

30 GOLDEN TREASURES
REDISCOVERED OVER 30 YEARS

30 golden treasures rediscovered over 30 years

The World Gold Council was founded in 1987. Over the past three decades it has increased the relevance and demand for gold in our rapidly changing world.

During the same period, many golden treasures from the past have been rediscovered. These finds not only speak to gold's rarity and enduring value but also to the many stories of human progress over millennia.

This publication celebrates 30 of these remarkable rediscovered treasures.

It chronicles the extraordinary breadth of artistry and craft that different cultures have applied to gold, each a unique language linked to a particular place and time. It illustrates how gold has conveyed love, status and military prowess as well as spiritual symbolism and its role as currency, aiding the growth of commerce.

In the 30 stories that you will read, you will discover that even after gold has lain dormant for centuries; lost, forgotten, scattered in combat or sunk at sea, it remains the constant of value that underpins financial security.

The Środa treasure

Poland, 1988

In 1985, a clay jug full of silver coins was found in the rubble of a demolished house in south-west Poland. After workers sent the jug off to a local museum, it was forgotten about. Three years later, bulldozers flattened the house next door – and only narrowly avoided destroying the haul of important gold artefacts hidden inside.

The treasure – later revealed to be part of the same hoard as the clay jug – contained an array of beautifully wrought gold pieces: two rings; a tattered but still gleaming length of gold tape; two pairs of pendants; a bracelet adorned with bead-like gold nodules; a saucer-sized breast pin; and a delicate crown designed for a female. There were also 390 gold florin coins.

It was a sensational find; nothing less than a long-lost set of crown jewels.

Archaeologists also highlighted the gold's value as a powerful bargaining tool.

14th century King of Bohemia, Charles IV, had used the treasure as collateral for a financial loan from Poland's Jewish community, to back his campaign to become Holy Roman Emperor. The crown had belonged to his wife, Blanche of Valois. When the Black Death swept Europe, Jews were blamed, triggering pogroms. It is likely that, amid the turmoil, the treasure's handlers had fled, leaving the gold behind.

In 2005, the hoard that was almost crushed by a bulldozer was valued at \$100 million.



A crown probably owned by
Blanche De Valois, the first wife
of the Emperor Charles IV.
Copyright: Rex Features



The Assyrian queens' tombs

Iraq, 1988

Early in the reign of King Ashurnasirpal II (883 to 859 BC), the Assyrian Empire's seat of power was transferred to the city of Kalhu, now called Nimrud, about 20 miles south of Mosul. As soon as the king was installed in Kalhu's fabulous citadel, he began to expand it with the construction of the Northwest Palace: an opulent labyrinth of vast hallways and cavernous parlours.

In the following decades, parts of the Northwest Palace became tombs for deceased Assyrian royals. Centuries later, in 1988, Iraq's Board of Antiquities and Heritage excavated four such tombs in the palace. Archaeologists found the remains of several Assyrian queens amid a teeming mass of gold objects: phials, bowls, stamp seals, ankle and wrist bracelets, beads, amulets, necklaces, ornaments, torcs, crowns and other jewellery. It was an astonishing set of finds. One coffin alone yielded 365 gold earrings.

The most spectacular single object recovered was the crown of Queen Hama, consort of Shalmaneser IV (783 to 773 BC). Weighing 1.1 kg and crafted to resemble a grape arbour, it was made from more than 140 interwoven gold leaves. Altogether, the rediscovered treasures presented the most detailed tapestry of Assyrian life ever discovered. As lead archaeologist Muzahim Hussein wrote, they offered an "unparalleled view of not just the wealth of the Assyrian Empire, but also its role as an engine for creativity."



Gold Assyrian crown
from Nimrud.
*Copyright: Courtesy of the
Oriental Institute of the
University of Chicago*



The Hoxne hoard

England, 1992

It sounds dreamlike. Eric Lawes, a retired Englishman searches part of a field to find a hammer he had lost. Instead, he discovers a haul of Roman gold that had been buried for 1,500 years. With uncanny foresight, his former colleagues had given him a metal detector for his leaving gift.

The hoard included 569 pure gold coins. But of greater historical importance were several beautifully preserved jewellery items, including 19 bracelets in various styles, and an exquisite 'body chain'. This set of thin, gold-mail straps was designed to be worn around the torso in an 'X' shape, centred on a jewel-studded front panel of gold, and a rear one stamped with a *solidus* coin of Emperor Gratian (AD 367 to 383). The hoard's gold content weighed around 3.5 kg.

Several items found in the hoard were engraved with the name 'Aurelius Ursicinus' – very likely a patriarch. This suggested that the articles had belonged to a family of powerful Roman aristocrats who had lived locally. That would certainly explain the body chain – a true luxury for the period. In total, the find was worth £2.7 million, which Lawes shared with the owner of the field.

The hammer was also found – and became part of the British Museum's exhibition of the hoard.



Hoxne Hoard. Empress pepper pot, Juliana bracelet and body chain.
Copyright: The Trustees of the British Museum



The Mir Zakah II hoard

Afghanistan, 1992

Sometimes, experts don't get to a historic find until it's too late. Such was the case with this treasure – the second to emerge from the Afghan village of Mir Zakah, following a lesser one of 1947. Found in a well by peasants, the hoard created an instant sensation. Word spread about its estimated 550,000 gold, silver and bronze coins, and scores of gold artefacts. However, no archaeologists oversaw the dig – so the haul quickly began to disperse.

In 1994, coin expert Professor Osmund Bopearachchi tracked down six sacks of the hoard to a Peshwari bazaar. Professor Bopearachchi found the variety of coins staggering. He began to sort them but the task was so huge, he could only organise a fraction. But the professor was able to confirm that an intriguing gold medallion that had recently appeared in a top London collector's portfolio had come from the hoard. Featuring Alexander the Great, the medallion's reverse displayed a tiptoeing elephant: a mocking gesture aimed at a Punjabi king that Alexander had defeated. The medallion explained why Asian-style elephants had appeared on coins in parts of Alexander's empire that had never even heard of the creatures.

Mir Zakah II had clearly been buried for important reasons. It promised historians an extraordinary feast of information. But as Afghanistan succumbed to political turmoil, the hoard trickled into obscurity. As long as its whereabouts remain unclear, said Professor Bopearachchi, "the story of Mir Zakah will remain untold".



The Mir Zakah coin, believed to be the only lifetime portrait of Alexander the Great.
Copyright: Courtesy Prof. Osmund Bopearachchi



The Dacian bracelets

Romania, 1998

During the late 1990s, looters scoured crypts at the historic Romanian site of Sarmizegetusa Regia. The mountaintop site was once capital of the Dacians: an ancient Carpathian tribe. In the early 2nd century AD, Emperor Trajan's Roman army had all but annihilated the tribe. Legends arose of the precious-metals haul that Trajan had plundered from the capital. This was rumoured to include as much as 227 tonnes of gold.

In December 1999, a mysterious, spiral-shaped, gold bracelet appeared at a Christie's auction in New York. Thanks to its unspecified origins and quirky style, the bracelet failed to attract any bids. But it did spark rumours among experts in Dacian antiquities, who monitored the markets to see if it would reappear. This led to joint efforts between conservators and legal authorities to track down similar pieces.

Over the next 15 years, a dozen spiral bracelets from the Dacian era were recovered. The sellers of these objects, offering spurious tales describing their origins, may not have cared about the bracelets' significance. But their activities brought the pieces into the security of those who *did* care. The immaculate condition of the bracelets gave archaeologists a fresh understanding of Dacian ceremonial customs. They concluded that the bracelets had marked their wearers' ascent from mere mortals to positions of spiritual authority.



Bracelets looted from Sarmizegetusa, the Dacian capital, and recovered in recent years.
Copyright: gettyimages



The Ringlemere gold cup

England, 2001

When treasure hunter Cliff Bradshaw found a Saxon brooch at Ringlemere Farm, he suspected that the land was keeping further secrets. The next day he resumed his search and unearthed something exceptional. Thought to have been made around 1600 BC, the artefact, later known as the Ringlemere Cup, predated the brooch by centuries. Its artistic sophistication instantly provided experts with a fresh understanding of the Bronze Age.

The cup was made from a single sheet of gold, beaten into shape and then styled with concentric corrugations. Even though the cup was badly crushed, its surface and all of its circular patterns were intact. That meant it still had a tale to tell.

Using a blend of x-ray scans and endoscopy, archaeologists created a computer model of how the cup looked when it was freshly formed, enabling experts to examine it as though it were brand new. According to the experts, the workmanship was much finer than they would have expected for the period. Amber and shale cups from the same era had never revealed as much artistic skill. In the words of archaeologist Paul Ashbee, "we are behoven to look at the cherished patterns of Bronze Age development anew."

The Ringlemere gold cup,
as found in its crumpled state.
*Copyright: The Trustees of the
British Museum*



The wreck of the SS Republic

USA, 2003

In October 1865, the American South was still reeling from the Civil War, which had ended months earlier. The post-war reconstruction was a grave period in America's economic history and highlighted severe financial weakness. Throughout the war, the Union had printed notes worth \$430 million and the Confederates had rushed out *\$1.5 billion* of paper money.

This left Americans with fistfuls of bills of worthless value, many not even worth the paper they were printed on. In the quest to rebuild and repair, gold was used as a dependable purchasing asset that had maintained its value throughout the conflict. On 25 October 1865, the *SS Republic* was carrying a consignment of gold and silver coins from New York to New Orleans, for use in the reconstruction. The steamer had served both North and South, enduring every type of maritime assault that warfare had to offer. But that day, it encountered a foe it couldn't survive: the weather.

A hurricane plunged the ship 1,700 ft down to the seabed off the coast of Savannah, Georgia. For 138 years it slumbered, gathering fame as a lost fragment of America's painful, post-war recovery. But the allure of its gold was too strong to ignore forever. In 2003, ambitious salvage firm Odyssey Marine Exploration began to excavate the wreck. It eventually recovered 50,000 coins worth US\$180 million. Gold's value had triumphed over war, weather – and time.



The Minjiang river treasure

China, 2005

At the tail end of the Ming era, the people's hero Zhang Xianzhong launched a peasant uprising. In 1644, he and his vast throng of followers conquered Sichuan, and acquired the area's wealth. Zhang then founded a power base that he called the Daxi Dynasty and appointed himself emperor. However, Ming soldiers fought back. When Zhang and his people tried to flee south with their riches in 1,000 boats, Imperial troops sank the fleet.

Historians considered that tale of lost treasure so farfetched that they deemed it a fanciful legend. But in 2005, farmers building an irrigation system off the Minjiang river stumbled upon a set of gold and silver ingots. Their engravings chimed with the folklore. The draw of 'Zhang's gold' sparked an instant flurry of treasure hunting around the site. It was only in 2015 that authorities announced the Zhang tale was real, the quality of engraved gold enabling them to confirm legend as truth.

Official excavations finally began in January 2017. In March, it was announced that a trove of 20,000 gold and silver items had been unearthed. Crucially, scripts etched into many of the artefacts referred to the Daxi Dynasty. Prominent Sichuan archaeologist Gao Dalun said: "The objects spanned the middle and late periods of the Ming Dynasty and came from areas covering more than half of China's territory at the time. They directly show the politics, military and social life during this period."



A golden ingot unearthed from a river at Pengshan District in Meishan City, China's Sichuan Province.
Copyright: Press Association



The Danube priestess' tomb

Germany, 2005

In 2005, archaeologists working around the sprawling Iron Age hillfort settlement at Heuneburg found the grave of a noble child. She was dressed in fine jewellery – including gold brooches. But as the team dug around her resting place, they found a trail of items that led to a much larger tomb nearby.

Five years later, a test dig around that tomb found that it contained gold artefacts. Archaeologists saw that the timber chamber that formed the tomb had caved in centuries ago. Eager to preserve as much of the find as possible, the team mounted a complex operation to remove the entire block of earth in which the tomb rested. They then transported it to a laboratory for deeper analysis.

Their work uncovered a female skeleton among a scattering of gold treasures: two, large boat-shaped brooches; five filigreed spheres; an intricately detailed strip earring almost 1ft long; and 26 ribbed, tubular beads that had once been parts of a necklace. Lead archaeologist, Dirk Krausse wrote “the unusually rich grave goods, conveyed the woman’s membership of a “social elite” that had lived around the Danube”. A fossilised sea urchin and ammonite found with her were consistent with the symbolism of priestesses.

The style of goldsmithing shed new light on the trade routes that the hillfort’s community had exploited, demonstrating “much closer connections with the area south of the Alps than was previously realised”.



Gold speaks from the tomb
of an Iron Age priestess.
Copyright: Professor Dirk Krausse



The Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple hoard

India, 2007

Looming brightly over Trivandrum's city skyline, this temple is one of India's most prominent sites for Vishnu worship. Sree Padmanabhaswamy, an avatar of Vishnu, is the adoptive deity of the Travancore royal dynasty. In the early 18th century, the Travancore Maharaja pillaged riches from several rival chieftains. Though the dynasty's power ceased when India became independent, it continued to preside over the temple – long thought to hold the Maharaja's spoils.

In 2007, a Kerala lawyer sued the Maharaja's descendants on behalf of two Vishnu worshippers, alleging the Travancores had bungled the temple's upkeep and compromised its security. The case soon attracted additional plaintiffs. With pressure mounting, a Travancore elder admitted to the existence of a "secret vault" in the temple. In it, he said, was a hoard that had built up since 800AD. When India's Supreme Court ordered an audit of the temple's contents, investigators were stunned.

There were six vaults, all completely full. And whatever the Maharaja had robbed formed just a tiny part of the hoard. The first search turned up 100,000 gold coins weighing around 798 kg, a set of 18 ft-long gold chains, a gold suit of armour and a diamond-encrusted, gold Vishnu idol. That only scratched the surface. The value of all the gold in the temple was estimated at US\$22 billion. Now, that gold is the focus of a passionate dispute between those who argue it must be used for public purposes and traditionalists who want it to remain the property of Vishnu.



Lady Mei's tomb

China, 2008

A life worthy of epic Chinese cinema was the last thing a group of construction workers expected to find when they dug foundations in Nanjing in 2008. Archaeologists who probed the brickwork the workers had exposed chipped through to a ramp that led down to a tomb. When they entered, they encountered a skeleton showered with astonishingly ornate gold jewellery. Epitaphs on two stone tablets told the story this was Lady Mei of Yunnan; once child concubine and later third concurrent wife of Ming-era duke Mu Bin.

Although she was low in the family hierarchy until the duke's death, Mei later blossomed. When the eldest son of one of her rival wives died, her son assumed succession. In raising the new duke, Mei found her inner noblewoman. She schooled him in filial loyalty and military acumen. His battlefield success confirmed her wisdom. Her journey from mistress to duchess garnered the court's respect. She was just 45 when she died.

The gold jewellery with which Mei was interred conveyed the huge power and status she had acquired. Her intricate, gem-studded pieces were so perfectly preserved they looked freshly crafted – not 500 years old. Adding weight to the jewellery's message of regal influence, Mei's burial at China's ancient capital reflected the significant favour she had earned from the emperor.



A gold hairpin, decorated
with a mix of sapphires
and rubies, found inside
the Ming Dynasty tomb.
*Copyright: Courtesy
inese Cultural Relics*



The Downpatrick bulla

Northern Ireland, 2008

While this is the smallest object in these pages, its gold nevertheless tells a story of great historical significance. Discovered on farmland in the village of Inch, this bulla – a term for miniature bags or amulets made of precious metals – was quickly referred to the National Museums Northern Ireland. Archaeologist Richard Warner carried out an extensive study of the artefact, revealing insights into the work of local artisans from 950 to 800 BC.

Warner noted that, several years prior to the Inch bulla's discovery, a similar one had been found at nearby Cathedral Hill. Furthermore, both areas had later produced other gold rediscoveries. "It can therefore be accepted that Downpatrick was the focus of important Late Bronze Age activity that included metalworking," he wrote. "The motifs and technology of the Inch bulla can be paralleled on some of the best Irish Late Bronze Age artefacts."

He was particularly impressed by the precise patterns that were still visible on the inch-long bulla's durable exterior. He remarked: "the level of technology and skill is outstanding. The finely incised concentric circles are perfect... and the wire bands are exquisite. It is, in short, a tiny masterpiece."

Warner reasoned that the object had been of considerable symbolic or spiritual importance to its wearer. "It is one of the most important gold ornaments to have been found in Ireland in the last decade," he concluded.

Designed as an item of jewellery
known as a 'heart-shaped bulla'.
Copyright: National Museums
Northern Ireland



The Stirling hoard

Scotland, 2009

David Booth was on his first-ever outing as a treasure hunter when he located a landmark set of torcs – ancient neck rings. His find revealed a wealth of information about European metalwork in the Iron Age. Two of the torcs were simple, ribbon-style spirals, each formed out of just 2.5 oz of gold. Their light, delicate shapes showed how small amounts of gold can be made to go a long way. But the other artefacts had even more to tell.

Of the three remaining items, two were fragments from the same half of a broken torc. Despite that damage, Dr Fraser Hunter of National Museums Scotland called the parent object a “technical masterpiece.” He was particularly impressed by how triplets of interlinked patterns ran along each piece all hammered out of one sheet of metal. Judging by that touch, Hunter said, it had been made near Toulouse.

The final piece, a complete torc, was the most fascinating. Intensely detailed, its whole length was filigreed, finished in braided gold adorned with gold-wire coils and tiny, gold spheres. Those techniques, wrote Hunter, “were alien to the Iron Age world, but common in Greek, Etruscan and Roman goldwork, and must indicate a craft worker trained in the Mediterranean.” He added: “We know from French Iron Age finds that goldsmiths from the Mediterranean were working in temperate Europe for powerful clients. Now we can see that those links stretched to Britain as well.”

Three of the Iron Age torcs found, one of which shows unusual craftsmanship, made by someone trained in the Greek or Roman world.
Copyright: National Museums Scotland



The Hanuman Dhoka palace treasure

Nepal, 2011

A five-acre maze of courtyards, temples and rooms, Kathmandu's royal palace, the Hanuman Dhoka, has long attracted the attention of archaeologists. On two occasions, they struck gold. In 1991, a hidden cache of gold and silver jewellery weighing nearly a tonne was found in a tiny chamber close to an opulent space called the 'King's Living Room'. In 2011, that was eclipsed by a find in the palace's nine-storey Basantapur Tower.

The discovery yielded gold and silver utensils and jewellery weighing over 2 tonnes, plus 52 kg of gold coins and unworked, raw gold. Examinations suggested that the gold artefacts dated back to the time of the feudal Malla kings, who ruled between the 12th and 18th centuries. It is likely that the coins originated during the reign of the final Malla king, Jaya Prakash Malla. The gold materials were also thought to have been used in devotional ceremonies. A spokesman for Nepal's culture ministry cited them as "offerings to the gods and goddesses".

That spiritual role of gold in the Malla era was underlined after the tragic destruction of parts of the Hanuman Dhoka in Nepal's devastating 2015 earthquake. When disaster recovery teams picked through the rubble of the Kasthamandap monument – which gives Kathmandu its name – they found saddlestones decorated with gold-leaf mandalas. According to UNESCO experts, these were intended to provide the monument with "cosmological significance".



The Grouville hoard

Jersey, 2012

Patience is a virtue in treasure hunting. After Richard Miles and Reg Mead began to explore farmland on Jersey in 1980, they took *32 years* to find something significant. But when they did, it was historic. A 4.5 ft-long, eight-inch-deep slab of ancient, silver-alloy coins, held together in multiple, dense layers of fossilised soil and oxidation. It weighed nearly 750 kg.

Under conservator Neil Mahrer's watchful eye, Jersey Heritage conducted a delicate, five-year lab operation to separate the estimated 70,000 coins. Once again, patience was key. Halfway through that painstaking process, Mahrer's team gradually uncovered six, gold Iron Age torcs, or neck rings. Thanks to gold's unique quality, they were completely immune to the corrosion that had blighted the coins.

Jersey Heritage curator of archaeology Olga Finch said: "The gold torcs are important to us because they were important to the Celts. They were the equivalent of royal jewellery to these people, and would only have been worn by individuals of high status... samples might reveal more about why the hoard was buried – and identify where [the torcs] came from, giving insights into travel and trade."



A pile of French Iron Age Celtic torques
(and one gold /silver ingot), found
in the Catillon II hoard (discovered 2012
in Jersey) which was believed to have
been buried in the second half
of the 1st century BC.
Copyright: Jersey Heritage



The Thracian gold treasures

Bulgaria, 2012

By 2012, the Bulgarian village of Sveshtari was well known to archaeologists. Three decades earlier, a beautifully carved tomb built in the 3rd century BC was found there. It was the work of the Thracians: an Indo-European people who covered parts of Macedonia, Romania, Greece and Turkey, as well as Bulgaria. They were a truly a commanding society. Ancient scholar Herodotus once wrote: "The Thracians are the most powerful people in the world – except, of course, for the Indians."

In 2012, archaeologists unearthed a further 150 tombs. The largest of them yielded a splendid gold hoard. It comprised a ring adorned with a regal face within a sun-like motif; 100 buttons; 44 female figurines; a set of snake-headed bracelets; a horse-headed ornament and a tiara with animal symbols. The 2,400-year-old pieces were immaculate, as if newly made, deepening experts' understanding of one of the earliest societies to practise sophisticated metallurgy.

Ruled by a caste of warrior nobles, the Thracians had gathered gold from around the Danube to fashion into finery for the highborn. Lead archaeologist Diana Gergova said: "These are completely new patterns in Thracian art that we have now discovered. We did not expect such an enormous surprise." She concluded that the treasure had stemmed from the apogee of the Getae; a Thracian tribe that had once ruled all the others. "The tomb may be linked with the first known Getic ruler, Cothelas," she said.

The tomb included a gold horse's head and 44 applications of female figures.
Copyright: Thomson Reuters



The Apollonia National Park hoard

Israel, 2012

In the summer of 2012, archaeology student Mati Johananoff of Tel Aviv University (TAU) was exploring part of a ruined fortress used during the Crusades. While searching under floor tiles, he unearthed a cracked clay pot stuffed with history-making gold treasure.

Beneath a stopper of mud were 108 coins from North African caliphate the Fatimids. It was one of the most significant caches of medieval currency ever found in Israel. TAU said that the fortress had been an important strategic stronghold for crusaders. In the 13th century, a Mamluk Sultan had captured and destroyed the building.

TAU's Professor Oren Tal said: "It's likely the stash was hidden by one of the crusader leaders who wanted to conceal it from the invading Muslims, and intended to come back for it some day. It was most likely hidden in a broken pot and covered with sand and earth to ensure the Mamluks disregarded it – a strategy that seems to have remained effective for the better part of 700 years."

In their superb condition, the coins provided a vast tapestry of medieval history and folklore. The Fatimids embossed their coins on both sides with concentric circles of early Arabic scripts. These would typically contain stories of sultans' adventures, bolstering their reputations. Professor Tal indicated that the coins would keep decipherers hard at work for some time because they are so dense with information.



A hoard of buried gold coins found in Apollonia National Park.
Copyright: Apollonia-Arsuf Excavation Project



The Saddle Ridge treasure hoard

USA, 2013

In 1901, the director of the San Francisco Mint filed his annual report on the facility's work, judging the year generally successful. However, he wrote, "It is with regret that I record that the count of coin in the mint at the close of the fiscal year revealed a shortage of US\$30,000."

Fast-forward 112 years. A couple who the press would later identify only as John and Mary were walking on their private land in rural San Francisco, when Mary noticed a rusty can poking out of the ground. It could so easily have been overlooked. But the couple tugged the can out of the earth, and found that it was one of eight – all packed with gold coins.

John and Mary had unearthed the largest stash of buried coins in American history. Researchers noted that the haul's face value of \$27,460 was tantalisingly close to the 1901 Mint director's shortfall. This sparked suggestions that the Californian government could claim rights to assets now worth \$10 million. But the coins' issue dates all predated 1901 – so the treasure belonged to John and Mary.

According to coin dealer Don Kagin, who catalogued the find for sale, the manner of the coins' burial hinted that their former owner had prized the value of gold over and above the ability of traditional custodians to handle it. Kagin said: "It was probably someone in the mining industry who was [stashing] his bonuses and not trusting the banks."



Californian mint coins from the Saddle Ridge hoard.
Copyright: saddleridgehoard.com



The Ophel treasure

Jerusalem, 2013

Working at Jerusalem's ancient site the Ophel, just south of Temple Mount, archaeologist Eliat Mazar and her team began to probe an unexplored part of its Byzantine foundations. After mere minutes, they uncovered a large, gold medallion. Instantly, they saw it was embossed with a menorah: the seven-branched candelabra that symbolises Judaism. Nearby were two, large gold earrings and a collection of 36 gold coins adorned with the faces of several, Byzantine emperors.

Dating the gold to the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in the early 7th century, Eliat became convinced that it had been used as a store of wealth. In her view, it was most likely "communal treasure meant to help the sparse Jewish community survive hard times," and had been "earmarked as a contribution towards the building of a new synagogue." Amid the conquest's turmoil, the treasure was probably abandoned.

The medallion spoke to an even higher order. To the left of the menorah there was a ram's-horn shofar, a bugle-like musical instrument often used in Jewish ceremonies. To the right, there was a Torah scroll. Based on those symbols, archaeologists concluded that the medallion was likely the oldest Torah-scroll ornament ever discovered. This gave the whole find a powerful religious significance. The durability of the gold enabled the past to resonate with the present. For Mazar, the find was a "once-in-a-lifetime" event. Even Israel's Prime Minister weighed in, saying: "This is a wonderful gift to the Jewish people."

A 10 cm gold medallion with the Jewish symbols of a menorah, a shofar and a Torah scroll etched into it.
*Copyright: Hanan Isachar/
Alamy Stock Photo*



The Lueneburg hoard

Germany, 2015

While scouring burial mounds at the edge of a field in his north-German town, amateur archaeologist Florian Bautsch spotted a trail of 10 pristine gold coins. That led him to a further 207. Each coin was almost an inch across and weighed just over a fifth of an ounce. Buried among the coins were two, aluminium seals embossed with swastikas. This was Nazi gold.

Examination of the coins revealed that they had come from all over Europe, originating in Austro-Hungary, Belgium and France between 1831 and 1910. But the seals were stamped with the words 'Reichsbank Berlin', so it was clear where they had been collected by the authorities. Scraps of pasteboard stuck to the seals enabled the hoard to be dated to the end of World War II.

Museum Lueneburg archaeologist Edgar Ring suspected the stash originated from a theft committed by a figure within the Nazi finance community. He told the press: "It was either someone who worked at the Reichsbank and had access – which means it could only have been someone who was there in an official role – or somebody who took advantage of the situation when the coins were being transported."

Whoever had hidden the gold, it is likely that they had set it aside as a safe store of wealth for the aftermath of the war, within a country whose monetary system was plunged into ruin by defeat.



Nazi-era gold coins.
Copyright: Thomson Reuters



The Palace of Nestor ancient warrior's tomb

Greece, 2015

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the Palace of Nestor is a pivotal location. Nestor himself appears, showering hospitality upon Odysseus's son Telemachus. The palace has long been of archaeological interest. But it saved perhaps its greatest treasure for 2015.

Husband-and-wife archaeological team Jack Davis and Sharon Stocker were forced by local officials to dig at part of the grounds that they hadn't planned to explore: an unpromising olive grove. They were not hopeful of unearthing anything significant – until they found a stone chamber. Inside was a male skeleton. Evidently a warrior, he was awash with gold, including a necklace of woven chain and other jewellery etched with gods and beasts. His dagger hilt and sword handle were both gold. And gold goblets were cluttered among his torso's bones. It was likely that the cups had been placed across his chest during his interment as a devotional gesture.

According to Jack, this was “one of the most magnificent displays of prehistoric wealth discovered in mainland Greece in the past 65 years.” Despite spending 3,500 years underground, the gold had lost none of its lustre, and opened a portal to the Mycenaeans, the first, Greek organised society. Active between 1600 and 1300 BC, the Mycenaeans were remarkably influential artists, architects, engineers and traders. They strongly influenced Homer's writing. But very little was known of their origins. The warrior's rediscovered riches changed that.

The Lord of the Gold Rings:
The Griffin Warrior of Pylos.
*Copyright: Courtesy of the
Department of Classics,
University of Cincinnati*



The 1715 treasure fleet

USA, 2015

On 31 July 1715, a fierce storm hit the Florida coast. Its force wrecked 11 Spanish galleons that had been sailing home from Havana, their hulls creaking with the weight of gold ingots, jewellery and coins that were then worth 3.5 million pesos (now US\$400 million). In a cruel, ironic twist, the fleet had been transporting the gold from Spanish imperial strongholds in the Americas to help save the motherland from bankruptcy.

In the years immediately after the disaster, the Spanish government launched several, costly salvage missions. When it concluded that it had recovered most of the fleet's cargo, it moved on. In the modern era, Spain has asserted no claim upon any remaining gold. That left the way open for treasure hunters, who have been delving into the shallow waters off Fort Pierce since the 1950s.

Perhaps the most famous recent find at the site was made by Eric Schmitt, whose haul 300 years after the fleet sank included an exceedingly rare, 1715 Tricentennial Royal: a gold coin made in special tribute to King Philip V of Spain and worth \$500,000 alone. Including the one Schmitt found, there are only six in private hands.

Schmitts' efforts are just part of a complex mosaic of expeditions, business interests and stakeholders that has formed around the location in the past few decades. Activities at the site have become an industry in their own right.



Gold rings, jewellery,
religious artefacts and large
silver bar. -1715 Fleet.
Copyright: by John de Bry,
courtesy of 1715 Fleet Society



The Caesarea harbour Arab coin hoard

Israel, 2015

Exploring Caesarea harbour's seabed, five amateur divers were shocked to see vivid glints of gold. Instantly, they doubted it was *real* and thought it was just children's play money. But then they looked closer – and decided to alert the specialists.

It was, in fact, Israel's largest-ever discovery of gold coins. The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) recovered 2,000 from the site, weighing around 6 kg – and worth around \$240,000. Like the Apollonia find of 2012, the coins had been issued under the Fatimid caliphate. They shone new light on the regime's domination of the Middle East in the 10th century.

Kobi Sharvit of IAA's Marine Archaeology Unit said: "Perhaps the treasure was meant to pay the salaries of the Fatimid military garrison that was stationed in Caesarea and protected the city. Or it was money belonging to a large merchant ship that traded between the coastal cities and port on the Mediterranean and sank there."

Israel's Nature and Parks Authority and the Caesarea Development Company said that the "impressive treasure" undoubtedly highlighted "the uniqueness of Caesarea as an ancient port city with rich history and cultural heritage".

IAA coin expert Robert Cole added: "The coins are in an excellent state of preservation, and despite the fact they were at the bottom of the sea for about 1,000 years, they did not require any cleaning or conservation intervention from the metallurgical laboratory. This is because gold is a noble metal and is not affected by air or water."

Hoard of gold coins
found in Caesarea harbor.
Copyright: Thomson Reuters



Sarmatian warrior woman's treasure

Russia, 2015

Amazon has become a catch-all label for any warrior woman of long ago. Indeed, the term has spawned many fictions and myths. Sometimes an archaeological discovery will summon that mythic image of a bow-wielding, warrior priestess back to reality. In the case of this particular rediscovered treasure, gold was central to that summoning.

While preparing the ground for a new airport near Rostov-on-Don in 2015, construction workers stumbled upon 29 burial mounds. Archaeologists flocked to the site. Beside the plundered grave of a male, they found the miraculously untouched tomb of a female. A cluster of arrowheads with which she had been interred provided strong evidence that she had been a sharpshooter. But it was her gold that spoke to her status as an important possibly even religious figure.

On each of her wrists were gold bracelets. Gold earrings rested either side of her skull. At the remains of her waist lay a bulbous, gold phial. Scientists who analysed the phial's contents concluded it was fossilised incense – evidence of a spiritual role. Some of the articles were dated to the 1st Century AD, while others were from the 1st Century BC. This suggested that she had been buried with valued heirlooms. Experts placed her among the fire-worshipping Sarmatians – active for about 900 years up to the 4th century – who had helped to fuel Greek myths about Amazon warrior women.



A Sarmatian-Parthian gold necklace and amulet, 2nd century AD.
Copyright: Tamoikin Art Fund



The Shropshire piano hoard

England, 2016

It is reasonable to expect buried treasure to remain undetected for decades. But what about a hoard that has been quietly on the move, and yet right beneath countless fingertips?

Just before Christmas 2016, piano tuner Martin Backhouse answered a call from a Shropshire school. Puzzled by the sheer flatness of its 110-year-old piano's sound, he carefully removed the keys – and found a row of heavy, fabric pouches underneath. He assumed that the pouches contained mothballs. In fact, they held 633 sovereign coins and 280 half-sovereigns issued between 1847 and 1915. Each coin was in perfect condition.

A coroner established a chain of custody for the piano, noting it was first sold in 1906 to specialist dealers in Essex, 160 miles to the south-east. In 1983, another Essex dealer had sold the piano to a music-loving husband and wife. The pair later moved to Shropshire, and donated the instrument to the school in 2015.

The piano's ownership between its first and second dealers couldn't be determined. But there was a subtle clue pointing to how and why the gold came to be in the piano. A scrap of an old advertising card found in one of the pouches was dated to the era of the Great Depression. This suggested that the coins had been hidden away by someone who had feared losing their assets during the depression and had put their faith in gold's ability to withstand such economic shocks.

The coroner valued the hoard at £500,000.



Gold hoard found stuffed in old piano.
Copyright: SWNS



The Jerusalem Nero coin

Israel, 2016

Despite its size, this small coin carries enormous historical weight. It was found alone, without any other surrounding pieces of currency, by US archaeologists who were working on a site at Mount Zion. The team was intrigued by its position, a short distance from their dig. Evidence suggested that the site had once been a mansion for members of an affluent, priestly class: its walls contained a *mikveh*, or pool for Jewish rituals, and a large bathroom that indicated luxury living.

The coin's inscriptions – NERO CAESAR AVG IMP on the front, and PONTIF MAXTR P III on the back – pinned it to the reign of Nero, one of Rome's most feared emperors. In 70 AD, two years after Nero's death, Rome had sacked Jerusalem amid the First Jewish-Roman War. Excavation co-director Dr Shimon Gibson, from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, described the coin as "a valuable piece of personal property" that had conceivably "ended up outside these structures in the chaos" of Rome's rampage.

He added: "This coin is exceptional. Coins of this type are usually only found in private collections, where we don't have clear evidence as to place of origin." Gibson's colleague Dr Rafael Lewis noted: "Because it is gold, there is no erosion. You can see the name of Nero, the fact that he was an emperor – every bit of information is clear. The gold is also of a very high quality. We are talking about 24 carats."

A gold coin found in
2016 in Jerusalem.
Copyright: Rachel Ward,
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of North Carolina



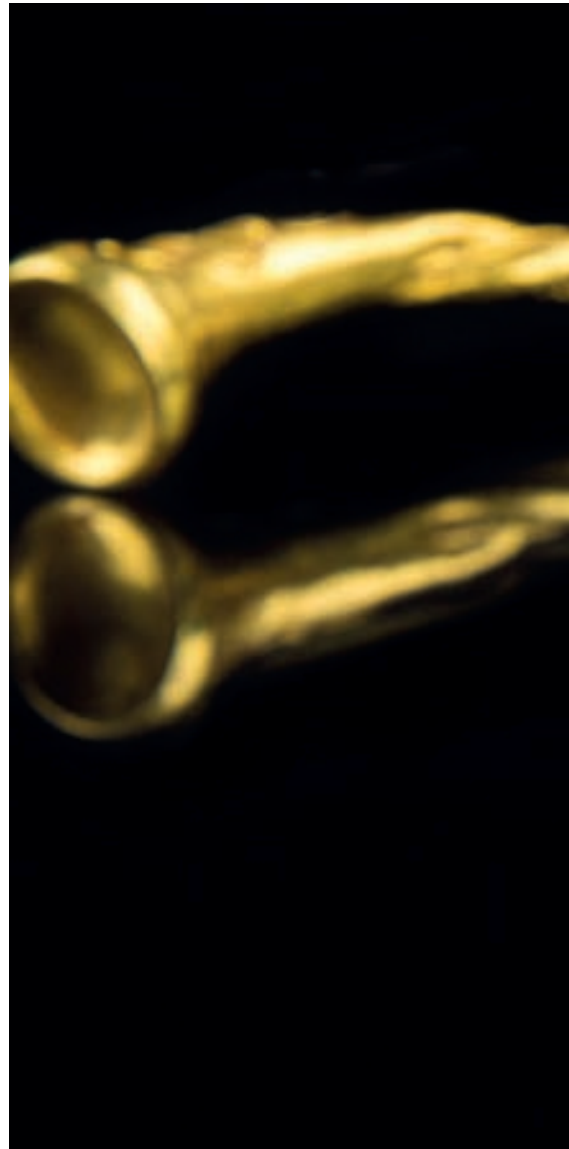
The Leekfrith iron age torcs

England, 2016

As Christmas 2016 approached, friends Mark Hambleton and Joe Kania had thought about hanging up their metal detectors. After 20 years of treasure hunting, they had little to show for it. They decided to give it one more try. This proved an extremely wise decision. After working for few hours on local moorland, Mark saw Joe digging frantically on his hands and knees. "I think I've found something quite good here," said Joe.

In the words of British Museum Iron Age curator Julia Farley, that something was in fact a "unique find of international importance".

The pair had discovered four ornate, gold torcs, or neck rings, from 250-400 BC, weighing between 1 and 8 oz: the oldest haul of Iron Age gold ever found in Britain. The find added weight to archaeologists' conjecture that a small, gold-trading elite had existed across Europe in that era. Farley said that the artefacts "were probably worn by wealthy and powerful women – perhaps people from the Continent who had married into the local community. Piecing together how these objects came to be carefully buried in a Staffordshire field will give us an invaluable insight into life in Iron Age Britain."



The oldest Iron Age jewellery
ever found in Britain.
*Copyright: Staffordshire
County Council*



The wreck of the Bom Jesus

Namibia, 2016

The Namibian government and diamond company De Beers jointly run a prospecting unit called Namdeb. In 2016, the firm cleared a stretch of Namibia's Skeleton Coast for gem mining by building a huge sea wall that curved out from the shoreline. The resulting man-made lagoon was drained and when Namdeb workers broke the uncovered ground, they found a *very* old shipwreck.

Called in by the Namibian government to examine the wreck, a team of archaeologists led by principal investigator Dr Bruno Werz identified it as the *Bom Jesus*: a Portuguese merchant vessel that had vanished on her way to India 500 years before. She had been transporting a wooden chest bulging with 11.5 kg of Spanish and Portuguese gold coins.

Miraculously, the chest had survived. The team worked out that it had been stored in the captain's cabin, but had slipped out as a storm destroyed the ship. After that, a loosened chunk of the hull had fastened the chest to the seabed. Many of the coins were bent, but their gold content had enabled them to withstand centuries of intense pressure from the wreck's timbers. Their markings were pristine.

The coins helped to reconstruct a snapshot of a critical time in naval history. The *Bom Jesus* had sailed in the era of Columbus and Vasco da Gama – a period when Africa was being opened up to the rest of the world, even as that world expanded.



A Spanish gold coin or excelsente from the reign of Ferdinand V of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. Copyright: Reproduced with kind permission of Dr Bruno Werz / the African Institute for Marine and Underwater Research, Exploration and Education (AIMURE)



Emperor Liu He tomb

China, 2016

The year 74 BC was somewhat mixed for young Liu He, member of China's Western Han Dynasty. Thanks to the scheming of an influential minister, he was enthroned as emperor to resolve a succession difficulty. Prince Liu Xu – son of the late Emperor Wu – had been poised to take power, but politicians blocked his ascent amid worries over his behaviour.

After just 27 days on the throne, Liu He himself was deposed, as politicians felt he lacked moral fibre. Later, he was granted the title of Marquis Haihun, which became hereditary.

In 2011, archaeological work began at a burial complex in Jiangxi province that experts identified as the resting place of a 'Marquis Haihun'. Five years later – following intensified excavations – the vast plot yielded 378 gold artefacts weighing 78 kg. Some were highly unusual, such as ingots shaped into horses' hooves, which reflected Han-era aristocrats' love of riding. There were also stacks of sheet-gold plates, which experts cited as a store of wealth that had supported the Haihun line's elevated status.

Most excitingly of all, the gold in the complex helped scientists to confirm the occupant of the main tomb – who had owned all this finery – as the Marquis Haihun: the 27-day emperor. Inscriptions on gold coins found within the tomb, together with others on a jade seal, told archaeologists that this was indeed the grave of Liu He. The surrounding artefacts also comprised the largest cache of Han-era gold ever found.



Templo Mayor Aztec wolf hoard

Mexico, 2017

From 1486 to 1502, the Templo Mayor (Main Temple) archaeological site in downtown Mexico City had been the seat of power for Aztec ruler Ahuitzotl. Given the Aztecs' elaborate use of precious metals, the site had fuelled explorers' curiosity for generations. In the 40 years up to July 2017, Templo Mayor had yielded 205 different treasure finds, 16 of which contained gold. But none of them could match the sheer quality or haunting story of the hoard found there that month.

On the edge of the site, tucked behind the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral, archaeologists found a stone box that had been damaged in the construction of a sewer pipe. Somehow, the workers hadn't thought to open it. When scientists eventually did so, they were thrilled with what they had discovered: the remains of a wolf, surrounded by 22 pieces of delicate sheet-gold adorned with intricate symbols that had clothed the creature in its grave. It was a sacrificial offering, beautifully preserved.

Lead archaeologist Leonardo Lopez said: "These are, without a doubt, the largest and most refined pieces of gold discovered here so far." The circumstances spoke volumes about gold's sacred place within Aztec culture. In its sacrificial state, the wolf represented the solar and war deity Huitzilopochtli. The Aztecs believed that wolves led slain warriors into the afterlife and, as Lopez noted, "took elaborate, symbolic care" of them after death because of what they represented.





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