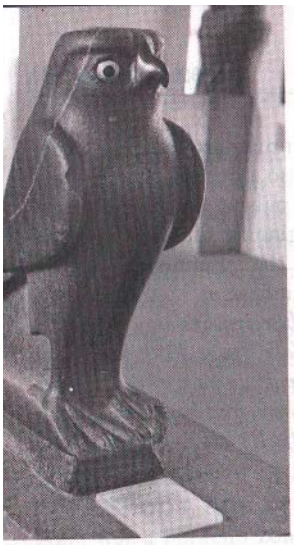
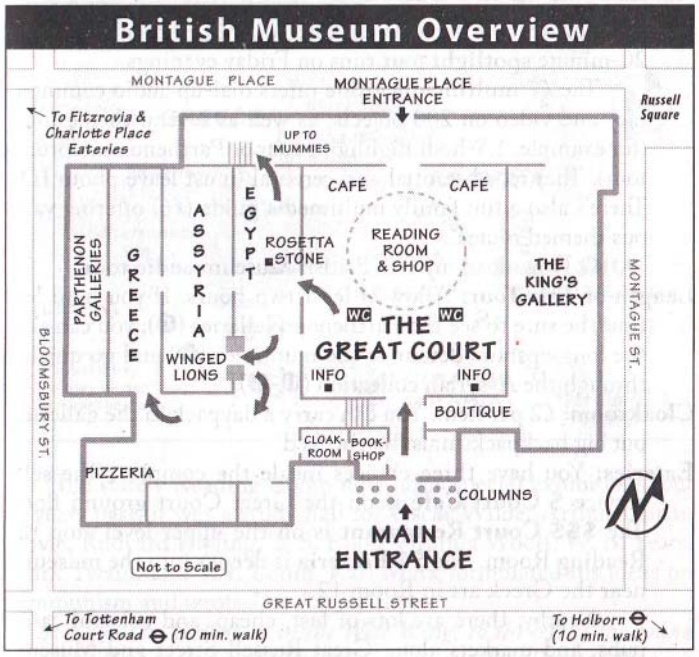


BRITISH MUSEUM TOUR

British Museum Overview



Length of This Tour: Allow at least two hours. If you have less time, be sure to see the Parthenon Galleries (㉗); you can skip the long upstairs detour to the mummies (❻) and go quickly through the Assyrian collection (⓭-⓴).

Cloakroom: £2 per item. You can carry a daypack in the galleries, but big backpacks must be checked.

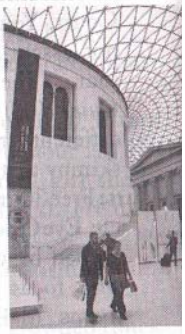
Eateries: You have three choices inside the complex. The self-service **$ Court Café** is on the Great Court ground floor. The **$$$ Court Restaurant** is on the upper level atop the Reading Room. The **$$ Pizzeria** is deeper into the museum, near the Greek art in Room 12.

Nearby, there are lots of fast, cheap, and colorful cafés, pubs, and markets along Great Russell Street and Museum Street. For other recommendations and some handy sit-down chains, see page 406. The sumptuous **$$ Princess Louise** pub is nearby (see page 408). Karl Marx picnicked on the benches near the museum entrance and in nearby Russell Square.

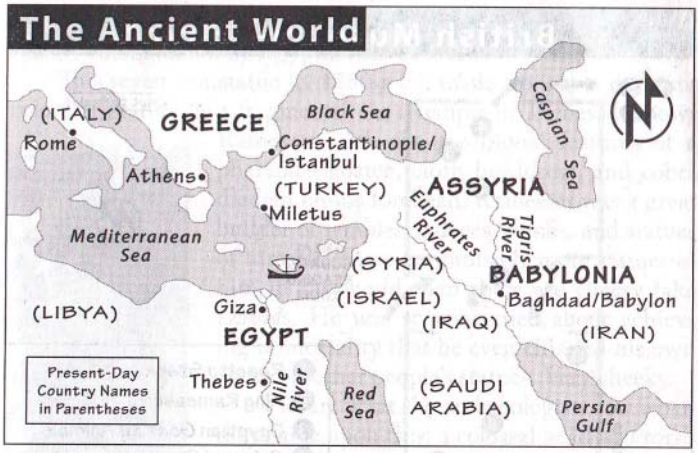
Starring: Rosetta Stone, Egyptian mummies, Assyrian lions, and the Parthenon sculptures.

The Tour Begins

The main entrance on Great Russell Street spills you into the Great Court, a glass-domed space with the round Reading Room in the center. From the Great Court, doorways lead to all wings. To the left are the exhibits on Egypt, Assyria, and Greece—our tour. You'll notice that this tour does not follow the museum's numbered sequence of rooms. Instead, we'll try to hit the highlights as we work chronologically.



Enjoy the Great Court, Europe's largest covered square, which is bigger than a football field. This people-friendly court—delightfully spared from the London rain—was for 150 years one of London's great lost spaces...closed off and gathering dust. Since the year 2000, it's been the 140-foot-wide hub of a two-acre cultural complex.



The stately Reading Room now hosts special exhibitions, but in years past, it was a study hall for Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats, Mark Twain, and V. I. Lenin. Karl Marx formulated his ideas on communism and wrote *Das Kapital* here.

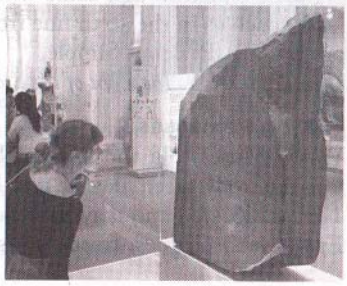
• *The Egyptian Gallery is in the West Wing, to the left of the round Reading Room. Enter the Egyptian Gallery. The Rosetta Stone is directly in front of you.*

ANCIENT EGYPT

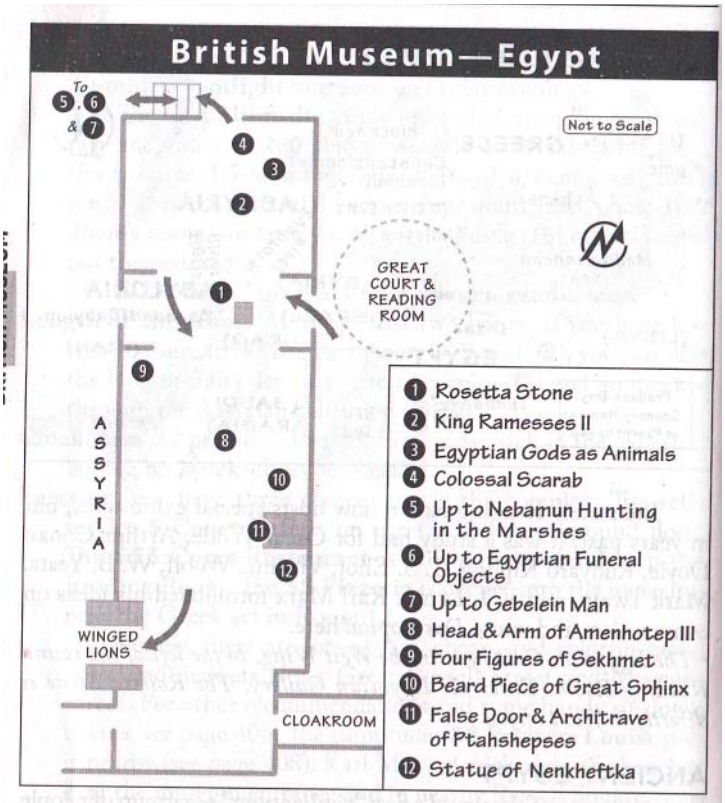
Egypt was one of the world's first "civilizations"—a group of people with a government, religion, art, free time, and a written language. The Egypt we think of—pyramids, mummies, pharaohs, and guys who walk funny—lasted from 3000 to 1000 B.C. with hardly any change in the government, religion, or arts. Imagine two millennia of Nixon.

❶ The Rosetta Stone

When this rock was unearthed in the Egyptian desert in 1799, it was a sensation in Europe. This black slab, dating from 196 B.C., caused a quantum leap in the study of ancient history. Finally, Egyptian writing could be decoded.



The hieroglyphic writing in the upper part of the stone was indecipherable for a thousand years. Did a picture of a bird mean "bird"? Or was it a sound, forming part of a larger word, like "burden"? As it



turned out, hieroglyphics are a complex combination of the two, surprisingly more phonetic than symbolic. (For example, the hieroglyph that looks like a mouth or an eye is the letter "R.")

The Rosetta Stone allowed linguists to break the code. It contains a single inscription repeated in three languages. The bottom third is plain old Greek (find your favorite frat or sorority), while the middle is medieval Egyptian. By comparing the two known languages with the one they didn't know, translators figured out the hieroglyphics.

The breakthrough came when they discovered that the large ovals (such as in the sixth line from the top) represented the name of the ruler, Ptolemy. Simple.

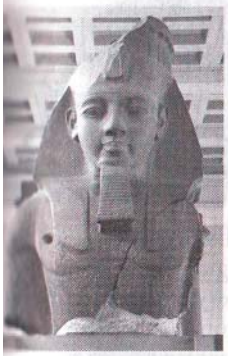
• *In the gallery to the right of the Stone, find the huge head of Ramesses.*

❷ King Ramesses II

When Moses told the king of Egypt, "Let my people go!" this was the stony-faced look he got. Ramesses II ruled for 66 years (c. 1290-1223 B.C.) and may have been in power when Moses cursed Egypt with plagues, freed the Israeli slaves, and led them out of

Egypt to their homeland in Israel (according to the Bible, but not exactly corroborated by Egyptian chronicles).

This seven-ton statue (c. 1250 B.C.), made from two different colors of granite, is a fragment from a temple in Thebes. It shows Ramesses with the traditional features of a pharaoh—goatee, cloth headdress, and cobra diadem on his forehead. Ramesses was a great builder of temples, palaces, tombs, and statues of himself. There are probably more statues of him in the world than there are cheesy fake *David*s. He was so concerned about achieving immortality that he even chiseled his own name on other people's statues. Very cheeky.

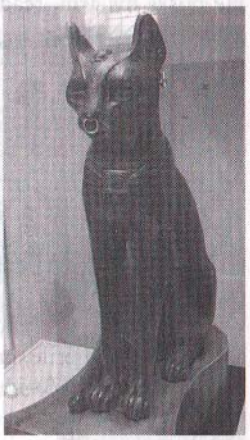


Picture what the archaeologists saw when they came upon this: a colossal head and torso separated from the enormous legs and toppled into the sand—all that remained of the works of a once-great pharaoh. Kings, megalomaniacs, and workaholics, take note.

• *Say, "Ooh, heavy," and climb the ramp behind Ramesses, looking for animals.*

❸ Egyptian Gods as Animals

Before technology made humans the alpha animal on earth, it was easier to appreciate our fellow creatures. Animals were stronger, swifter, and fiercer than feeble *Homo sapiens*. The Egyptians worshipped animals as incarnations of the gods.



Though the displays here change, you may see the powerful ram—the god Amun (king of the gods)—protecting a puny pharaoh under his powerful chin. The falcon is Horus, the god of the living. The speckled, standing hippo (with lion head) is Taweret, protectress of childbirth. Her stylized breasts and pregnant belly are supported by ankhs, symbols of life. (Is Taweret grinning or grimacing in labor?) Finally, the cat (with ear- and nose-rings) served Bastet, the popular goddess of stress relief.

Scattered around the floor are huge stone boxes. The famous mummies of ancient Egypt were wrapped in linen and then encased in finely decorated wooden coffins, which were then placed in these massive stone outer coffins.

• *At the end of the Egyptian Gallery is a big stone beetle.*

❹ Colossal Scarab

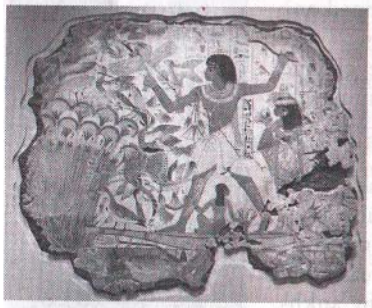
This species of beetle would burrow into the ground, then reappear—it's a symbol of resurrection, like the sun rising and setting, or death and rebirth. Scarab amulets were placed on mummies' chests to protect the spirit's heart from acting impulsively. Pharaohs wore the symbol of the beetle, and tombs and temples were decorated with them (this one, from c. 332 B.C., probably once sat in a temple). The hieroglyph for scarab meant "to come into being."

Like the scarab, Egyptian culture was buried—first by Greece, then by Rome. Knowledge of the ancient writing died, condemning the culture to obscurity. But since the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, Egyptology has boomed, and Egypt has come back to life.

• *You can't call Egypt a wrap until you visit the mummies upstairs. Continue to the end of the gallery and up the West Stairs (four flights or elevator) to floor 3. At the top, turn left into Room 61 (a.k.a. the Michael Cohen Gallery), with objects and wall paintings from the tomb of Nebamun. As you enter the room, veer slightly left and head to the far wall to find a...*

❺ Painting of Nebamun Hunting in the Marshes

Nebamun stands in a reed boat, gliding through the marshes. He raises his arm, ready to bean a bird with a snakelike hunting stick. On the right, his wife looks on, while his daughter crouches between his legs, a symbol of fatherly protection.



This nobleman walks like Egyptian statues look—stiff and flat, like he was just run over by a pyramid. We see the torso from the front and everything else—arms, legs, face—in profile, creating the funny walk that has become an Egyptian cliché. (As in an early version of Cubism, we see various perspectives at once.)

But the stiffness is softened by a human touch. It's a family snapshot of loved ones from a happy time. The birds, fish, and plants are painted realistically, like encyclopedia entries. (The first "paper" came from papyrus plants like the bush on the left.) The only unrealistic element is the house cat (thigh-high, in front of the

man) acting as a retriever—possibly the only cat in history that ever did anything useful.

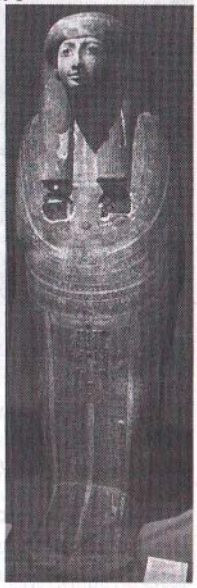
When Nebamun passed into the afterlife, his awakening soul could look at this painting (c. 1350 B.C.) on the tomb wall and think of his wife and daughter—doing what they loved for all eternity.

• Browse through Rooms 62-63, filled with displays in glass cases. There are several corpses on display. Find yourself a mummy. In other glass cases you'll find coffins, tomb paintings, canopic jars, statuettes, even animal mummies. These objects all have something to do with...

❻ The Egyptian Funeral

Mummifying a body is much like following a recipe. First, disembowel it (but leave the heart inside), then pack the cavities with pitch, and dry it with natron, a natural form of sodium carbonate (and, I believe, the active ingredient in Twinkies). Then carefully bandage it head to toe with hundreds of yards of linen strips. Let it sit 2,000 years, and...*voilà!* Or just dump the corpse in the desert and let the hot, dry, bacteria-killing Egyptian sand do the work—you'll get the same results.

The mummy was placed in a wooden coffin, which was put in a stone coffin, which was placed in a tomb. (The pyramids were supersized tombs for the rich and famous.) The result is that we now have Egyptian bodies that are as well preserved as Larry King.



The internal organs were preserved alongside the mummy in canopic jars, and small-scale statuettes of the deceased *(shabtis)* were scattered around. Written in hieroglyphs on the coffins and the tomb walls were burial rites from the Book of the Dead. These were magical spells to protect the body and crib notes for the waking soul, who needed to know these passwords to get past the guardians of eternity.

Many of the mummies here are from the time of the Roman occupation, when fine memorial portraits painted in wax became popular. X-ray photos in the display cases tell us more about these people.

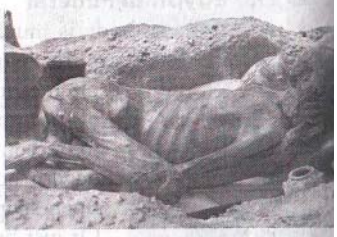
Don't miss the animal mummies. Cats (Room 62) were popular pets. They were also considered incarnations of the cat-headed

goddess Bastet. Worshipped in life as the sun god's allies, preserved in death, and memorialized with statues, cats were given the adulation they've come to expect ever since.

• *Linger in Rooms 62 and 63, but remember that eternity is about the amount of time it takes to see this entire museum. In Room 64, in a glass case, you'll find what's left of a visitor who tried to see it all...*

❼ Gebelein Man, Known as "Ginger"

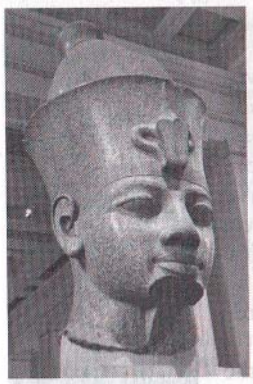
This man died 5,400 years ago, a thousand years before the pyramids. His people buried him in the fetal position, where he could "sleep" for eternity. The hot sand naturally dehydrated and protected the body. With him are a few of his possessions: bowls, beads, and the flint blade next to his arm. His grave was covered with stones. Named "Ginger" by scientists for his wisps of red hair, this man from a distant time seems very human.



• *Backtrack to Room 61 and head back down the stairs to the Egyptian Gallery and the Rosetta Stone. Just past the Rosetta Stone, find a huge head (facing away from you) with a hat like a bowling pin.*

❽ Head and Arm of a Statue of Amenhotep III

Art served as propaganda for the pharaohs, kings who called themselves gods on earth. Put this red-granite head (c. 1370 B.C.) on top of an enormous body (which still stands in Egypt), and you have the intimidating image of an omnipotent ruler who demands servile obedience. Next to the head is, appropriately, the pharaoh's powerful fist—the long arm of the law.



Amenhotep's crown is actually two crowns in one. The pointed upper half is the royal cap of Upper Egypt. This rests on the flat, fez-like crown symbolizing Lower Egypt. A pharaoh wearing both crowns together is bragging that he rules a combined Egypt. As both "Lord of the Two Lands" and "High Priest of Every Temple," the pharaoh united church and state.

• *Along the wall to the left of the red-granite head (as you're facing it) are four black lion-headed statues.*

❾ Four Figures of the Goddess Sekhmet

The lion-headed goddess Sekhmet looks pretty sedate here (in these sculptures dating to c. 1360 B.C.), but she could spring into a

fierce crouch when crossed. She was the pharaoh's personal bodyguard, who could burn his enemies to a crisp with flaming arrows.

The gods ruled the Egyptian cosmos like dictators in a big banana republic (or the US Congress). Egyptians bribed their gods for favors, offering food, animals, or money, or erecting statues like these.

Sekhmet holds an ankh. This key-shaped cross was the hieroglyph meaning "life" and was a symbol of eternal life. Later, it was adopted as a Christian symbol because of its cross shape and religious overtones.

• *Continuing down the Egyptian Gallery, a few paces directly in front of you and to the left, find a glass case containing a...*

⓾ Beard Piece of the Great Sphinx

The Great Sphinx—a statue of a pharaoh-headed lion—crouches in the shadow of the Great Pyramids in Cairo. Time shaved off the sphinx's soft, goatee-like limestone beard, and a piece is now preserved here in a glass case. This hunk of stone is only a whisker—about three percent of the massive beard—giving an idea of the scale of the six-story-tall, 250-foot-long statue.

The Sphinx is as old as the pyramids (c. 2500 B.C.), built during the time known to historians as the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 B.C.), but this beard may have been added later, during a restoration (c. 1420 B.C., or perhaps even later under Ramesses II).

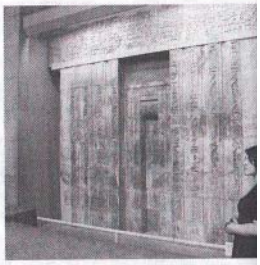
• *Ten steps past the Sphinx's soul patch is a 10-foot-tall, red-tinted "building" covered in hieroglyphics.*

⓫ False Door and Architrave of Ptahshepses

This limestone "false door" (c. 2400 B.C.) was a ceremonial entrance (never meant to open) for a sealed building, called a *mastaba,* that marked the grave of a man named Ptahshepses. The hieroglyphs of eyes, birds, and rabbits serve as his epitaph, telling his life story, how he went to school with the pharaoh's kids, became an honored vizier, and married the pharaoh's daughter.

The deceased was mummified, placed in a wooden coffin that was encased in a stone coffin, then in a stone sarcophagus (like

the **red-granite sarcophagus** in front of Ptahshepses' door), and buried 50 feet beneath the *mastaba* in an underground chamber.



Mastabas like Ptahshepses' were decorated inside and out with statues, steles, and frescoes like those displayed nearby. These pictured things that the soul would find useful in the next life—magical spells, lists of the deceased's accomplishments, snapshots of the deceased and his family while alive, and secret passwords from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. False doors like this allowed the soul (but not grave robbers) to come and go.

• *Just past Ptahshepses' false door is a glass case with a red-tinted statue.*

⓬ Statue of Nenkheftka

Painted statues such as this one (c. 2400 B.C.) represented the soul of the deceased. Meant to keep alive the memory and personality of the departed, this image would have greeted Nenkheftka's loved ones when they brought food offerings to place at his feet to nourish his soul. (In the mummification rites, the mouth was ritually opened, to prepare it to eat soul food.)

In ancient Egypt, you *could* take it with you. The Egyptians believed that after death, your soul lived on, enjoying its earthly possessions—sometimes including servants, who might be walled up alive with their dead master. (Remember that even the great pyramids were just big tombs for Egypt's most powerful.)

Statues functioned as a refuge for the soul on its journey after death. The rich scattered statues of themselves everywhere, just in case. Statues needed to be simple and easy to recognize, mug shots for eternity: stiff, arms down, chin up, nothing fancy. This one has all the essential features, like the simplified human figures on international traffic signs. To a soul caught in the fast lane of astral travel, this symbolic statue would be easier to spot than a more detailed one.

With their fervent hope for life after death, Egyptians created calm, dignified art that seems built for eternity.

• *Relax. One civilization down, two to go. Near the end of the gallery, on the right, are two huge, winged Assyrian lions (with bearded human heads) standing guard over the Assyrian exhibit halls.*

ANCIENT ASSYRIA

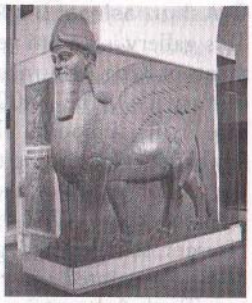
Long before Saddam Hussein, Iraq was home to other palace-building, iron-fisted rulers—the Assyrians.

Assyria was the lion, the king of beasts of early Middle Eastern civilizations. These Semitic people from the agriculturally challenged hills of northern Iraq became traders and conquerors, not farmers. They conquered their southern neighbors and dominated the Middle East for 300 years (c. 900-600 B.C.).

Their strength came from a superb army (chariots, mounted cavalry, and siege engines), a policy of terrorism against enemies ("I tied their heads to tree trunks all around the city," reads a royal inscription), ethnic cleansing and mass deportations of the vanquished, and efficient administration (roads and express postal service). They have been called the "Romans of the East."

The British Museum's valuable collection of Assyrian artifacts has become even more priceless since the recent destruction of ancient sites in the Middle East by ISIS terrorists.

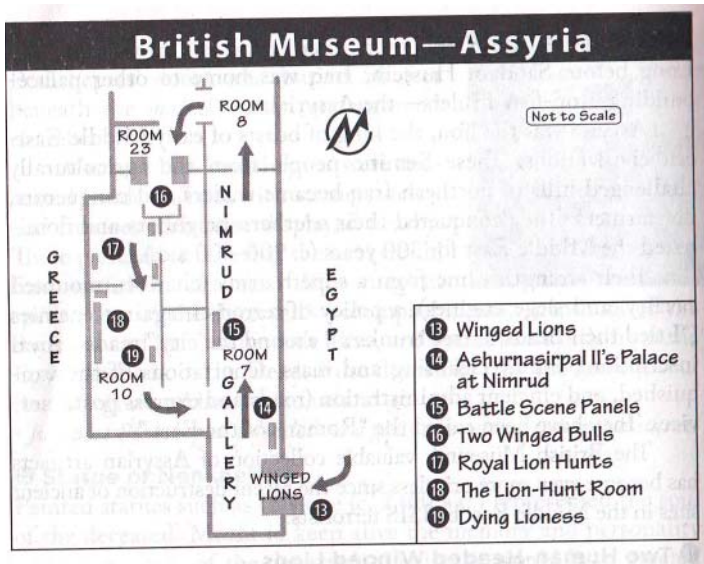
⓲ Two Human-Headed Winged Lions



These stone lions guarded an Assyrian palace (11th-8th century B.C.). With the strength of a lion, the wings of an eagle, the brain of a man, and the beard of ZZ Top, they protected the king from evil spirits and scared the heck out of foreign ambassadors and left-wing newspaper reporters. (What has five legs and flies? Take a close look. These winged quintupeds, which appear complete from both the front and the side, could guard both directions at once.)

Carved into the stone between the bearded lions' loins, you can see one of civilization's most impressive achievements—writing. This wedge-shaped **(cuneiform)** script is the world's first written language, invented 5,000 years ago by the Sumerians (of southern Iraq) and passed down to their less-civilized descendants, the Assyrians.

• *Walk between the lions, glance at the large reconstructed wooden gates from an Assyrian palace, and turn right into the long, narrow red gallery (Room 7) lined with stone relief panels.*



⓮ Ashurnasirpal II's Palace at Nimrud

This gallery is a mini version of the throne room and royal apartments of King Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Nimrud (9th century B.C.). The 30,000-square-foot palace was built atop a 50-acre artificial mound. The new palace was inaugurated with a 10-day banquet (according to an inscription), where the king picked up the tab for 69,574 of his closest friends. Entering, you would have seen the king on his throne at the far end, surrounded by these pleasant, sand-colored, gypsum relief panels (which were, however, originally painted and varnished).

That's Ashurnasirpal himself in the **first panel on your right,** with braided beard, earring, and fez-like crown, flanked by his supernatural hawk-headed henchmen, who sprinkle incense on him with pinecones. The bulging forearms tell us that Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 B.C.) was a conqueror's conqueror who enjoyed his reputation as a merciless warrior, using torture and humiliation as part of his distinctive management style. The room's panels chronicle his bloody career.

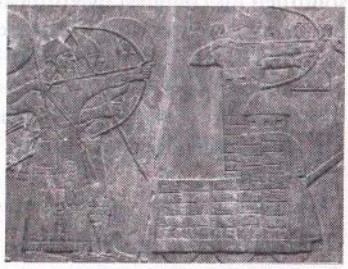
Under Ashurnasirpal's reign, the Assyrians dominated the Mideast from their capital at Nineveh (near modern Mosul). Ashurnasirpal II proved his power by building a brand-new palace in nearby Nimrud (called "Calah" in the Bible).

The cuneiform inscription running through the center of the panel is Ashurnasirpal's résumé: "The king who has enslaved all

mankind, the mighty warrior who steps on the necks of his enemies, tramples all foes and shatters the enemy; the weapon of the gods, the mighty king, the King of Assyria, the king of the world, B.A., M.B.A., Ph.D., etc...."

• *A dozen paces farther down, on the left wall, are several relief panels (among many in this room that are worth focusing on.*

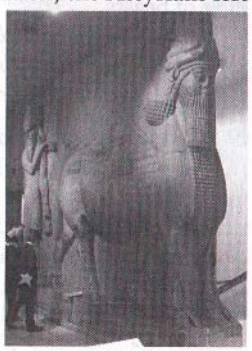
⓯ Panels with Battle Scenes



These relief panels show Assyria at war. Find the panel in which the Assyrians lay siege with a crude "tank" that shields them as they advance to the city walls to smash down the gate with a battering ram. The king stands a safe distance away behind the juggernaut and bravely shoots arrows.

In another panel nearby (called *Enemy Escape*), enemy soldiers flee the slings and arrows of outrageous Assyrians by swimming across the Euphrates, using inflated animal bladders as life preservers. Their friends in the castle downstream applaud their ingenuity.

Next (in *Review of Prisoners*), prisoners are paraded before the Assyrian king, who is shaded by a parasol. Ashurnasirpal II sneers and tells the captured chief, "Drop and give me 50." Above the prisoners' heads, we see the rich spoils of war—elephant tusks, metal pots, and so on. The Assyrians, whose economy depended on booty, depopulated conquered lands with slavery and ethnic cleansing, then moved in Assyrian settlers. Despite their ruthless reputation, the Assyrians left a legacy as builders, rather than destroyers.



• *Exit the gallery at the far end, then hang a U-turn left. Pause at the entrance of Room 10c to see the impressive...*

⓰ Two Winged Bulls from the Palace of Sargon

These marble bulls (c. 710-705 B.C.) guarded the entrance to the city of Dur-Sharrukin ("Sargonsburg"), a new capital (near Nineveh/Mosul) with vast pal-

aces built by Sargon II (r. 721-705 B.C.). The 30-ton bulls were cut from a single block, tipped on their sides, then dragged to their place by POWs. (In modern times, when the British transported them here, they had to cut them in half; you can see the horizontal cracks through the bulls' chests.)

Sargon II gained his reputation as a general by subduing the Israelites after a three-year siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 17:1-6). He solidified his conquest by ethnically cleansing the area and deporting many Israelites (inspiring legends of the "Lost" Ten Tribes).

In 710 B.C., while these bulls were being carved for his palace, Sargon II marched victoriously through the streets of Babylon (near present-day Baghdad), having put down a revolt there against him. His descendants would also have to deal with the troublesome Babylonians.

• *Sneak between these bulls and veer right (into Room 10), where horses are being readied for the big hunt.*

⓱ Royal Lion Hunts from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal

Lion hunting was Assyria's sport of kings. On the right wall are horses; on the left are the hunting dogs. And next to them, lions, resting peacefully in a garden, unaware that they will shortly be rousted, stampeded, and slaughtered.

Lions lived in Mesopotamia up until modern times, and it was the king's duty to keep the lion population down to protect farmers and herdsmen. This duty soon became sport, with staged hunts and zoo-bred lions, as the kings of men proved their power by taking on the king of beasts.

• *Continue ahead into the larger lion-hunt room. Reading the panels like a comic strip, start on the right and gallop counterclockwise.*

⓲ The Lion-Hunt Room

In these panels (c. 650 B.C.), the king's men release lions from their cages, then riders on horseback herd them into an enclosed arena. The king has them cornered. Let the slaughter begin. The chariot carries King Ashurbanipal, the great-grand-

son of Sargon II (not to be confused with Ashurnasirpal II, who ruled 200 years earlier, mentioned previously).

The last of Assyria's great kings, Ashurbanipal has reigned now for 50 years. Having left a half-dozen corpses in his wake, he moves on, while spearmen hold off lions attacking from the rear.

• *At about the middle of the long wall...*

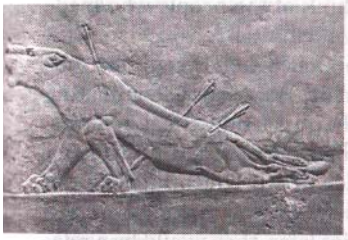
The fleeing lions, cornered by hounds, shot through with arrows, and weighed down by fatigue, begin to fall. The lead lion carries on even while vomiting blood.

This low point of Assyrian cruelty is, perhaps, the high point of their artistic achievement. It's a curious coincidence that civilizations often produce their greatest art in their declining years. Hmm.

• *On the wall opposite the vomiting lion is the...*

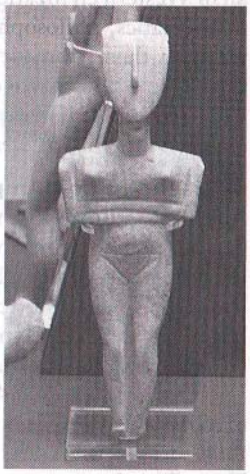
⓳ Dying Lioness

A lion roars in pain and frustration. She tries to run, but her body is too heavy. Her muscular hind legs, once a source of power, are now paralyzed.



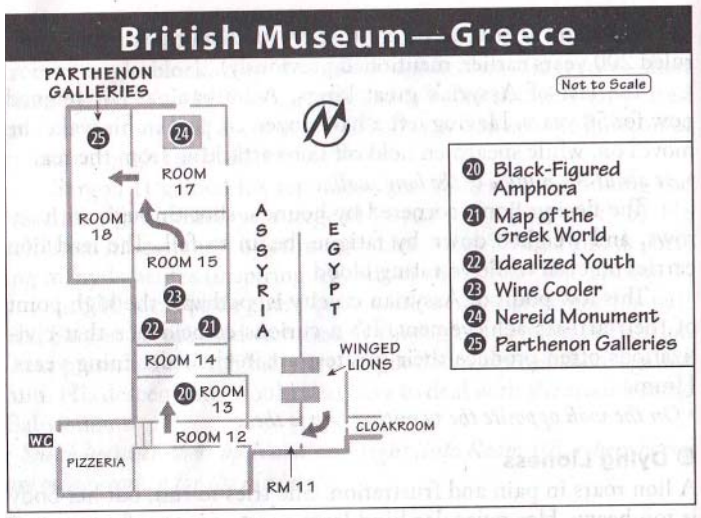
Like these brave, fierce lions, Assyria's once-great warrior nation was slain. Shortly after Ashurbanipal's death, Assyria was conquered, and its capital at Nineveh was sacked and looted by an ascendant Babylon (612 B.C.). The mood of tragedy, dignity, and proud struggle in a hopeless cause makes this dying lioness one of the most beautiful of human creations.

• *Exit the lion-hunt room at the far end. Make your way back to the huge, winged lions who welcomed you to Assyria. Exit between them and make a U-turn to the right to head for the Greek section. Pass through Rooms 11-12 and turn right (if you're hungry, you can go straight to the Pizzeria) into Room 13, filled with Greek vases in glass cases.*



ANCIENT GREECE

In this room, you'll see lots of pottery—from the earliest, with geometric patterns (8th century B.C.), to painted black silhouettes on the natural orange clay, and then a few crudely done red human figures on black backgrounds. As you



marvel at these beautiful creations, think of the people who made them.

The history of ancient Greece (600 B.C.-A.D. 1) could be subtitled "making order out of chaos." While Assyria was dominating the Middle East, "Greece"—a gaggle of warring tribes roaming the Greek peninsula—was floundering in darkness. But by about 700 B.C., these tribes began settling down, experimenting with democracy, forming self-governing city-states, and making ties with other city-states. Scarcely two centuries later, they would be a relatively united community and the center of the civilized world.

During its Golden Age (500-430 B.C.), Greece set the tone for all of Western civilization to follow. Democracy, theater, literature, mathematics, philosophy, science, gyros, art, and architecture as we know them, were virtually all invented by a single generation of Greeks in a small town of maybe 80,000 citizens.

• *Roughly in the middle of Room 13 is a Z-shaped glass case marked* #8. *On the lower shelf, the item marked* #231 *is a...*

20 Black-Figured Amphora with Achilles Killing Penthesilea

Greeks poured wine from jars like this one, which is painted with a legend from the Trojan War. The Trojan War (c. 1200 B.C.)—part fact but mostly legend—symbolized Greece's long struggle to rise above war and chaos.

On the vessel (540-530 B.C.), Achilles of Greece faces off against the Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea, who was fighting for Troy. (The Amazons were a legendary race of

warrior women who cut off one breast to facilitate their archery skills.) Achilles bears down, plunging a spear through her neck, as blood spurts. In her dying moment, Penthesilea looks up, her gaze locking on Achilles. His eyes bulge wide, and he falls instantly in love with her. She dies, and Achilles is smitten.

Greek pottery was a popular export product for the sea-trading Greeks. On this jar, see the names of the two enemies/lovers ("AXILEV" and "PENOESIIEA") as well as the signature of the craftsman, Exekias.

• *Continue to Room 15, then relax on a bench and read, surrounded by statues and vases in glass cases. On the entrance wall, find a...*

㉑ Map of the Greek World, 520-430 B.C.

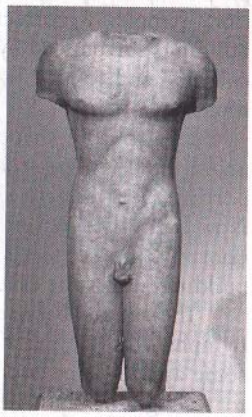
After Greece drove out Persian invaders in 480 B.C., the city of Athens became the most powerful of the city-states and the center of the Greek world. Golden Age Greece was never really a full-fledged empire, but more a common feeling of unity among Greek-speaking people.

A century after the Golden Age, Greek culture was spread still farther by Alexander the Great, who conquered the Mediterranean world and beyond (including Persia). By 300 B.C., the "Greek" world stretched from Italy and Egypt to India (including most of what used to be the Assyrian Empire). Two hundred years later, this Greek-speaking Hellenistic Empire was conquered by the Romans.

• *There's a nude male statue (missing his arms and legs) on the left side of the room.*

㉒ Torso of an Idealized Youth (Kouros)

The Greeks saw their gods in human form...and human beings were godlike. They invented a statue type—the kouros (literally, "youth")—to showcase idealized bodies. In this example (c. 520-510 B.C.), the youth would have exemplified the divine orderliness of the universe with his once perfectly round head (it's now missing), symmetrical pecs, and navel in the center. The ideal man was geometrically perfect, a balance of opposites, the Golden Mean. In a statue, that meant finding the right balance between movement and stillness, between realistic human anatomy (with human flaws) and the perfection of a Greek god. Our youth is still a bit uptight, stiff as the rock from which he's carved. But—as we'll see—in

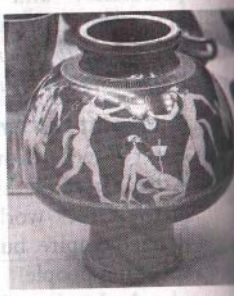


just a few short decades, the Greeks would cut loose and create realistic statues that seemed to move like real humans.

• *Two-thirds of the way down Room 15 (on the left) is a glass case containing a vase. (Circle the glass case to take in both sides.)*

㉓ Red-Figured Wine Cooler Signed by Douris as Painter

This clay vessel (490 B.C.), called a *psykter,* would have been topped off with wine and floated in a bowl of cooling water. Its red-figure drawings show satyrs at a *symposium,* or drinking party. These half-man/half-animal creatures (notice their tails) had a reputation for lewd behavior, reminding the balanced and moderate Greeks of their rude roots.

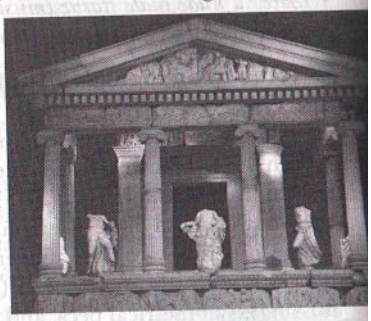


The reveling figures painted on this jar are realistic and three-dimensional; their movements are more naturalistic than the literally three-dimensional but quite stiff kouros. The Greeks are beginning to conquer the natural world in art. The art, like life, is more in balance. And speaking of "balance," if that's a Greek sobriety test, revel on.

• *Carry on into Room 17 and sit facing the Greek temple at the far end.*

㉔ Nereid Monument

Greek temples (like this reconstruction of a temple-shaped tomb from Xanthos, c. 390-380 B.C.) housed a statue of a god or goddess. Unlike Christian churches, which serve as meeting places, Greek temples were the gods' homes. Worshippers gathered outside, so the most impressive part of the temple was its exterior. Temples were rectangular buildings surrounded by rows of columns and topped by slanted roofs.



The triangle-shaped space above the columns—the pediment—is filled with sculpture. Supporting the pediment are decorative relief panels, called metopes. Now look through the columns to the building itself. Above the doorway, another set of relief panels—the frieze—runs around the building (under the eaves).

The statues between the columns are Nereids—friendly sea nymphs with dramatic wavelike poses and windblown clothes; some appear to be borne aloft by sea animals. Notice the sculptor's delight in capturing the body in motion, and the way the wet clothes cling to the figures' anatomy.

Next, we'll see pediment, frieze, and metope decorations from Greece's greatest temple.

• *Enter through the glass doors labeled* Parthenon Galleries. *(The rooms branching off the entryway usually have helpful exhibits that reconstruct the Parthenon and its once-colorful sculptures.)*

㉕ Parthenon Galleries

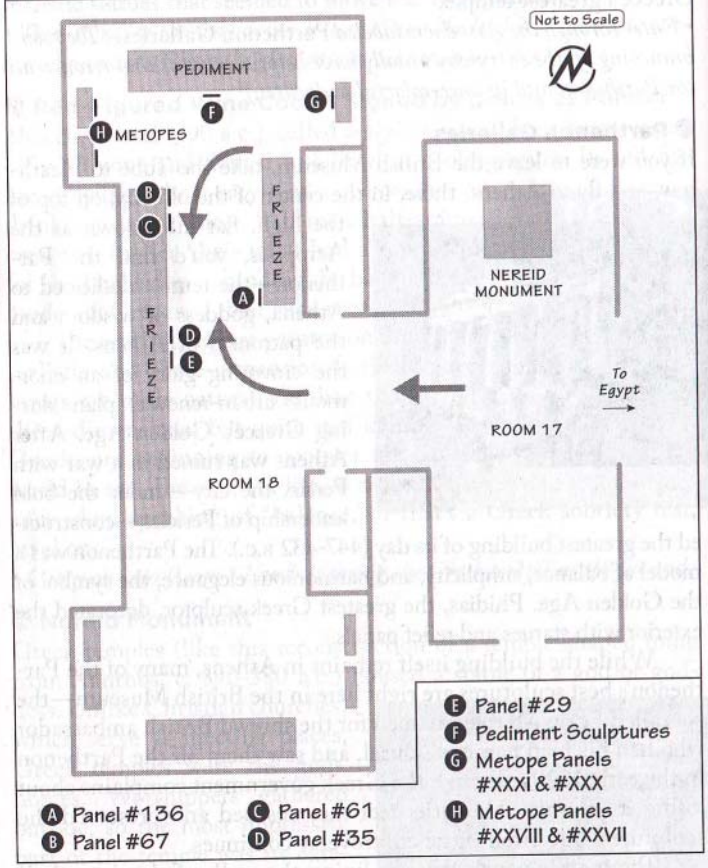
If you were to leave the British Museum, take the Tube to Heathrow, and fly to Athens, there, in the center of the old city, on top of the high, flat hill known as the Acropolis, you'd find the Parthenon—the temple dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom and the patroness of Athens. It was the crowning glory of an enormous urban-renewal plan during Greece's Golden Age. After Athens was ruined in a war with Persia, the city—under the bold leadership of Pericles—constructed the greatest building of its day (447-432 B.C.). The Parthenon was a model of balance, simplicity, and harmonious elegance, the symbol of the Golden Age. Phidias, the greatest Greek sculptor, decorated the exterior with statues and relief panels.

While the building itself remains in Athens, many of the Parthenon's best sculptures are right here in the British Museum—the so-called Elgin Marbles, named for the shrewd British ambassador who had his men hammer, chisel, and saw them off the Parthenon in the early 1800s. Though the Greek government complains about losing its marbles, the Brits feel they rescued and preserved the sculptures. The often-bitter controversy continues.

The marble panels you see lining the walls of this large hall are part of the frieze that originally ran around the exterior of the Parthenon, under the eaves. The statues at either end of the hall once filled the Parthenon's triangular-shaped pediments. Near the pediment sculptures, we'll also find the relief panels known as metopes.

The Frieze: These 56 relief panels show Athens' "Fourth of July" parade, celebrating the birth of the city. On this day, citizens marched up the Acropolis to symbolically present a new robe to the 40-foot-tall, gold-and-ivory statue of Athena housed in the Par-

British Museum—Parthenon Galleries



thenon. The grand parade featured chariots, musicians, children, animals for sacrifice, and young maidens with offerings.

• *Start at the panels by the entrance* ***(#136),*** *and work counterclockwise.*

Men on horseback lead the parade, all heading in the same direction—uphill. Prance on.

Notice the muscles and veins in the horses' legs and the intricate folds in the cloaks and dresses. Some panels have holes drilled in them, where gleaming bronze reins were fitted to heighten the festive look. All of these panels were originally painted in realistic colors. As you move

along, notice that, despite the bustle of figures posed every which way, the frieze has one unifying element—all the people's heads are at the same level, creating a single ribbon around the Parthenon.

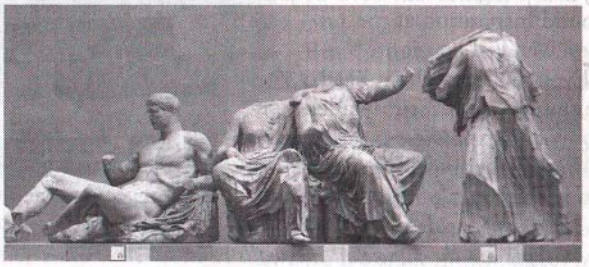
• *Cross to the opposite wall.*

A two-horse chariot **(#67),** cut from only a few inches of marble, is more lifelike and three-dimensional than anything the Egyptians achieved in a freestanding statue.

Enter the girls (five yards to the left, **#61**), the heart of the procession. Dressed in pleated robes, they shuffle past the parade marshals, carrying incense burners and jugs of wine and bowls to pour out an offering to the thirsty gods.

The procession culminates **(#35)** in the presentation of the robe to Athena. A man and a child fold the robe for the goddess while the rest of the gods look on. There are Zeus and Hera **(#29),** the king and queen of the gods, seated, enjoying the fashion show and wondering what length hemlines will be this year.

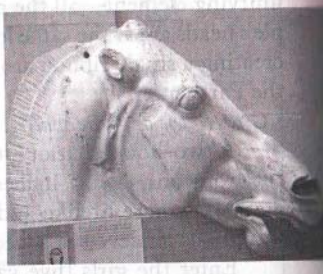
• *Head for the set of pediment sculptures at the far right end of the hall.*



The Pediment Sculptures: These statues were originally nestled nicely in the triangular pediment above the columns at the Parthenon's main (east) entrance. The missing statues at the peak of the triangle once showed the birth of Athena. Zeus had his head split open, allowing Athena, the goddess of wisdom, to rise from his brain fully grown and fully armed, inaugurating the Golden Age of Athens.

The other gods at this Olympian banquet slowly become aware of the amazing event. The first to notice is the one closest to

them, Hebe, the cupbearer of the gods (tallest surviving fragment). Frightened, she runs to tell the others, her dress whipping behind her. A startled Demeter (just left of Hebe) turns toward Hebe.



The only one who hasn't lost his head is laid-back Dionysus (the cool guy farther left). He just raises another glass of wine to his lips. Over on the right, Aphrodite, goddess of love, leans back into her mother's lap, too busy admiring her own bare shoulder to even notice the hubbub. A chess-set horse's head screams, "These people are nuts—let me out of here!"

The scene had a message. Just as wise Athena rose above the lesser gods, who were scared, drunk, or vain, so would her city, Athens, rise above her lesser rivals.

This is amazing workmanship. Compare Dionysus, with his natural, relaxed, reclining pose, to all those stiff Egyptian statues standing eternally at attention.

Appreciate the folds of the clothes on the female figures (on the right half), especially Aphrodite's clinging, rumpled robe. Some sculptors would first build a nude model of their figure, put real clothes on it, and study how the cloth hung down before actually sculpting in marble. Others found inspiration at the *taverna* on wet T-shirt night.

Even without their heads, these statues, with their detailed anatomy and expressive poses, speak volumes.

Wander behind. The statues originally sat 40 feet above the ground. The backs of the statues, which were never intended to be seen, are almost as detailed as the fronts.

• *The metopes are the panels on the walls to either side. Start with the three South Metope panels on the right wall.*

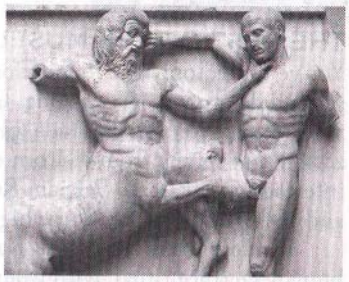
The Metopes: The metopes once decorated the gaps between the crossbeams above the Parthenon's columns. Here's the scene: The humans have invited some centaurs—barbarian half-man/half-horse creatures—to a wedding feast. All goes well until the brutish centaurs, the original party animals, get too drunk and try to carry off the women. A brawl breaks out.

In the central panel of the three **(#XXXI),** a centaur grabs a man by the throat while the man pulls his hair. Meanwhile, the man tries fending off the centaur with his knee, while the cen-

Centaurs Slain Around the World

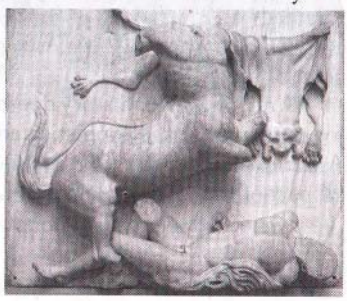
Dateline 500 B.C.—Greece, China, India: Man no longer considers himself an animal. Bold new ideas are exploding simultaneously around the world. Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, and others are independently discovering a nonmaterial, unseen order in nature and in man. They say man has a rational mind or soul. He's separate from nature and different from the other animals.

taur wraps his forelegs around the man's leg. The two stand eye to eye, and, at this point, the battle seems pretty evenly matched. But in **#XXX,** the centaur does the hair-pulling, and begins to drive the man to his knees.



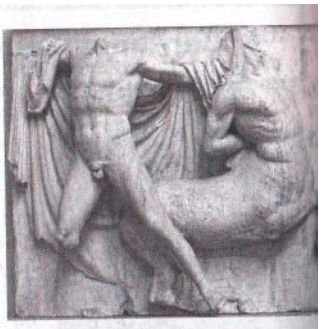
The story continues on the opposite wall. In the central panel **(#XXVIII),** the centaurs take control of the party, as one rears back and prepares to trample the helpless man. The leopard skin draped over the centaur's arm roars a taunt.

But the humans rally. To the left **(#XXVII),** the humans rise up and drive off the brutish centaurs. A centaur tries to run, but the man grabs him by the neck and raises his (missing) right hand to prepare to finish him off. Notice how graceful the man is, with his smooth skin offset by the rough folded cloak.



These metopes tell the story of the struggle between the forces of human civilization and animal-like barbarism. The Greeks had always prided themselves on creating order out of chaos. Within just a few generations, they went from nomadic barbarism to the

pinnacle of early Western civilization. Now, the centaurs have been defeated. Civilization has triumphed over barbarism, order over chaos, and rational man over his half-animal alter ego.



Why are the Parthenon sculptures so treasured? The British of the 19th century saw themselves as the new "civilized" race, subduing "barbarians" in their far-flung empire. Maybe these carved stones made them stop and wonder—will our great civilization also turn to rubble?

THE REST OF THE MUSEUM

You've toured only the foundations of Western civilization on the ground floor of the West Wing. Upstairs you'll find still more artifacts from these ancient lands, plus Rome and the medieval civilization that sprang from it. Locate the rooms with themes you find interesting (Etruscan, Persian, Roman Britain, Dark Age Europe, and so on) and explore. Some highlights:

Lindow Man (a.k.a. the Bog Man): This victim of a Druid human-sacrifice ritual, with wounds still visible, was preserved for 2,000 years in a peat bog (Room 50, upper floor, via East Stairs).

Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: Finds from a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon burial site (Room 41, upper floor, via East Stairs).

Treasures of the Persian Civilization: The collection here is far better than what remains to be seen in Iran (Room 52, upper floor).

Michelangelo's Drawings: The museum owns a complete cartoon (a full-scale preliminary drawing for another work of art) by Michelangelo—it's one of only two that survive (Room 90, level 4, accessed via the North Stairs or from the top of the Reading Room).

Enlightenment Gallery: Formerly known as the King's Library, this room held the British Library's treasures when it was founded in 1753. Today it displays objects that reveal the learning and wonder of the Age of Discovery (Room 1; the long hall to the right of the main entry).

And, of course, history doesn't begin and end in Europe. Look for remnants of the sophisticated, exotic cultures of Asia and the Americas (in North Wing, ground floor) and Africa (lower floor)—all part of the totem pole of the human family.