
HISTORY TODAY

Media information

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*Tristram Hunt, Director,
Victoria & Albert Museum*

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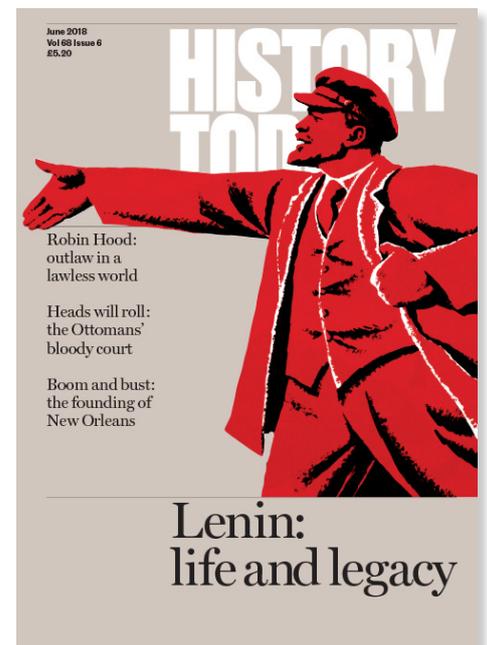
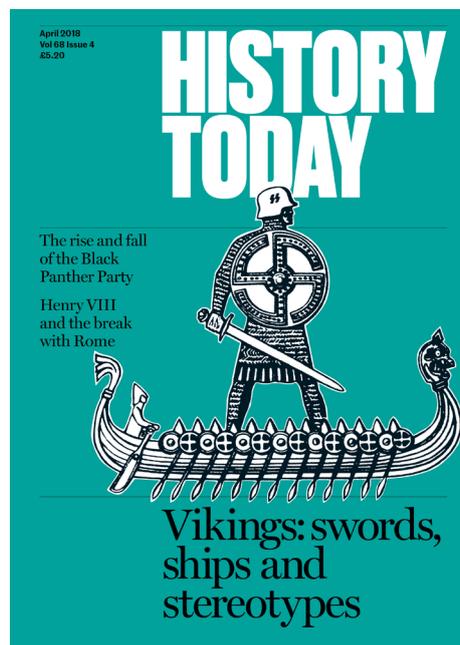
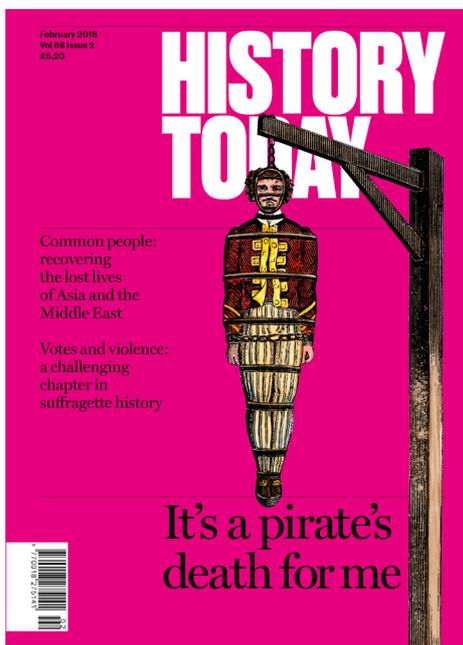
ABOUT THE MAGAZINE

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present Aswan Low Dam, the first such construction on the Nile, completed after four years of construction in 1902. Standing 96 metres high and almost 2,000 metres in length, it was only achieved by using all the methods and equipment of modern technology. Eleventh-century engineering simply stood no chance against the destructive power of the Nile. When al-Haytham realised how impossible his task was, it was too late; the caliph was already expecting success. Hearing the fatal reprieve that came with disappointing the monarch, al-Haytham feigned madness, hoping the caliph would consider his untenable plans to have been the result of his illness. To his great luck, it worked. The caliph spared his life, insisting only that al-Haytham be held under strict house arrest in Cairo.

It was during his time in confinement that al-Haytham made perhaps his greatest contribution to science. Free from the distractions of the world, he revolutionised the field of optics by designing the first experiment with a camera obscura was known, but it was not fully understood. *Problematia*, a fourth-century BC text attributed to Aristotle, asks: 'Why is it that when the sun passes through quadrilaterals, as for instance in wickerwork, it does not produce a figure rectangular in shape but circular?' Al-Haytham experimented by making a pinhole, using the window shutters of a completely darkened room, for light to

'Al-Haytham is also the father of the modern scientific method' for his insistence on the experimental scientific process'

pass through and project onto the opposite wall. He discovered that scenes and images from outside the camera obscura were turned upside down by passing through the pinhole. From his experiments, al-Haytham made two important conclusions, which he published along with his other findings, in his seven-volume treatise *Kitab al-Manazir*, or 'The Book of Optics'. His first conclusion was that light travels in straight lines: 'Vision perceives necessarily all the objects through supposed straight lines that spread themselves between the object and the central point of the sight'. His second conclusion was that light comes from external sources.

This second finding was particularly important in debunking the prevailing theory of light at the time, which was proffered by towering intellectual figures, such as Ptolemy, Galen and Euclid. It was believed that the eyes emitted beams of light onto objects, rendering them visible. This idea came to be

known as the 'extramission theory' of light. What al-Haytham proved with his camera obscura experiments was that light does not come from our eyes; rather, light comes from external sources that illuminate objects in our world. 'Eyelight perceives the light and colour existing on the surface of the contemplated objects. As a result of these observations, along with the other findings in the *Kitab*, al-Haytham is today widely regarded as the father of modern optics.

After a decade of incarceration, al-Haytham was finally released following the caliph's mysterious death in 1021. This renewed sense of freedom afforded al-Haytham the opportunity to further pursue his research. It is said that his total published output amounted to 200 books, 96 of which were scientific studies. Al-Haytham's impressive contributions led the quantum physicist and popular science communicator Jim al-Khalili to view al-Haytham as more than just a pioneer in the science of optics; for him, al-Haytham is also 'the father of the modern scientific method' for his insistence on the experimental scientific process. This he accomplished not just with his genius, but with the aid of luck and reckless daring. We do not just shed light on science metaphorically, but literally. After all, al-Haytham needed light, however small, while inside the darkened room to give birth to what we now call the scientific method.

Pippo Carmona is a biologist and historian of science.

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TOUR OPERATOR OF THE YEAR - ACTO 2017

Chabi, consort of Qubilai Khan, from the *Album of Great Qing Emperors' Portraits*, Chinese, 13th century.

MOINGOL WOMEN

Women may be largely absent from traditional accounts of the Mongol conquests, but they played a crucial role in creating the largest of all land empires. *Anne F. Broadbridge*

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ON THE SPOT DAISY DUNN

We ask 20 questions of leading historians on why their research matters, one book everyone should read and their views on Edward Gibbon ...

Why are you a historian of the Classical world?
Because I enjoy the creativity involved in piecing together fragments to create a bigger picture.

What's the most important lesson history has taught you?
That even the sharpest minds can be flawed.

Which book has had the greatest influence on you?
H. H. Scullard's *From the Gracchi to Nero*.

What book in your field should everyone read?
The History of Greek Vases by John Boardman.

Which moment would you most like to go back to?
I'd love to have been with the Bishop of Verona when he came across Catullus' poems in the tenth century.

Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?
Barbara Levick. She writes with such verve on the emperors of Rome and imperial women.

Which person in history would you most like to have met?
I'd be disappointed if I didn't meet Emperor Claudius in the afterlife.

How many languages do you have?
I read Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian.

What's the most exciting field in history today?
Maritime archaeology.

What historical topic have you changed your mind on?
Our government.

The young Octavian – who became the Emperor Augustus – probably had more forethought than I used to give him credit for.

Which genre of history do you like least?
Political 'histories' of the last few years. There is such a thing as too soon.

Is there a major historical text you have not read?
I should really get round to reading Jerome's biblical commentaries.

What's your favourite archive?
The Conway at the Courtauld Institute for Art History in London.

What's the best museum?
Must I choose one? I can't choose between Sir John Soane's Museum and the British Museum.

Normans or Anglo-Saxons?
Anglo-Saxons.

Rome or Athens?
Rome.

Braudel or Gibbon?
Got to be Gibbon.

Michelangelo or Frida Kahlo?
Michelangelo. Just look at Phaedon falling from the chariot.

What's the most common misconception about your field?
That it is the preserve of public schoolboys.

What will future generations judge us most harshly for?
Our government.

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