Jot & Tittle

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A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.
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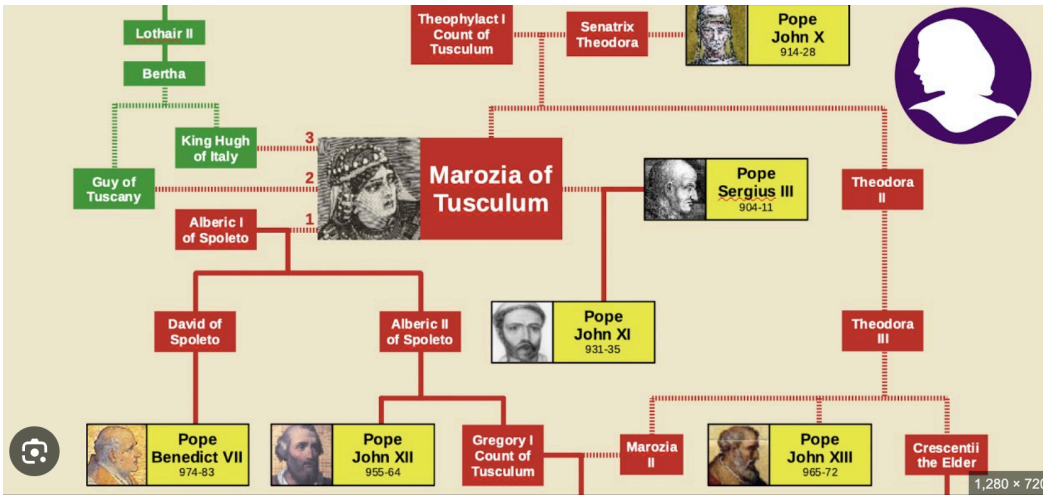
THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE[1]

The Saeculum obscurum, also known as the Rule of the Harlots or the *Pornocracy*, was a period in the history of the papacy during the first two thirds of the 10th century, following the chaos after the death of Pope Formosus, mentioned in the last edition. It began with the installation of Pope Leo V - who came from the unfortunately named village of Priapi - in 903 and lasted until 964. During this period, the popes were influenced strongly by a powerful and allegedly corrupt aristocratic family, the Theophylacti, counts of Tusculum, and their relatives and allies. The previously mentioned popes were quickly followed by an antipope and two popes strangled in prison. Now, onto the stage comes what John Julius Norwich calls the ravishingly beautiful but sinister figure of Marozia, Senatrix of Rome. Her mother, Theodora, was described by Bishop Liudprand of Cremona as *a shameless strumpet who was sole monarch of Rome and wielded power like a man*. He went on to describe her two daughters as *not only her equals but could even surpass her in the exercises beloved of Venus*.

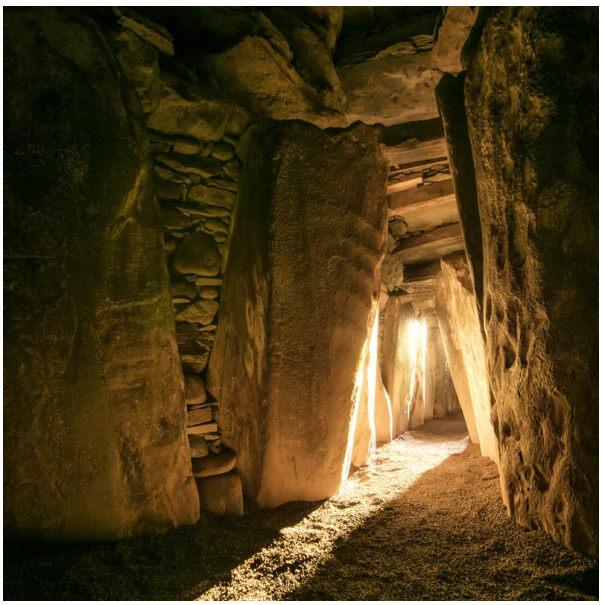


Even Gibbon describes Marozia's *rare genealogy*: lover, mother and grandmother of popes (see family tree above). In fact there was a seventh pope to be added to the chart: Benedict IX, her great-great-grandson. John Julius wonders if she could possibly be the origin of the Pope Joan story? Behind this tree lies murder, torture, rape and public adultery. Marozia was deposed by her own son at her third marriage, and locked up. She died in prison about 937, still in her forties. And you thought the Borgias were bad?

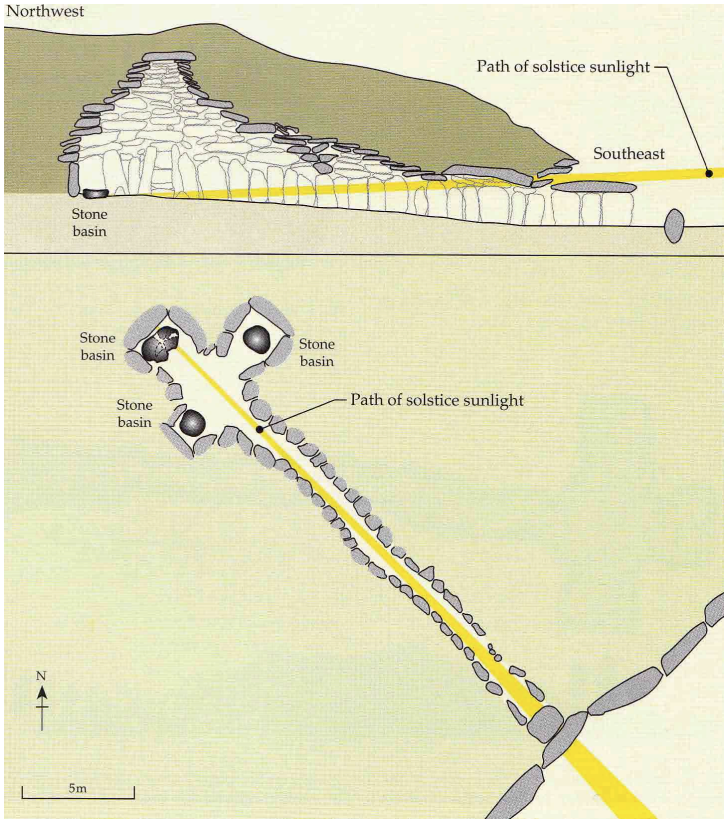
NEWGRANGE[2]

In 2020, analysis of a skull fragment discovered at Newgrange, County Meath, led to sensational claims of royal incest within the region's prehistoric ruling dynasties. But new research suggests that Neolithic Ireland may have been far more socially equal – and more complex – than originally assumed.

In the Boyne Valley of eastern Ireland stands one of the world's most fascinating prehistoric monuments: Newgrange. Centuries older than the Pyramids of Giza or Stonehenge, Newgrange is a large passage tomb, and a 5,000-year-old marvel of ancient engineering. It's also one of the best windows that researchers have into the ancient society that constructed it. For years, many archaeologists and geneticists believed that a small, powerful elite ruled over Neolithic Ireland and commissioned monuments like Newgrange as a reflection of their social dominance. That theory gained momentum in 2020, when DNA analysis of a skull fragment discovered in the tomb revealed that the buried individual – referred to by researchers as NG10 – was the product of an incestuous union between two siblings, or a parent and child. Some experts interpreted this as compelling evidence of a dynastic elite that practised incest to preserve a sacred bloodline – not unlike royal traditions in ancient Egypt. This, in turn, painted a picture of Neolithic Ireland as a deeply hierarchical society ruled by a tightly knit, closely related few.



Newgrange is one of several monumental passage tombs built during the Neolithic period (c4000–2500 BC) across Ireland and western Britain. Located in County Meath, the monument consists of a circular mound around 85 metres in diameter, ringed with standing stones and containing a narrow interior passage that aligns precisely with the rising sun on the winter solstice. Each year, on or around the winter solstice, the rising sun illuminates the chamber at the heart of the tomb for a few minutes via a precision-engineered 'roof-box' above the entrance. It's an astonishing feat of



prehistoric engineering that reflects both a deep understanding of astronomy, and a symbolic reverence for cosmic cycles of light and dark. And Newgrange isn't alone. Across Neolithic Europe, other monuments reveal similar concerns: Bryn Celli Ddu in Wales aligns with the summer solstice sunrise; Maeshowe in Orkney aligns with the winter solstice sunset; and Stonehenge captures both summer and winter solstice points. For much of the 20th century, these Neolithic feats were seen as evidence of powerful and centralised leadership: they were thought to point to a social elite that wielded enough power to be capable of coordinating complex constructions and mustering vast amounts of labour.

However, the new study challenges that interpretation, arguing that it dramatically stretches what the evidence can tell us. Can we really know that a powerful, incestuous elite ruled Ireland with an iron fist? "The evidence all points to a much more collective ethos," says Professor Penny Bickle, from the University of York's Department of Archaeology. "There are not wide disparities in diet, houses are relatively flimsy, and they are all similar to each other. There are no large settlement systems or trade mechanisms, and we also don't see production of craft on the scale that we see in other ancient societies such as in ancient Egypt, where incest was thought to be practised by the ruling elite." And, Bickle adds, it's not necessarily certain that NG10 had specific links to Newgrange. "It is by no means clear that the monument was the first burial site of NG10 and the tomb grew in stages, so tracing who this individual was is a very difficult task indeed," Bickle explains. "As it stands, the incestuous origins of NG10 are a one-off compared to all of the DNA data we have for Neolithic Ireland." In other words, NG10 could be a genetic anomaly, rather than evidence of an all-powerful ruling dynasty.

"People were definitely being selected for burial in passage tombs – the whole community does not end up in these monuments," says Associate Professor Jessica Smyth, of University College Dublin. "However, we don't know the reasons behind this selection, and why they were thought to be special." What's also clear is that burial practices in Neolithic Ireland differed sharply from those in modern times, so applying 21st-century expectations to the past can be misleading. "Unlike today, bodies don't tend to be buried 'whole' or 'intact' in this time period," Smyth adds. "Before they end up in megalithic monuments, bodies are broken down, sometimes cremated and even circulated around their communities." This process of disarticulation and redistribution means that the people who placed the bones into tombs like Newgrange may not have known – or even cared – about the biological identity of the individuals involved. In NG10's case, the community may have had no knowledge of their parentage at all.

Rather than a symbol of elite power and dynastic control, Newgrange might instead reflect the ritual and cooperative culture of a Neolithic society bound by shared beliefs, agricultural rhythms and ancestral commemoration. Its solstice alignment still speaks to an extraordinary grasp of time and the cosmos, and its scale still demands coordination. But the latest research suggests these achievements were communal, rather than commanded.

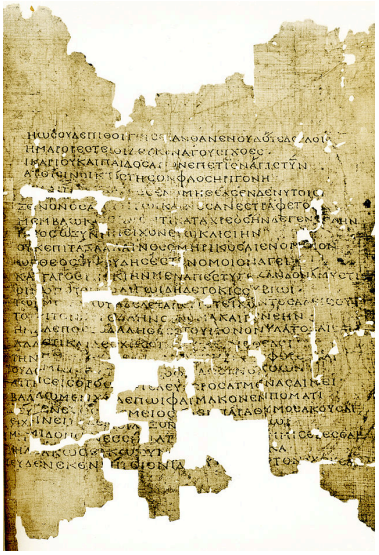
In 332 BC, Alexander the Great took over Egypt as he assembled one of the largest empires in history. The following year, he founded the city of Alexandria — named after himself — on the northern Egyptian coast. I like the theory that he was frustrated by the priestly caste who blocked everything he tried to do. Once he realised that their power came from the pyramids he moved the capital to Alexandria thus circumventing their interference. Despite arriving from a foreign land, Alexander was welcomed by the Egyptians, who saw him as a hero liberating them from their hated Persian custodians. Early Alexandria merged cultural touchstones from Egypt and Alexander's Greek homeland. This cosmopolitan approach extended to the establishment of a 'Great Library' aimed at luring influential scholars to the city. However, the oft-told story of the library, including its eventual demise, is a mix of history and hearsay.

Like many aspects of the library, its origins are shrouded in mystery. Alexander himself has been credited with envisioning the concept of a 'universal library' where books from across the world would be gathered. Such a library would give the city 'soft power' by bolstering its reputation and offering resources for Egypt's rulers. Alternatively, the idea might have originated with Ptolemy I Sotor, who became pharaoh of Egypt in 304 or 305 BC, after Alexander the Great's death.

According to a letter written in the 2nd century BC, Demetrius of Phalerum — an adviser to Ptolemy — was tasked with sourcing books for the library. Judging from the sources, it's possible that the book-gathering stage, at least, did begin during Ptolemy I's reign. Still, it looks likely that the library was not physically built and opened until the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-246 BC).

The above-mentioned 'Letter of

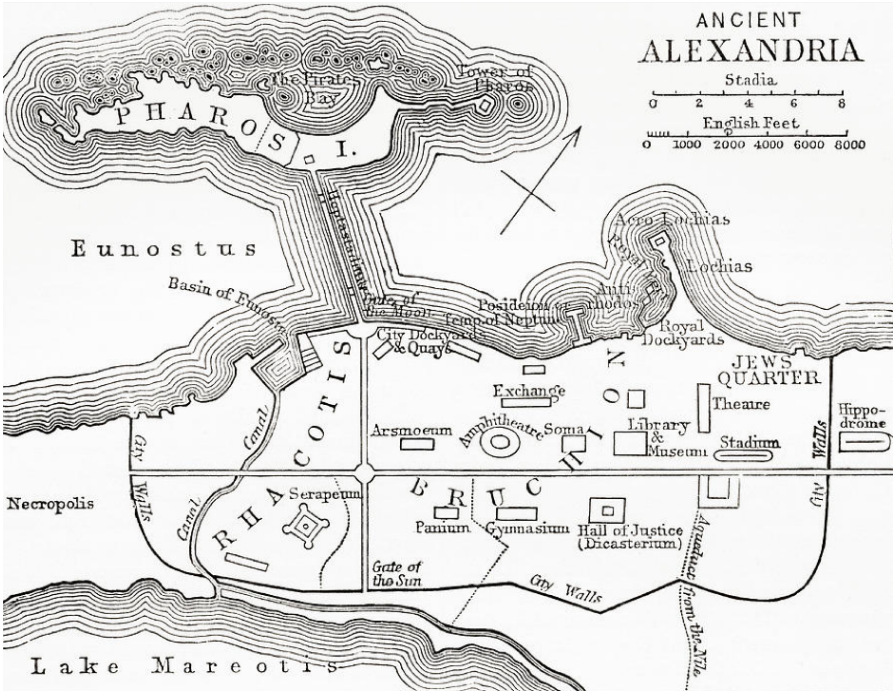
Aristeas' claims that Demetrius was handed 'a large budget in order to collect, if possible, all the books in the world'. By the time Ptolemy came to the throne, this work was transferred to other agents. Agents striving to obtain books on the Ptolemaic rulers' behalf reportedly went to extraordinary lengths to do so. These included travelling to book markets in Athens and Rhodes and taking books found on ships in Alexandria's harbour.



Where possible, agents sought original texts rather than copies, as the former were assumed to be more in line with the author's vision. One seemingly common practice was to seize manuscripts, duplicate their contents and subsequently deliver the copies to the original owners. Contemporary descriptions of the library are somewhat vague, and do not touch upon its precise layout. Nonetheless, during its heyday, the library is said to have included lecture halls, meeting rooms, gardens and a communal dining room. In the first century BC, Greek geographer Strabo reported that scholars based at the library were paid handsomely and exempt from paying taxes. Such perks were intended to help the scholars free up more time to spend on academic pursuits. The list of prestigious scholars who worked at the library is like a who's who of thought leaders in the third and second centuries BC. For example, there's the mathematician Eratosthenes of Cyrene, who calculated the earth's circumference within an astonishing degree of accuracy.

The first recorded head librarian was Zenodotus of Ephesus (lived c. 325 – c. 270 BC). Zenodotus' main work was devoted to the establishment of canonical texts for the Homeric poems and the early Greek lyric poets. Zenodotus is known to have written a glossary of rare and unusual words, which was organised in alphabetical order, making him the first person known to have employed alphabetical order as a method of organisation. Meanwhile, the scholar and poet Callimachus of Cyrene compiled the *Pinakes*, (above), a 120-book catalogue of various authors and all their known works - a precursor to the modern library catalogue.

Over the centuries, the library lost patronage from political authorities, whose interests often conflicted with the scholars' own. Reports suggest that leaders including Julius Caesar may also have inflicted damage to the building in wars. However, contrary to some stories, it likely perished more due to long-term decline than any single destructive event. All in all, there is no reliable evidence that the library still existed by the 270s AD. How many books did the library hold at its height? Judging from ancient sources, it was in the tens of thousands. These would have included works from such respected authors as philosopher Plato and historian Herodotus. Literary pieces by the poets Sophocles, Euripides and Sappho may have been lost forever as the library fell. Scientific



tracts from such scribes as Democritus and Anaximander, too, could have failed to see the light of day again.

Archaeology is near enough impossible as the modern city sits on top of the ancient one. The library was most likely situated in the *Bruceion* (Royal Quarter) and formed part of the *Mouseion* research institution. The first pic is a guess at how it looked. The second shows underground storage beneath the *Serapeum* (temple of Serapis), that was possibly part of the library and the fifth pic is of the modern *Bibliotheca Alexandrina* built as a tribute to the original 'wonder of the world'.

DATING[4]

Until 1873, when it switched to the Gregorian calendar, Japan used the Chinese lunar-solar calendar. The military however continued to use the old imperial calendar which started with the mythical founding of the nation in 660BC. In 1940 the Japanese Air Force took delivery of the new Mitsubishi fighter. As weapons were always designated by the last digit of the imperial year, in this case 2,600, they called it the Zero.

Dionysius Exiguus (The Humble) lived in Scythia, modern Romania/Bulgaria, from 470 to 544 AD. He was given the job of calculating the dates of all paschal full-moons and Easter Sundays for the period 532 to 626 AD. He used the letters AD which at the time stood for Anno Diocletiani. As this emperor was particularly homicidal towards Christians, Dennis decided unilaterally to change the meaning to Anno Domini, the year of our Lord. He also decided that Jesus' birth was 531 years before and named it year 1 as the zero was not then known in the West. The Saxons got behind this concept but Catholic Spain resisted change until the fourteenth century - whilst the Coptic Church still uses Anno Diocletiani!!!

1. Includes passages from Wikipedia and *The Popes* by John Julius Norwich (Vintage 2012). Family tree courtesy of SchoolTube.
2. Taken from History Extra. Pics courtesy of Our Irish Heritage, Authentic Vacations and Claddagh Rings.
3. Taken from Sky History and Wikipedia. Pics courtesy of Bookstr, History Hit and arabcont.com. Papyrus fragment from the *Aetia* of Callimachus courtesy of Wikipedia. Map courtesy of Wordpress.com.
4. From *The Long and the Short of it* by Graeme Donald (Michael O,Mara Books 2016).