animals and birds. Someone brought two dodos from Mauritius to add to his collection. The illustration at left, dated about 1625, is attributed to his court artist Ustad Mansur. The dodo is pictured in the middle.



The painting at right is by Dutch artist Cornelius Saftleven. It is dated about 1638.

Russian Games

(1700s)



These games developed at various times in Russian history as people made up rules and shared them with others.

Gorodki

In this game, a set of small wooden pins are arranged in one of several patterns (resembling a cannon, star, or arrow, for example). Players attempt to knock over the pins by throwing a bat at them. Peter the Great played this game as a young man. The photo at left by Eirik Sundvor shows players in the USSR in 1935.

Lapta

This game is played with a bat and ball by two teams of six players. It involves a server tossing the ball for the hitter, players running to score points, and the defense trying to catch the ball and tag the runners. Peter the Great ordered his guards to play the game as part of their fitness program. Some Russians think that Russian immigrants took the game to the United States, where it inspired the creation of baseball. A modern game of lapta is shown at right.



Birulki

In this game, also known as spillikins, several small objects are put in a pile. Traditionally, the objects included toy furniture and other household objects. Using a special hook, as shown at left, players attempt to remove one object from the pile without moving any other objects. The player who successfully pulls the most objects from the pile is the winner.

Svaika

Players in this game throw a metal spike toward a metal ring lying on the ground. The goal is to have the spike land upright in the middle of the ring. The illustration at right is from about 1800.



Letter to Georg Erdmann

Johann Sebastian Bach (1730)

Johann Sebastian Bach was not entirely happy with his position in Leipzig. Local officials criticized him for not giving his duties his full attention, while Bach felt that his talents were not fully appreciated. Bach had attended school with Georg Erdmann, who was serving in Gdansk as a Court Councillor to the Russian Emperor. Bach wrote this letter to Erdmann, seeking help in finding another position. Since Bach continued to work in Leipzig, Erdmann was evidently not able to help him. This text of the letter is from Ernest Newman's translation of Albert Schweitzer's 1908 biography J. S. Bach.

Honoured Sir,

Your Excellency will excuse an old and faithful servant for taking the liberty to trouble you with this letter. Nearly four years have now flown by since your Excellency honoured me with a gracious answer to the letter I sent you, but as I remember that you graciously wished me to give you some news of my vicissitudes, I shall now most obediently proceed to do so.

From my youth up my history has been well known to you, until the change which took me as Kapellmeister to Cothen. There lived there a gracious Prince, who both loved and understood music, and with whom I thought to live the rest of my days. It so happened, however, that his Serene Highness married a Princess of Berenburg, and then it seemed as if the musical inclination of the said Prince had grown a little lukewarm, while at the same time the new Princess appeared to be an amusement to him; so God willed it that I should be called to this place as Director Musices and cantor at St. Thomas's school.

At first it was not wholly agreeable to me to become a cantor after having been a Kapellmeister, on which account I delayed making a decision for a quarter of a year; however, this post was described to me in such favourable terms that finally—especially as my sons seemed inclined towards study,—I ventured upon it in the name of the Most High, and betook myself to Leipzig, passed my examination, and then made the move. Here, by God's will, I am to this day.

But now, since I find (1) that the appointment here is not nearly so considerable as I was led to understand, (2) that it has been deprived of many perquisites, (3) that the town is very dear to live in,* and (4) that the authorities are strange people, with little devotion to music, so that I have to endure almost constant vexation, envy, and persecution, I feel compelled to seek, with the Almighty's aid, my fortune elsewhere. Should your Excellency know of, or be able to find, a suitable appointment in your town for an old and faithful servant, I humbly beg you to give me your gracious recommendation thereto; on my part I will not fail, by using my best diligence, to give satisfaction and justify your kind recommendation and intercession.

My position here is worth about 700 thalers, and when there are rather more funerals than usual the perquisites increase proportionately; but if the air is healthy the fees decrease, last year, for example, being more than 100 thalers below the average from funerals. In Thuringia

* In this usage, "dear" means expensive.

I can make 400 thalers go further than twice as many here, on account of the excessive cost of living.

And now I must tell you a little about my domestic circumstances. I am married for the second time, my first wife having died in Cothen. Of the first marriage, three sons and a daughter are still living, whom your Excellency saw in Weimar, as you may be graciously pleased to remember. Of the second marriage, one son and two daughters are living. My eldest son is *Studiosus Juris*,* the other two are one in the first and the other in the second class, and the eldest daughter is still unmarried. The children of the other marriage are still little, the eldest, a boy, being six years old. They are one and all born musicians, and I can assure you that I can already form a concert, vocal and instrumental, with my family, especially as my wife sings a good soprano, and my eldest daughter joins in, quite well.

I should almost overstep the bounds of politeness by troubling your Excellency with any more, so I hasten to conclude with all devoted respects, and remain your Excellency's life-long most obedient and humble servant,

Joh. Seb. Bach,
Leipzig, 28th October 1730.



J. S. Bach and His Family at Morning Prayers
Toby Edward Rosenthal (American, 1870)

* This means law student. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach went on to work as a musician.

Moravian Missionaries

(1700s)

In 1731 Count Zinzendorf met a slave named Antony Ulrich from the Caribbean island of St. Thomas who had been brought to Denmark. Antony had become a Christian and longed for someone to go to St. Thomas to share the gospel with his family. When Zinzendorf shared Antony's appeal with the Brethren, several young men volunteered to go. In 1732 Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann went to Copenhagen to find a ship to take them to St. Thomas. They faced opposition from the Danish officials at first, but eventually they were allowed to leave. This account is from J. E. Hutton's History of the Moravian Church, published in 1909.

At Copenhagen, where they called at the court, they created quite a sensation. . . . For a while they met with violent opposition. Von Plesz, the King's Chamberlain, asked them how they would live.

"We shall work," replied Nitschmann, "as slaves among the slaves."

"But," said Von Plesz, "that is impossible. It will not be allowed. No white man ever works as a slave."

"Very well," replied Nitschmann, "I am a carpenter, and will ply my trade."

"But what will the potter do?"

"He will help me in my work."

"If you go on like that," exclaimed the Chamberlain, "you will stand your ground the wide world over."

The first thing was to stand their ground at Copenhagen. As the directors of the Danish West Indian Company refused to grant them a passage out they had now to wait for any vessel that might be sailing. The whole Court was soon on their side. The Queen expressed her good wishes. The Princess Amalie gave them some money and a Dutch Bible. The Chamberlain slipped some coins into Nitschmann's pocket. The Court Physician gave them a spring lancet, and showed them how to open a vein. The Court Chaplain espoused their cause, and the Royal Cupbearer found them a ship on the point of sailing for St. Thomas.

As the ship cast anchor in St. Thomas Harbour the Brethren realized for the first time the greatness of their task. There lay the quaint little town of Tappus, its scarlet roofs agleam in the noontide sun; there, along the silver beach, they saw the yellowing rocks; and there, beyond, the soft green hills were limned against the azure sky. There, in a word, lay the favoured isle, the "First Love of Moravian Missions." Again the text for the day was prophetic: "The Lord of Hosts," ran the gladdening watchword, "mustereth the host of the battle." As the Brethren stepped ashore next day they opened a new chapter in the history of modern Christianity. They were the founders of Christian work among the slaves. For fifty years the Moravian Brethren laboured in the West Indies without any aid from any other religious denomination. They established churches in St. Thomas, in St. Croix, in St. John's, in Jamaica, in Antigua, in Barbados, and in St. Kitts. They had 13,000 baptized converts before a missionary from any other Church arrived on the scene.

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