

Our Creative World

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



Our Creative World
Edited by John Notgrass

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Our Creative World

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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Of the Father's Love Begotten

Aurelius Prudentius (c. 400 AD)

Aurelius Prudentius (c. 348-413) was born in Hispania Tarraconensis, a Roman province that is now in northern Spain. He worked as a lawyer and public official before retiring to a simple life of prayer and fasting. He composed many poems, including the one featured below. This English translation from the original Latin is from the 1850s. John M. Neale made the original translation, which Henry W. Baker revised.

Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

At His Word the worlds were framèd; He commanded; it was done:
Heaven and earth and depths of ocean in their threefold order one;
All that grows beneath the shining
Of the moon and burning sun, evermore and evermore!

He is found in human fashion, death and sorrow here to know,
That the race of Adam's children doomed by law to endless woe,
May not henceforth die and perish
In the dreadful gulf below, evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessèd, when the virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bare the Savior of our race;
And the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face, evermore and evermore!

This is He Whom seers in old time chanted of with one accord;
Whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word;
Now He shines, the long expected,
Let creation praise its Lord, evermore and evermore!

O ye heights of heaven adore Him; angel hosts, His praises sing;
Powers, dominions, bow before Him, and extol our God and King!
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert sing, evermore and evermore!

Righteous judge of souls departed, righteous King of them that live,
On the Father's throne exalted none in might with Thee may strive;
Who at last in vengeance coming
Sinners from Thy face shalt drive, evermore and evermore!

Thee let old men, thee let young men, thee let boys in chorus sing;
Matrons, virgins, little maidens, with glad voices answering:
Let their guileless songs re-echo,
And the heart its music bring, evermore and evermore!

Christ, to Thee with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
Hymn and chant with high thanksgiving, and unwearied praises be:
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory, evermore and evermore!



This image of Christ from around the time of Prudentius is from the catacomb of Commodilla in Rome. It features Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

Ancient Hawaiian Poetry

The early settlers of the Hawaiian islands came from the Polynesian culture of the Pacific Ocean. Recognizing the beauty of the natural world was an important part of this culture. These two excerpts were collected and translated by Nathaniel B. Emerson. He was born in Oahu, Hawaii, in 1839; his father was a missionary. Dr. Emerson's book Unwritten Literature of Hawaii was published in 1909.

Black crabs are climbing,
Crabs from the great sea,
Sea that is darkling.
Black crabs and gray crabs
Scuttle o'er the reef-plate.
Billows are tumbling and lashing,
Beating and surging nigh.
Sea-shells are crawling up;
And lurking in holes
Are the eels o-u and o-i.
But taste the sea-weed a-kaha-kaha.
Ka-hiki! how the sea rages!
The wild sea of Kane!

'Twas in Ko'o-lau I met with the rain:
It comes with lifting and tossing of dust,
Advancing in columns, dashing along.
The rain, it sighs in the forest;
The rain, it beats and whelms, like the surf;
It smites, it smites now the land.
Pasty the earth from the stamping rain;
Full run the streams, a rushing flood;
The mountain wall leaps with the rain.
See the water chafing its bounds like a dog,
A raging dog, gnawing its way to pass out.

Hawaiian Black Crab



An Account of Egypt

Herodotus (c. 440 BC)

Herodotus was a Greek historian who compiled an extensive record of cultures and nations that bordered the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. The following excerpt contains his description of the building of the Great Pyramid of Giza under Pharaoh Khufu (also known as Cheops). This 1904 translation is by George Campbell Macaulay.

For the making of the pyramid itself there passed a period of twenty years; and the pyramid is square, each side measuring eight hundred feet, and the height of it is the same. It is built of stone smoothed and fitted together in the most perfect manner, not one of the stones being less than thirty feet in length.

This pyramid was made after the manner of steps which some called "rows" and others "bases": and when they had first made it thus, they raised the remaining stones with machines made of short pieces of timber, raising them first from the ground to the first stage of the steps, and when the stone got up to this it was placed upon another machine standing on the first stage, and so from this it was drawn to the second upon another machine; for as many as were the courses of the steps, so many machines there were also, or perhaps they transferred one and the same machine, made so as easily to be carried, to each stage successively, in order that they might take up the stones; for let it be told in both ways, according as it is reported.

However that may be the highest parts of it were finished first, and afterwards they proceeded to finish that which came next to them, and lastly they finished the parts of it near the ground and the lowest ranges.

On the pyramid it is declared in Egyptian writing how much was spent on radishes and onions and leeks for the workmen, and if I rightly remember that which the interpreter said in reading to me this inscription, a sum of one thousand six hundred talents of silver was spent; and if this is so, how much besides is likely to have been expended upon the iron with which they worked, and upon bread and clothing for the workmen, seeing that they were building the works for the time which has been mentioned and were occupied for no small time besides, as I suppose, in the cutting and bringing of the stones and in working at the excavation under the ground?



Eduard Spelterini took this photo from a balloon in 1904. The Great Pyramid is on the right.

Chronicle of the Reign of Sargon

This description of Sargon's reign comes from a tablet written about 600 BC, though it is thought to be a copy of a much earlier record. This excerpt is from A Source-Book of Ancient History (1912), published by husband and wife team George and Lillie Botsford.

The text refers to Ishtar and Marduk, the names of two false gods worshipped in the Middle East. Kasalla and Subartu are the names of places that Sargon attacked, while Agade is the name of a town Sargon controlled.

Sargon, King of Akkad, through the royal gift of Ishtar was exalted, and he possessed no foe nor rival. His glory over the world he poured out. The Sea in the East* he crossed, and in the eleventh year the Country of the West in its full extent his hand subdued. He united them under one control; he set up his images in the West; their booty he brought over at his word. The sons of his palace for five *kasbu*** around he settled, and over the hosts of the world he reigned supreme.

Against Kasalla he marched, and he turned Kasalla into mounds and heaps of ruins; he destroyed the land and left not enough for a bird to rest thereon. Afterward in his old age all the lands revolted against him, and they besieged him in Agade; and Sargon went forth to battle and defeated them; he accomplished their overthrow, and their widespreading host he destroyed.

Afterward he attacked the land of Subartu in his might, and they submitted to his arms, and Sargon settled that revolt, and defeated them; he accomplished their overthrow, and their widespreading host he destroyed, and he brought their possessions into Agade. The soil from the trenches of Babylon he removed, and the boundaries of Agade he made like those of Babylon. But because of the evil which he had committed the great lord Marduk was angry, and he destroyed his people by famine. From the rising of the sun unto the setting of the sun they opposed him and gave him no rest.

* *The Persian Gulf*

** *About seven miles*

Board Games of Sumer and Egypt

These photos illustrate two of the oldest known board games. The game in the top photo is called the Royal Game of Ur or the Game of Twenty Squares. Two copies were found in the Royal Tombs of Ur in Iraq. The game in the bottom photo is an Egyptian game called Senet. This example is from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun, though older examples have also been found.

Archaeologists do not know exactly how the ancient Sumerians and Egyptians played these games, though you can find rules that people have attempted to recreate. The modern game of backgammon appears to have some similarities, in that players use dice to race their pieces around the board.



Babylonian Herding Contract

(c. 1700 BC)

This contract was recorded on a Babylonian tablet during the reign of King Samsuiluna, a son of Hammurabi. It is similar to the agreement between Laban and Jacob, through which Laban entrusted care of his flocks to Jacob and Jacob was responsible for any losses. This translation by J. J. Finkelstein (1922-1974) was published in "An Old Babylonian Herding Contract and Genesis 31:38 f," Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 88, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1968), pp. 30-36.

92 ewes, 20 rams, 22 breeding lambs, 24 spring lambs, 33 she-goats, 4 male goats, 27 kids—total: 158 sheep; total: 64 goats, which Sinsamuh has entrusted to Dada the shepherd. Dada assumes liability (therefore) and will replace any lost (animals). Should Nidnatum, Dada's shepherd boy, absent himself, Nidnatum will bear responsibility for any loss, and Dada will measure out 5 kor of barley.

Three witnesses; Samsuiluna year 1, fourth month, 16th day.



Sheep Herded by a Bedouin Family in Modern Syria

Seal of Tarkummuwa

Hittite (c. 1400 BC)

This Hittite seal was discovered about 1850 at Smyrna, an ancient city in what is now the country of Turkey. It features a man wearing royal robes holding a sword. The text in the center is written in Hittite hieroglyphs. The text around the rim is written in cuneiform. Having the inscription in two languages helped scholars learn how to read the Hittite writing. The seal states that it was created for Tarkummuwa, King of Mera.



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.



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