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NewAcropolis

An Invitation to Think

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
SOCIETY
ART
AND MORE

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About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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What's Inside

Editorial

Are We Morally Prepared for Crises?

In March 2025, the EU advised all its 450 million citizens to prepare for potential crises like war, cyberattacks, a major disease outbreak and natural disasters. Brussels issued detailed guidelines for survival kits, including food, water, first aid items and torches to last 72 hours and some countries, like France and Germany, were distributing materials and encouraging families to convert cellars into bunkers.

This recommendation signals a shift from a reactive approach to a more proactive one, and it is part of a broader effort to build a more resilient and prepared population, so that most citizens can be self-sufficient for 72 hours while allowing emergency services to focus on those most in need during the initial stages of a crisis.

I am writing this in June 2025, and the recent news of escalating conflicts, wars, blackouts, riots, sky-rocketing government debts and increasing global economic instability seem to confirm the urgent need to 'get ready'. But I think that there is even more at stake than the loss of lives, livelihoods, goods and possessions. We could also, quite easily, lose our humanity, our dignity and many other elements that are vital for the continuation of civilization.

Emergencies are very stressful and often life-threatening situations where the normal rules of behaviour disappear and a deeper layer of our human nature becomes exposed. These moments of crises reveal the character of individuals as well as of cultures and systems. We might not even know ourselves what lies beneath the surface of our own 'thin veneer of civilization'. Would our instinct-driven, selfish and violent animalistic nature come out or would we remain upright, aligned with our values and capable of thinking of others as well as ourselves?

Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote: "There are two races of men in this world: the 'race' of the decent man and the 'race' of the indecent man." And to Confucius is attributed the quote: "Only in winter do the pine and cypress show they are evergreen." This implies that there are, and have always been, individuals who have shown courage, compassion and dignity in moments of severe adversity.

When the masks fall away and the norms break down, it can go both ways. There are many interesting studies of group behaviour in disasters. During Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, for example, there was a complete breakdown of social order with looting and violence in the streets, rumours of rape and murder circulating and racial and class tensions rising to the surface. Katrina is often cited as an example of how people can 'go feral' when systems break down. The key insight was that without leadership (and it is widely acknowledged that the government responded late and poorly), without trust and coordination, fear and survival instincts take over.

The opposite example comes from Japan during the time of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that led to the Fukushima nuclear crisis in 2011. There was remarkable calm and order, no looting reported at all (even with mass displacement and power outages). There was civic discipline with long orderly queues for supplies and people took only what they needed (!). Survivors checked on neighbours, shared food and worked together and youth volunteers and even elderly citizens joined cleanups and rebuilding efforts. The key insight from this study was that strong social cohesion, a culture of respect and an ingrained sense of duty were able to create an atmosphere of dignified endurance.

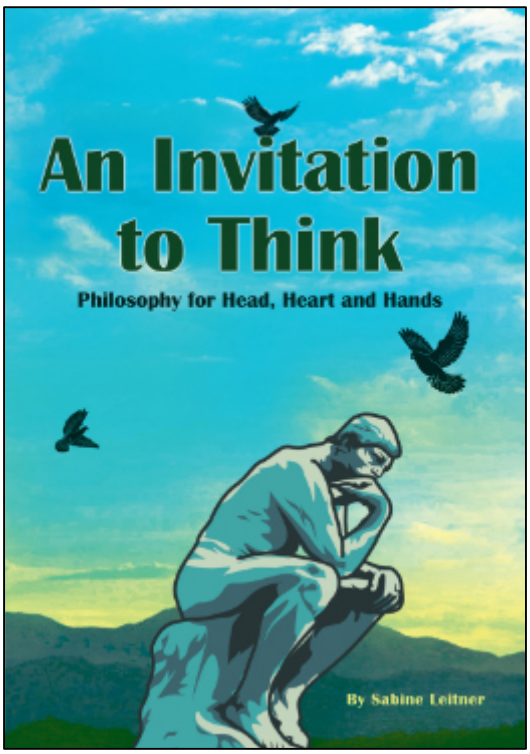
The conclusion is that we human beings are capable of both brutality and nobility; and what emerges in a crisis depends on our values (individual and collective), social cohesion and leadership. Even in chaos, there are always those who are able to remain composed and who can act in a dignified way. A good example of dignity is the Elizabethan poet, scholar and courtier Sir Philip Sidney who, slowly dying from a gunshot wound aged 31, gave his water-bottle to another wounded soldier with the words: "Thy necessity is yet greater than mine."

We not only need to prepare our material emergency bag but also our moral survival kit and always keep in our consciousness a set of principles, values and inner tools that can help us act ethically and stay human in times of crisis, chaos or uncertainty. We will need our moral compass, empathy, critical thinking, courage, solidarity, historical memory and a good dose of hope.

A full larder is useful; but knowing with clarity and conviction what kind of human being we want to be in moments of crisis might be even more useful…

Sabine Leitner

An Invitation to Think



Our regular readers will already be familiar with Sabine Leitner's editorials for this magazine, and we recently came up with the project of compiling them all into the form of a book, entitled *An Invitation to Think: Philosophy for Head, Heart and Hands*. As a result of this project we decided to found a publishing company, Eclectic Books. In the following interview the book's editors ask Sabine about the ideas contained in the book and why she thinks they are important.

Sabine, why do you call your book 'An Invitation to Think'? What are you inviting us to think about, and how? And why is this so important in 2025?

For me, philosophical thinking starts with questions. And it seems that we have forgotten how to listen to our most fundamental questions. When we carry questions deep within ourselves, they make us think, they make us wonder, they make us search for an answer, and we have always had the intuition that there are answers to our questions.

So that's one aspect of the title of the book. Another is that the topics I am writing about are fundamental topics for any kind of civilization, for any kind of culture. By inviting the reader to think about these topics, I hope to nourish our aspirations towards the development of our individual and collective potential, and the civilization we want to build.

And why 'Philosophy for Head, Heart and Hands'?

Because deep thinking, as in the Platonic tradition, goes much deeper than just our cerebral, intellectual thinking. It also touches our heart, our whole being, and will inevitably lead to action. Strengthening our capacity to think with our head and our heart is really important in our current technological age which has almost withered our ability to think for ourselves. It is too easy to take our thinking off the shelf, in the form of AI or a podcast, already shaped and ready-made, and not to think for ourselves. There's a real danger in that.

And Sabine, it's such a strong theme in the book, building the habit of thinking and reflecting deeply and 'digestively' to nourish our inner life. As you say, your New Acropolis editorials cover a wide range of topics over the last 10-15 years – philosophical, political, social, economic, spiritual, environmental. What strikes you most about the current state of our civilization?

When I was young, which is some time back now, I would never have imagined that the world would be in such a state as it sadly is now. There's so much polarization going on, so much confusion, and I

also think that somehow – maybe I'm wrong – that our leaders, the leaders of the major powers in this world, are worse than the majority of the people they lead, and that this leads to significant problems. Imagine we had leaders with timeless values and the ideal of the common good and with a sense of the whole – I think the world would be in a much better state.

In one editorial, you write – "Dear reader, I wish you the discernment to differentiate between the trivial and the profound truths. And I also hope that you may discover many more truths of the profound kind." Could you say a little more about that here?

What I mean by a 'profound truth' is something that is lasting, universal, timeless. It has a validity that endures for thousands of years; that speaks to people across all different cultures; and that can encompass the whole, not just a part. Very often, the truth of a part is different to the truth of the whole. This sounds a bit abstract. But it is something I'm practising myself: to see more clearly how all things are needed to work together and to form a living whole, how everything has different aspects, how to unite and harmonize opposites.

So, for me, a profound truth is something that is not 'either/or' but 'both/and', and carries the sense of the whole.

One of the great features of the book is the way you bring so much eternal wisdom from the past – 'lasting, universal, timeless' – to bear on the challenges and possibilities of modern times. Could you comment, Sabine, on another key phrase in the book – "Our most urgent task is not outer but inner change"?

This might sound counterintuitive because there's such a pressing urgency right now to rescue many, many things that are almost dying now and we must all support those rescue efforts in the short term. But we must also never lose sight of the long-term view. If we constantly only fight fires, we will never get anywhere.

And taking the long-term view, what is the primary cause of all the problems we are experiencing? It's the human being. So, if we are the problem, we can and must also be the solution. This calls for change within ourselves. For me, as for Plato in his Republic, a single human being is a good analogy for a whole state. If I can't be a good ruler within my own inner kingdom, my own inner world, if I can't harmonize the many different desires and voices within me, then we have no chance of harmonizing all the differences in the world out there.

So, I think we really have to practise reaching happiness, harmony and peace within ourselves – and then it will follow suit in the outside world, in the long term.

And it seems to be this sense of harmony – both inner and outer – that lies at the core of your aspirations for our civilization, Sabine.

Absolutely. We talked earlier about 'profound truths'. I believe that harmony is a profound truth, a profound law, of the whole of the universe. It will always try to establish harmony. And harmony requires that there are different parts. It's like in music, harmony requires different notes, not the same note, that's not harmony.

I see that law as inherent in Nature, and I believe that, one day, human beings will be able to live in harmony within themselves, with others and with Nature as well. It's not us against Nature. We have to live in harmony, but that requires a certain maturity. And so, the inner evolution, the inner development of the potential of the human being is the most important task that I can see.

And this is also a task that asks us to aspire to do what is right. That's a very Confucian idea. Not to do what is easy, not to do what is comfortable, not to do what is profitable, not to do what is maybe rewarding in a superficial way. The first important criterion would be – Is it the right thing to do? We must develop our own dialogue with our conscience, with our inner voice. If we all live like that, the future will be different.

Sabine, you give special mention to the act of teaching, and to your own important teachers, especially Delia Steinberg Guzmán. What lies behind this?

For me, teaching and culture go together. Culture is education in a bigger context. To educate an individual well, we need good teachers, but also a culture that nourishes the best in us, just as good soil nourishes a seed. Education informs culture and culture can lead to a civilization. They are all completely linked.

A good teacher has a kind of bifocal vision of the human being. A good teacher sees the student as they are now, but also sees the potential they have, and will help the student to close this gap between the potential of what could be and what it is now, helping the student to find their own way. And they do so with a lot of love – not just love for the student, but also transmitting and awakening love. Love for Nature, love for beauty, justice, goodness, right action, etc.

My own teacher, Delia Steinberg Guzmán, was a good example of this. She could always see our potential and this helped us to grow. And she also transmitted her great love of music to us. I don't think anyone who knew her could not have started to get interested in classical music.

'An Invitation to Think' has just this kind of bifocal vision of humanity, seeing humanity as we are now, but also seeing the potential at the same time. The final message in the book is one of hope. What underpins this sense of hope for you, Sabine?

This sense of hope rests on my belief in the human potential, which is in every one of us. On the level of potential, we are all the same. We all have the same potential. And I believe that this potential is trying to emerge in us at all costs. And it will eventually find its way, in the same way as water can be enclosed in something for thousands or even millions of years, but it will find its way. So, I have patience. I don't think there will be any immediate improvement, on the contrary, but in the long term, there is a lot of hope.

Thank you, Sabine. And finally, Eclectic Books. This is the first book to be published under that label. What can we look forward to in the coming months and years?

The gestation of Eclectic Books was really a kind of call from within, not something premeditated or planned. On the one hand, we all have so many books and we don't need to read more – we actually need to apply more. But on the other hand, good books are very stimulating companions, they can inspire our thoughts and actions. And we especially need books that communicate universal timeless ideas, that fill gaps in our education; and such books are sometimes out of print. Providing such thinking companions will be the focus of Eclectic Books, in line with our motto of "Examine everything and hold on to what is good". That was the motto of eclecticism, coined by Philo of Alexandria two thousand years ago.

The next book after 'An Invitation to Think' will be by Julian, editor of the New Acropolis magazine. Full of his articles from the last ten to fifteen years it will offer us a panorama of philosophy, history, culture, arts, nature and religion from our current and past civilizations. They're very inspiring to read. We will learn so much, discover many different treasures and ideas that will help us move positively towards the future, towards a new renaissance.

In a nutshell, the purpose of Eclectic Books is to disseminate living ideas. And a 'living idea' is like a seed. A 'fact' is not alive, because I might know the distance from the Earth to the Moon, but it doesn't help me to live my life better, to make wiser decisions. But a 'living idea' is like a seed that has the potential to grow within me, to take root and help me navigate my life to better effect. Living ideas: this is what we want to promote in Eclectic Books.

Julian Powe and Sian Phillips

If you would like to order a copy of the book, please send an email to info@eclecticbooks.co.uk and we will send instructions for payment. The price is £8.99 (20% discount for members of New Acropolis) plus p&p, or collect a copy from our school at 18 Compton Terrace, London N1 2UN to save on p&p.

Romanticism or Realism?

This question occurred to me as I was coming to the end of the 19th century novel *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans). As the characters' lives and actions came to fruition I found myself thinking: would this person's life really have ended like this (so happily), or would they have ended up in a pit of despair? Not that they all ended up living 'happily ever after', but the worst that could have happened did not generally happen, because a benevolent fortune, fate or destiny (via the writer) intervened. Whereas in the works of other novelists, such as Thomas Hardy, I would find myself thinking, 'this can't get any worse'… and it generally did.

So although *Middlemarch* is not classified as a strictly romantic novel, as there are many realistic elements of everyday life in a provincial English town, it is not so gritty as, say, a novel by the French writer Émile Zola, author of such grim works as *Thérèse Raquin* – about a wife who, with her lover, plots to murder her disabled husband – or *Germinal*, which highlights the misery of working in a 19th century mine.

Tastes differ, but I would venture to assert that a novel like *Middlemarch* leaves you feeling more uplifted and optimistic, whereas those of Hardy or Zola are likely to leave you feeling rather depressed. What is better for the human being? There might be several ways of answering this question. Is the role of art to uplift, or to reflect 'reality'? And I put 'reality' in inverted commas, because reality is actually quite subjective. Yes, conditions in a 19th century mine were no doubt horrific. But there were other things going on in the 19th century which were very positive (all the amazing classical music for example). So the reality of the 19th century is all of those things, not just the bad things (or the good things).

Rather than enter into a literary debate on this point, I would like to look at it through the lens of mythology. Do myths always have a happy ending? Indeed, do fairy tales, which are a form of mythology, always end happily? Generally, yes, but that ending may be a very long time coming, and may not even take place in this world, but in heaven!

Let us look at some examples: *The Odyssey by Homer*, for instance. Odysseus travels back to his island home on Ithaca, where he is reunited with his wife and son. A happy ending

J.W.Turner's *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus*. Image from Wikimedia.

indeed, but the journey takes ten years and during that journey, the hundreds of companions who accompanied him died, often in the most horrific manner, such as being eaten alive by the pitiless one-eyed Cyclops.

The same could be said of the story of Heracles and his Twelve Labours. In the end he was successful, but in one of the fits of madness sent to him by the Goddess Hera, he kills his wife and children, and afterwards, obviously, is filled with horror and remorse.

Or we can take the most tragic of all Greek tragedies, that of Oedipus, who famously kills his father (unwittingly), marries his mother (without realizing it) and blinds himself in shame for his actions, which were not really his fault. But finally he ascends to heaven, where a voice greets him kindly, saying, 'what took you so long to return?' So even that gory myth ends happily for Oedipus.

Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus the Wayfarer*. Image from Wikimedia.

A similar destiny awaits Orpheus and Eurydice, the doomed lovers, Eurydice being condemned to return to the Underworld and Orpheus being torn to pieces by the raging Maenads (female followers of Dionysus). But in the end, both of them ascend to heaven and are happily reunited in the constellation of the Lyre.

I would say that these mythical stories are actually more true to life than either the romantic or realistic novels, because they reveal a much more long-term vision, in which happiness comes in the end, but not necessarily in this world. However, in these myths, the focus is not so much on happiness, as on meaning. In the Odyssey the meaning is that in order to attain real happiness, one must pass through many trials, understanding a trial not merely as a phase of suffering, but as a way of learning and also of divesting oneself of parts of oneself that one has outlived and no longer needs.

It may come as a surprise to many that myths are a form of philosophy, as the archaeologist and anthropologist Henri Frankfort eloquently put it: "Myth is a carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought." If we follow this golden thread, we can extract many wonderful teachings from ancient myths. But how can we apply all this to life?

In life, we shouldn't expect a happy-ever-after ending, because "happiness is not a plant of this world", as Delia S. Guzmán writes in one of her books. Rather, happiness comes after a long journey of resolving all the problems we have within ourselves, and this is done by seeing them not as problems, but as trials which will help us to grow.

The romantic attitude is good in that it contains ideals: ideals that are expressed in people with strong values or virtues, such as selflessness and generosity, as contrasted with self-interest, pettiness and meanness. The realistic attitude is also good in that it focuses on the stark injustices of the world and makes us more aware of them. If you like, it brings us down to earth. But as the human being is made of both heaven and earth, spirit and matter, surely true realism must also contain idealism and a touch of romanticism?

Moreover, it is probably not realistic to assume that everyone has feet of clay and that, as Plato suggested, it is possible to emerge from the Cave of illusion, and to ascend towards perfect justice, even if in this world nothing is absolutely perfect. But a Buddha, a Jesus, and quite a few others, have come pretty close.

The heroes of the myths are not perfect either – they make mistakes and often suffer from *hubris* – but they are somehow 'great' (often depicted as the children of some god) in their strength and intelligence; and this greatness of spirit enables them to overcome all the trials, which in the end make them more humble and benevolent as human beings, and above all wise. This is why Heracles is shown in the end being carried up to heaven in a chariot driven by Athena, the goddess of wisdom.

Because it is wisdom which is the true goal of the journey, and all these stories, whether in myths or great novels, enable us to gather some seeds of wisdom that will help us arrive at that sunny harbour. And, as Plato shows in Book IX of his *Republic*, it is only through wisdom and justice that true and lasting happiness can be achieved.

Julian Scott

The Homesick Philosopher: Living Between Two Worlds

There is a kind of quiet battle that rages in the hearts of many who have left their homeland to seek a life elsewhere. For some, it's a practical journey. For others, like myself, it is a path that feels marked by destiny, as if some whisper from beyond had once called out and said, "This is the way."

I was born and raised in Hungary, a land steeped in rich history, poetic depth and cultural elegance. My love for it has never dimmed. In many ways, I consider myself a patriot. I cherish the Hungarian language with its rhythm and richness, the folk traditions, the wit of our poets, the weight of our history and the quiet resilience of our people. It is where my roots lie, tangled deep in the Danube's flow and the soil of my ancestors.

And yet, for more than fifteen years I have lived in England.

It is not a matter of rejection or escape, but a journey of calling. This path has always felt more than circumstantial. As a follower of the Platonic school of thought, I believe in the notion of the soul's journey not merely from body to body, as the ancients might have said, but from idea to realization, from shadow to form. Living abroad, then, becomes not an abandonment of my past but an attempt to walk toward my personal telos, my purpose, however hazy its edges may be.

Plato once spoke of the soul as a charioteer pulled by two horses: one noble, one unruly. I feel this image daily. One horse pulls me back to Hungary to my mother, who still lives there, to my sister and her husband and their two children, whom I love to bits and miss more than words can carry. To the streets I walked as a child, the language that shaped my thoughts and the cultural rhythm that still pulses in me even as I sip tea under grey, rainy English skies.

The other horse pulls me forward, towards growth, towards the fulfilment of a vision I have always felt deep within, even if I cannot articulate it fully. England has given me space, opportunity, challenge

and the environment to become what I feel I must be. This does not mean it is easy, nor that the path is always clear. But I feel the pull of purpose.

Still, between these horses, the soul is strained. The question is not merely where to live, but how to live. How does one remain whole while divided across two lands?

There is a compelling spiritual argument, notably expressed by Rudolf Steiner, that one's task is to raise the light – or to elevate the consciousness – in the land where one was born. According to Steiner, our soul is born into a particular nation, culture, and language for a reason. These are not accidents, but deliberate settings in which we are meant to unfold spiritually and fulfil a collective task. To leave, then, is to risk abandoning that sacred responsibility.

I have often wrestled with this thought. It resonates with my deep love for Hungary, its spirit, its land and the people who continue to shape it. I wonder sometimes: am I meant to be there, helping to raise the collective soul of my homeland? Am I, in living abroad, walking away from my true task?

And yet, another truth persists in me, one that aligns more with the Platonic concept of the soul's personal daimonion, the inner guide that points not to duty as defined by geography, but by essence. Sometimes, it seems, the light we are called to raise must be kindled elsewhere, so that we might one day return stronger, or perhaps so that we may spread the essence of our culture and values far beyond our birthplace.

There is no easy resolution between these two views. They stand in tension: one calling us to ground ourselves and elevate our birth-soil, the other drawing us outward toward our individual telos. I carry both voices within me.

There is no silence quite like the one felt on a quiet evening abroad when you miss your family. It is not merely sadness, it is ontological. It is a homesickness of the soul, a gentle ache that lingers in your chest. It comes without warning, when you see a photo, hear a song or just smell a familiar dish or perfume. It's in the laughter of children that reminds you of your niece and nephew, in the embrace you cannot give your mother.

Some would say, "Go home, then." And indeed, I have asked myself this question countless times. But going home is not as simple as packing a suitcase. When the soul feels called to something, it cannot turn back without losing something essential.

Plato taught that the visible world is a reflection, a shadow of the true world, the world of forms and ideals. Perhaps that is what life abroad feels like to the homesick philosopher. You leave the land of your birth, which is real and warm and deeply

The personal Daemon. Image from Wikimedia

known, for something less certain, yet pregnant with potential. You follow not comfort, but an ideal. You leave what you love, paradoxically, because of love for your destiny, for your evolution, for the idea of what you might become.

But it is not without cost.

Living abroad often feels like being a bridge never quite belonging to one side or the other. You're not fully of the new land, nor can you wholly return to the old one unchanged. You live between worlds. And sometimes, you feel alone.

But Plato would remind us that the journey of the soul is not about ease, but truth. To seek truth is to embrace discomfort. To follow your daimonion,

Facing the Open Sea by Augustus , 2025

your inner guide, often means leaving behind what is safe and known.

And so, here I am, one part of me in Hungary, one part in England and another part still journeying toward something greater.

One of the hardest aspects of living abroad is not the bureaucracy, the language or the cultural adjustment. It is the loneliness. Even when surrounded by people, it can creep in like fog. A sense that you are not fully seen, not fully understood.

But this loneliness has taught me something. It is not a punishment, but a companion. It forces introspection. It invites you to know yourself not as your culture defines you, not as your family sees you, but as you are at your core.

There is a certain beauty in this. A gift, even. For when we strip away all identity markers, language, nation, tradition, we are left with the raw soul. And it is here that we meet ourselves, perhaps for the first time.

Family is the tether to home. For me, it is also the hardest part of being away. My mother's voice over the phone is a thread I follow back to my origins. My sister's updates, the laughter of her children, are reminders of life unfolding without me. There's a subtle grief in that. The birthdays missed, the Sunday lunches not attended, the little milestones that pass unshared.

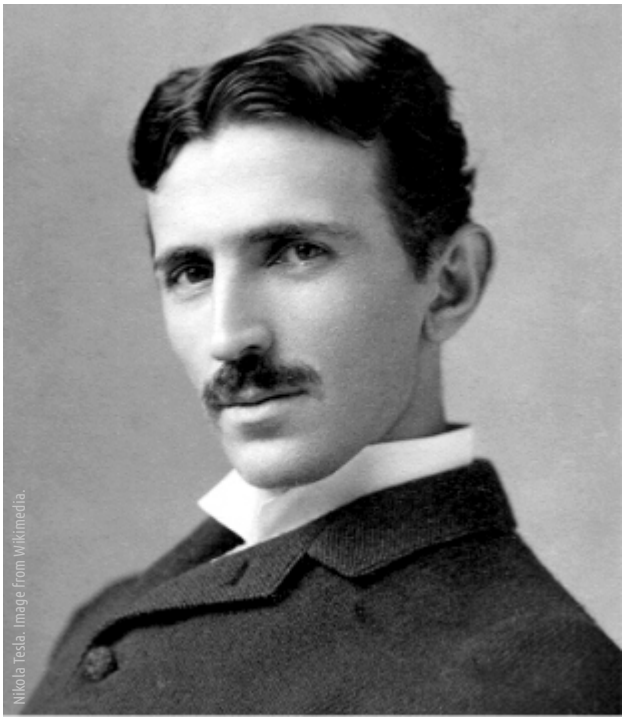
And yet, love remains. Perhaps that is the truest thing in all of this. The real form behind all shadows. Love is what pulls me toward Hungary and love is what calls me to stay in England and fulfil my work, my destiny.

Migration is far from being a fracture. We learn from history that sometimes the soul does not blossom where it is first planted. Händel, born in Germany, eventually found his true stage in England, where his musical gifts could truly flourish. While his decision to stay in London left his employer, prince George, the Elector of Hanover, feeling betrayed, destiny already set a different direction. When the prince later became King George I of England, it was Handel who composed the now iconic Water Music for him, played from boats on the Thames. What began as a personal journey away from home turned into something much greater. England didn't just receive a foreign composer, it gained a master whose music became part of its national identity.

Hannah Arendt, born in Germany in a Jewish family, was forced to flee her homeland as totalitarianism darkened the skies of Europe. Her journey took her from Germany to France and finally to the United States, where she became one

of the most influential political philosophers of the 20th century. Arendt did not migrate just to survive, she carried with her an extraordinary capacity to think deeply about the forces that had exiled her. Her writings, including The Human Condition and The Origins of Totalitarianism explored the essence of freedom, the causes of evil and the responsibilities of citizenship. Her exile gave rise to insights that might never have emerged in the comfort of familiarity.

Nikola Tesla left the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in what is now Croatia) without any official



Nikola Tesla. Image from Wikimedia.

recognition or academic honours to his name. He departed from Austria after failing academically at the University of Graz due to personal distractions and a chaotic lifestyle that prevented him from focusing on his studies. And so he travelled to the United States, not in victory but in rejection. His actual destiny, however, emerged in this seeming failure. Tesla's relocation was the journey of a genius whose light could not be ignited in his native country. Maybe only because he departed did the world get to see his greatness.

In the Platonic tradition, love (eros) is not just affection, it is the driving force that pulls the soul toward what is good, true and beautiful. I believe the love I feel for my family and homeland is the same love that fuels my work abroad. It is not one against the other. It is the same flame burning in different directions.

To those who feel this same ache, who love their homeland deeply but find themselves walking a path elsewhere I say this: You are not alone.

What you are experiencing is not weakness, nor indecision. It is the human condition magnified. You are living a double truth: one foot in the past that made you, and one in the future that calls you. That tension is not failure. It is the sign of a soul in motion.

You may never fully resolve the conflict, and that's alright. Plato might say that the soul is not meant to settle, but to strive. We are beings of desire – not shallow longing, but the deep desire to become what we truly are. If your path takes you abroad, away from those you love, it is not because you love them less. It is because love sometimes asks us to grow, even if it hurts.

Hold tight to your roots. Speak your language. Honour your past. But do not fear your future. You are not betraying your country by living elsewhere. You are extending it, carrying its culture, values and beauty into new places.

Perhaps one day you will return. Perhaps not. But know this: your journey is sacred.

As for me, I continue walking sometimes unsure, often emotional, but always with a sense that I am where I must be for now. The path is not linear, nor easy, but it is mine.

And in that, there is peace.

Laszlo Balizs

The Etruscans
Guardians of the Sacred

The origins of the Etruscans – along with their sacred knowledge, language, and traditions – remain, in part, veiled in mystery. Even in antiquity, people wondered where this enigmatic civilization came from. Herodotus, for example, claimed that during a time of severe famine, the people of ancient Lydia migrated to the fertile lands of the Italian peninsula, where they eventually founded what would become the Etruscan civilization. By the time of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE), however, this theory had already been challenged by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. In his writings, he argued that the Etruscans had no connection with the Lydians and were, in fact, an indigenous people of Italy. Modern archaeological research conducted over the past fifty years appears to support this view, making it the most widely accepted theory today. Of course, this does not rule out the influence that Eastern cultures had on the Etruscans over the centuries – particularly in art and religion.

Already in the third millennium BCE, the territories of Etruria were inhabited by people (the so-called Rinaldone culture) who observed the sky, built with ingenuity and purpose, and carried out complex rituals. This suggests that the founders of

Etruscan Boccanera Plaques from Cerveteri. Image by Pixabay

the megalithic astronomical temple (circa 2300 BCE) of Poggio Rota in Tuscany, were probably the true, or at least indirect, cultural ancestors of the Etruscans.

A people deeply steeped in mystical and magical knowledge, the Etruscans heavily influenced Roman civilization (two of Rome's seven kings were of Etruscan origin). Many traditions thought to have originated with Rome should instead be attributed to Etruscan knowledge. We could mention in this respect: the Roman custom of having both a first and last name, the grid-like city layout (known as Hippodamian plan), the widespread use of the arch found in buildings and walls, and even the famous gladiatorial combats – which were originally part of Etruscan funerary rites.

As early as the ninth century BCE, the Etruscans were already well organized into a confederation of twelve city-states that reflected macrocosm-microcosm correspondences, particularly linked to solar symbolism. Each of these cities was ruled by a priest-king called a Lucumo, who was assisted by a council of wise men that later evolved into a body of magistrates (similar to the Roman praetors), forming the aristocratic and ruling class. These cities, surrounded by massive walls still visible today, were founded with great care, following magico-religious prescriptions, as confirmed by the studies on the foundation of Rome itself. Besides geomagnetic and telluric considerations in choosing the ideal locations, there was also meticulous urban planning. Cities were built following a plan that aligned all the roads with the two main cardinal axes (known as the *cardo* – north-south – and *decumanus* – east-west axis).

Etruscan religion was a blend of rituals and symbols originating from the ancient Greek and Latin peoples, with the addition of some uniquely Etruscan deities. For the Etruscans, all human life was permeated and influenced by the sacred. There was always a connection between what is happening on Earth, the gods in the sky and those in the underworld. Particularly interesting is how the Etruscans conceived of their relationship with the gods – a relationship that, unlike that of the Romans, was entirely governed by fate. For the Romans, the relationship with the gods was based on mutual respect and exchange; for the Etruscans, humans had no power against the forces of the gods, to whom they owed complete obedience. From this distinctive religious worldview, it becomes clear why the foundation of Etruscan ritual practices reflected their deep understanding of various forms of divination and mantic arts.

The *Etrusca Disciplina* was the sacred doctrinal corpus of Etruscan religion, regulating the relationship between humans and gods, through a system of complex divinatory practices. We find, for instance: haruspicy, the interpretation of omens through the entrails of sacrificed animals – particularly the liver; fulguration, which involved

reading the signs revealed by lightning and other atmospheric phenomena; and augury, the observation of the flight patterns of birds to discern divine will. Additionally, they practiced extensively oneiromancy, or the interpretation of dreams, and made great use of female prophetesses, known as vegoie – later referred to as sibyls. Another significant element of their divinatory tradition was the widespread use of magical mirrors, which were believed to reveal hidden truths and divine messages.

Staying within this context, the most mysterious and fascinating figure is *Tages*, the founder of the entire Etruscan religious-divinatory system, identified as a divine child with otherworldly appearance and wisdom, who miraculously emerged from a clod of earth to teach humanity. His birth from the earth, reflects the deep connection the Etruscans had with Nature, with the sacredness of the soil and the legendary enchanted woods where it is said the Etruscan priest-kings annually met.

The vast majority of surviving Etruscan inscriptions are funerary in nature, showing how much care was devoted to matters of death and the afterlife. The *Libri Fatales*, in some of their sections, speak of the


Image from Wikimedia

inevitable end that awaits both human life and the life of the state. Their vision of the beyond was complex, populated by both benevolent and malevolent deities that needed to be understood and guarded against. There are many parallels with ancient Egyptian customs. Etruscan tombs were made to look like real homes, and the dead were buried with the things they loved in life. The underworld was a realm that had to be understood in order to navigate it and act appropriately within it. Among funerary texts, we also find the Acherontic Books, which offer funerary instructions and practical guidance to ensure a safe passage for the soul's journey – a journey that was by no means guaranteed. These ritual practices likely belonged to a corpus of secret knowledge reserved for priestly colleges and mystery rites.

Regarding the disappearance of the Etruscans, it is worth noting that ancient esoteric traditions speak of certain places on Earth acting as portals to other dimensions – mysterious and 'subterranean' (i.e. invisible) realms known by various names. The well known myths of Shamballa and Agartha specifically refer to these traditions. Legendary aspects of the Etruscan people and their disappearance are also linked to mysterious 'portals' or sacred sites. We can mention, for instance, the *Fanum Voltumnae* and Lake Bolsena, known in antiquity as the "sacred mirror" of the Etruscans. The *Fanum Voltumnae* was the federal sanctuary and the most sacred centre of Etruscan power, an oracular centre dedicated to the most important Etruscan deity, Voltumna – an asexual god associated with the metamorphosis of Nature and royal authority.

Aside from the legendary elements – which often veil hidden truths – the answer to the question of how the Etruscans 'disappeared' lies in the simple fact that, with Rome's expansion, they were slowly assimilated into it. The Romans tended to integrate conquered cities organically, often leaving local customs and administrative structures intact. In fact, for many centuries after Rome's conquest of Etruria, the Etruscans retained a notable degree of autonomy. Up until the 1st century CE, the Etruscans actively engaged with and supported Roman society, contributing their cultural and religious wisdom. In doing so, they became a vital and sacred foundation for what would later become the heart of the Mediterranean world.

Agostino Dominici

Suggested further reading:

Etruschi: il vincolo dell' unità sacrale by Enzo Pecchioni

La Magia Etrusca by Stefano Majorca

Giordano Bruno
A Mystic of the Infinite Cosmos

Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) was an Italian philosopher, mathematician and mystic whose radical ideas about the universe, God and human potential placed him at odds with the intellectual and religious authorities of his time – the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. A Dominican friar turned itinerant scholar, Bruno is remembered today as a visionary who challenged the dogmas of both science and theology, envisioning a cosmos far more expansive and mysterious than his contemporaries dared to imagine. His execution by the Roman Inquisition underscores both the boldness of his ideas and the threat they posed to the orthodox worldview of the late Renaissance.

Born in Nola, near Naples, in 1548, Filippo Bruno entered a monastery in the Dominican Order (where the theologian Thomas Aquinas had taught) at the age of 15, taking the name Giordano. He was drawn to philosophy and theology, and studied the works of Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, but his curiosity soon brought him into conflict with monastic authority. His questioning of established doctrines – particularly the veneration of saints and the Virgin Mary – drew suspicion. By the age of 28, Bruno had fled the monastery and began a life of exile, wandering across Europe from Geneva to Paris, London, Wittenberg and Prague, often living with people who gave him protection and often earning a living as a lecturer and tutor.

Bruno absorbed and synthesized a wide array of philosophical and esoteric traditions: Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Lullism and the emerging Copernican heliocentrism. Unlike many contemporaries, he did not view science and mysticism as contradictory but as two dimensions of the same cosmic truth.

At the heart of Bruno's philosophy was an intense mysticism rooted in the belief that the universe itself was a manifestation of the divine. Influenced by Hermetic texts – especially the Corpus Hermeticum – Bruno envisioned God not as a remote, personal deity, but as an immanent presence pervading all things. For Bruno, the divine was infinite, and so too must be the universe. To propose a finite cosmos, he believed, was to limit the divine itself.

This pantheistic view led him to a vision of Nature that was both sacred and dynamic. He proposed that the cosmos was not a static, hierarchical structure with Earth at the centre, as Aristotle and Ptolemy had maintained, but an infinite expanse filled with countless worlds like our own. Bruno famously asserted: "There are innumerable suns, and an infinite number of earths revolve around these suns" (Bruno, De l'infinito universo et mondi).

Bruno's mysticism extended to his view of the human soul. He saw the soul as eternal and capable of uniting with the universal spirit through

contemplation, love and intellectual ascent. The soul longs to be free from the body and is lifted by love to ascend to the world of spirit. This theme was most powerfully expressed in his Heroic Frenzies – poetic dialogues on love, madness and the longing for divine union (Gli eroici furori).

Some of Giordano Bruno's most influential ideas were:

1. The Infinite Universe and Multiplicity of Worlds

Bruno took the Copernican model and extended it beyond its original conception. Where Copernicus replaced the geocentric system with a heliocentric one, Bruno exploded the very notion of cosmic finitude. He argued for an infinite universe, with no centre and no edge, filled with innumerable stars and planetary systems. This concept directly challenged the Aristotelian and Christian cosmology that placed Earth and humanity at the centre of creation.

2. Unity of Matter and Spirit, and Reunion through Love

Bruno rejected the dualism of body and soul. For him, spirit and matter were not separate substances but different expressions of the same divine essence. All matter was animated – a view that lent a mystical dimension to natural philosophy. He regarded Nature as a reflection of the Divine Mind: God (or the spirit of the Universe) made tangible. When we fall in love with Nature and take a path of ascension by understanding its depth and true reflection, we fall in love with God.

3. Memory and the Art of Knowing

A master of mnemonic techniques, Bruno was deeply engaged with the art of memory, drawing on the work of Ramon Llull and classical rhetoric. He believed that memory systems could be used not only to retain information but to ascend towards divine truths. His mnemonic wheels and symbolic diagrams were both cognitive tools and metaphysical maps.

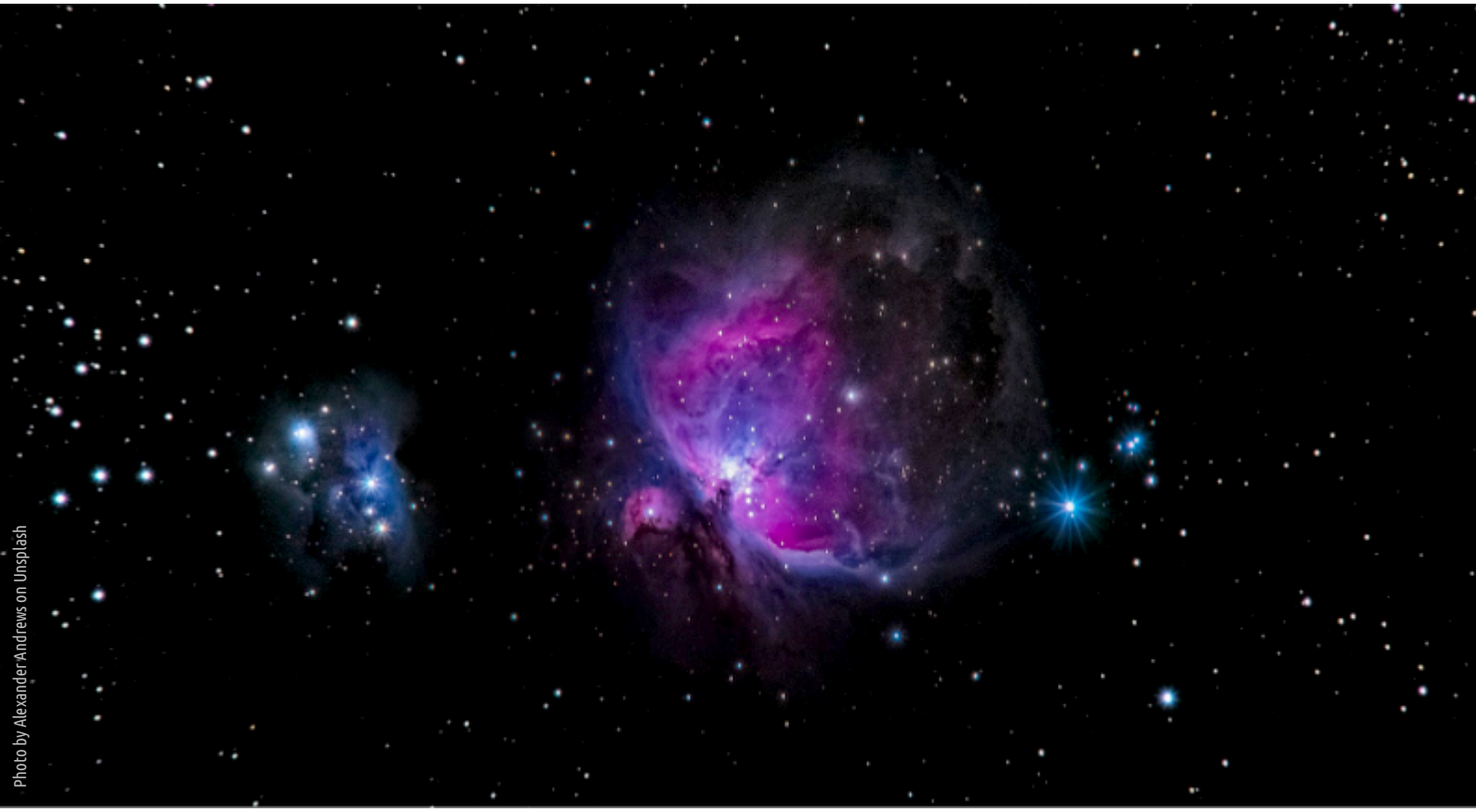


Photo by Alexander Andrews on Unsplash

4. Religious and Philosophical Freedom

Bruno championed intellectual freedom and was critical of religious dogmatism. He believed that

truth could not be confined to any one doctrine or faith and called for a universal religion rooted in reason and nature – a vision far ahead of its time and, of course, a heretical one in the eyes of the Church.

In 1951, Bruno was invited back to Italy by a Venetian nobleman interested in his memory system, but was betrayed and arrested by the

A portrait of Giordano Bruno. Image from Wikimedia

Inquisition for heresy in 1952. He spent some time in the Venetian prison "i Piombi" before being transferred to Rome in 1593. Over a total of 8 years, he was interrogated under severe imprisonment and torture and offered opportunities to recant, which he refused to do. This included severe psychological torment and physical torture like the "rack" – having his hands bound behind his back then tied to a rope, which the inquisitors pulled up with a pulley system, his arms twisting at his shoulders against his own body weight. As the inquisitors pushed for his confession of heresy, he stood firmly by his beliefs and principles…"I have lifted one corner of the veil that hides the mighty mother from her children…Truth that I have worshipped, keep me true…"

On February 17, 1600, he was burned at the stake in Rome's Campo de' Fiori, declaring to the judges the following, before walking to his death with his head erect and a peaceful expression on his face: "You pronounce that sentence with more fear than I feel in hearing it" (Besant, 1910).

Though largely forgotten for centuries, Bruno was rediscovered by Enlightenment thinkers and later hailed by Romantic poets, secular philosophers and scientists as a martyr for free thought. His vision of an infinite universe, filled with life and divinity, continues to inspire both mystics and cosmologists alike.

Giordano Bruno remains a powerful symbol of the courage to think beyond limits – scientific, spiritual or societal – his life being a testament to the dangerous beauty of "extra-ordinary" ideas. Although most of us in our modern times may not receive harsh opposition for studying and sharing ideas, we still raise eyebrows and collect turned backs by those even within our closest circles, causing us to fear social rejection. Caving into this fear and forfeiting our individual progression would mean betraying our true selves, imprisoning our intellectual and spiritual freedom. This is why deep personal investigation and practical philosophy both at intellectual and spiritual levels is important, so that we may cultivate a noble heart to a point where, like Bruno, our love for wisdom and connection with the divine gives us the answers and meaning we long for, and cannot be betrayed.

Sofia Venuti

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Precision Engineering in Predynastic Egypt

Ancient Egypt remains a place of wonder and mystery, from the beautiful temple complexes to the impressive pyramids that have survived the test of time. One could spend years studying the great pyramids of the Giza plateau and observe the amazing achievements of the ancient Egyptians. But in this article, I want to focus on much smaller, yet incredible, artifacts.

Under the pyramid complex of Saqqara many ancient artefacts were found, amongst them tens of thousands of stone vases and vessels. Not a few, or a few hundreds, but thousands and thousands of them. I emphasize the sheer numbers, because it gives proof of an industry, a true savoir-faire dating back over five thousand years ago, during an age we call pre-dynastic, as it predates dynastic Egypt and the Old Kingdom. As such vessels are pretty common in almost every museum that have an Ancient Egypt collection, I invite you to look for them.

What distinguishes those vases from the many ancient vases and jars from antiquity and before is the material they are made of: stone, very hard stone, such as quartzite, granite and diorite. These

Egyptian diorite vase. Image from Wikimedia.

stones are harder than modern steel. Yet tens of thousands were carefully crafted. Most common jars and vases from that period are made of clay and hardened through kiln fires. Some might be made of softer stones such as sandstone or alabaster and are still made today using simple, traditional methods.

In the last decade a group of engineers have scanned a few of the hard stone vases to determine the methods and tools used to create them as well as the level of precision they were able to achieve.

Egyptian stone vases. Image from Wikimedia.

Marks of tubular drills showing traces of iron and titanium were found inside the vases, discrediting the current theory that the ancient Egyptian craftsmen used drills made of copper.

Another fascinating thing is the level of precision and symmetry of the vessels, ranging from a few hundredths of a millimetre to a few tens of thousandths of a millimetre, less than the width of human hair. And even if the smoothness of many of the vases can be explained with time and elbow grease, such levels of precision and consistency cannot be achieved without advanced tools and techniques. These vessels don't seem to belong to a time when the wheel and metal tools were not supposed to be known.

After such observations it is easy to reach for far-fetched theories of aliens and lost advanced civilizations, denying in the process the achievement of the pre-dynastic Egyptians, by relegating them to an anomaly or something that only someone else could have done. But it is also disingenuous to say that this was done using primitive tools and techniques, while showing only drawings and experiments done with tools we know pre-dynastic Egyptians did not possess, such as turning wheels with ball bearings.

Over the past centuries, our vision of the ancient past has changed quite dramatically and archaeology is, like most sciences, a modern one. If we want such a field to advance, we need to allow for doubt, experimentation and corrections to be included in the process. Archaeology needs other scientists to help understand a past for which we only have very limited clues and remains.

Florimond Krins

1. https://www.artifactfoundation.org/

Rediscovering the Hieratic Dimension in Art

Both the National Gallery in London and the Louvre in Paris have shown major exhibitions this year on 13th century art with its sense of the hieratic or 'sacred' dimension in art. With two major European institutions choosing this focus, what might it have to say about our current times and aspirations?

13th century Europe saw the rising spires of gothic cathedrals and great advancements in art and culture, it was a time of civilizational ascendancy that led ultimately to the Renaissance. At this moment, the church was the seat of civilizational power and all cultural and social forms were mediated through her. This is not to suggest that

Duccio's *Maestà*. Image by Wikimedia

the hieratic or sacred dimension is the sole province of Christianity or any other religion, but that this was simply the expression of the time.

The hieratic or 'sacred' dimension reflects the sense of art as a pathway to spiritual elevation and the 'revealing of a mystery'. When, separated by time's oceans, we stand in front of a painting and witness some hidden presence of Life, its timeless truth, glory and beauty, and experience how it can move us deeply… it is something extraordinary and we wonder what has happened to us.

Detail from Simone Martini's *The Annunciation*. (1333). Image from Wikimedia

For the artists of the 13th century, intelligible Beauty was a moral and psychological reality. These things weren't considered relative to individual taste but – in line with Platonic philosophy (which inspired much of Christian theology) – intelligible, aesthetic and moral truths existed. The artist sought to make contact with these realities and transmit them. It is important to understand that art with a sacred dimension is not a chance occurrence or a random gestural accident. Rather, through a dynamic obedience (the word 'obedience' has the root meaning 'to listen' or 'to perceive') the artist seeks contemplation of that which IS, encountering the fire of divine mystery with its awe and holy silence… (McColman, 2023).

"*The drama of the aesthetic discipline lies precisely in a tension between the call of earthbound pleasure and a striving after the supernatural… Furthermore when this discipline is victorious it brings peace and mastery over the sensual*" (Eco, 1986).

The medieval city of Siena was an important place of sacred art, situated on the Via Francigena pilgrimage route between Canterbury and Rome. The proximity of cities to the Via Francigena supported their prosperity, as did being in reach of the 'silk routes', which meant that artists could take inspiration from the Byzantine world as well as from across Europe. The Sienese style was highly experimental, innovative and sacred. Duccio's *Maestà* altarpiece made for the cathedral of Siena demonstrated possibilities of narrative storytelling in paint on a scale not attempted since. In a later Maestà painted for the Palazzo Pubblico, Simone Martini was able to express an entirely new subtlety of emotion and his depictions of the Archangel Gabriel are as exquisite as anything ever created by the human hand. With their innovation they also preserved the possibility of transcendence and created works that are original expressions of something timeless, that can hold open a space and the possibility of stepping into some deeper truths. "In Sienese art, symbolism is not decoration, but revelation" (Schuon, 2007).

By comparison, earlier medieval centuries produced art that was quite flat, formalistic and cartoonish. A passive acceptance of prevailing dogmas always thwarts innovation and individual creativity. The dogmas of those early centuries were religious, but today we have our own and our art forms can be no less dull and lifeless than some dreary medieval tableau…Today, it is the dogma of materialism that is most pernicious, denying as it does the possibility of the transcendent realities which meant so much to the Sienese masters.

Whenever we see times of important civilizational progress, such as happened in the 13th century, we also find a spirit of confidence and certainty about the future. Why build (or even imagine) a

Interior view of the dome in Siena Cathedral. Image from Wikimedia.

cathedral, pyramid or beautiful image of the Madonna, if life is understood as more or less transactional, relative and without meaning? Artists have always struggled with circumstance, doubt and limitations, but some have been able to transcend this and transmit a vision beyond the confines of their own lifetime. A message from the heart cast across death's abyss to future worlds that will and must exist…

Times of great civilizational activity occur at two moments, when cultures are either being born or when they are dying. The activity of a dying culture is characterized by dissolution, fragmentation and separation, much like the physical body in the process of death. Whereas the activity of civilizational birth is characterized by a coming together, integration and expansion. In the Neoplatonic tradition, unity at any level is the result of a higher principle, because unity occurs under the guidance of something that can harmonize the parts. The creative outpouring of the 13th century was harmonized through the timeless dimension where intelligible Beauty resides.

"*Sometimes we find the greatest value, meaning and purpose in life not by chasing after the new but by allowing something venerable and old to form and nurture us*" (Rabbi Kaplan citied in Colman, 2023).

The intention to seek higher truth – whether moral, aesthetic or divine – is also an attitude towards life, with the natural sense of it heading somewhere. Materialistic dogma not only denies the realm of intelligible Beauty, but in the extreme it denies the future too. If nothing gives cohesion, we are left with nothing to hold us together and no way to build. Let us rediscover a sacred dimension in art with curiosity about the existence of transcendent realities, about our creative possibilities and with obedient listening to the beating heart of life.

"All the way to heaven is heaven" - Catherine of Siena

Siobhan Farrar

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Ulugh Beg of Samarkand: Scholar, Astronomer, Ruler

In the heart of Central Asia where fertile valleys meet ancient arteries of the Silk Road, lies Samarkand, an enchanting city steeped in legend, adorned with splendid architecture, storied past, vibrant bazaars and serene moments of contemplation beneath a starlit sky. Among its many historical chapters, one shines with particular brilliance – a luminous revival of Samarkand's might, guided by a ruler whose devotion to science not only transformed his city, but also enriched the course of human knowledge.

Mirzo Ulugh Beg, grandson of the famed conqueror Amir Timur – known in the West as Tamerlane – was no ordinary ruler. Rather than pursuing glory on the battlefield, he dedicated himself passionately to the cultivation of knowledge. His approach to governance was rooted in scholarship, education and cultural advancement. In an age still ruled by the sword, he gathered scholars, poets and artists, built institutions and transformed his court into a centre of learning that would inspire future generations.

From the very beginning, Ulugh Beg seemed to have a special destiny. Born in 1394 in the city of Sultaniyya during one of his grandfather's campaigns, his arrival was greeted with joy –

The Sher-Dor Madrasa in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Image from Wikimedia.

according to legend, the citadel of Mardin and its inhabitants were granted mercy in honour of his birth. He was named Muhammad Taraghay, but from an early age was called Ulugh Beg, meaning "Great Ruler" – a title that would follow him throughout his life. As the beloved grandson of Tamerlane, he accompanied the conqueror on long and formative expeditions. These journeys exposed him to the diversity of cultures and ideas across the vast Timurid empire. Recognizing his potential, Ulugh Beg's family ensured he was educated by the finest scholars of the realm. Proficient in Arabic,

Ulugh Beg in a contemporary Timurid painting (1425–1450). Image from Wikimedia.

Persian and Turkic, he built a strong foundation in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, theology and poetry that would shape his future.

In 1409, at just fifteen, Ulugh Beg was appointed governor of Samarkand. By 1411, he was acknowledged as the ruler of Transoxiana, also known as Mavarannahr – a vast region encompassing modern Uzbekistan, southern Kazakhstan, and parts of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. He acted under the authority of his father Shah Rukh, the head of the Timurid Empire, supporting him in securing borders and quelling internal uprisings. After a defeat by Uzbek forces in 1427, Ulugh Beg's engagement in military affairs decreased and he could focus more on his intellectual and cultural endeavours. When Shah Rukh died in 1447, Ulugh Beg ascended as the head of the Timurid Empire for about two years until his untimely death, marking a forty-year span of influence and leadership.

Samarkand already had a strong intellectual tradition, but Ulugh Beg elevated it to new heights by institutionalizing education and ensuring the participation of some of the finest scholars of the Islamic world. He recruited prominent scientists such as Qadi Zada al-Rumi, Jamshid al-Kashi and later Ali Qushji to teach and collaborate at the madrasa and observatory he built. He not only welcomed scientists to the city, but it also became a magnet for poets, artisans, architects and musicians.

Ulugh Beg commissioned magnificent madrasas in Samarkand (1417-1420), Bukhara (1417) and Gijduvan (1433), all of which remained active till the early 20th century. The education there was characterized by a dual focus, encompassing both traditional Islamic theological studies and a strong emphasis on scientific and philosophical disciplines. The entrance to the Bukhara madrasa is adorned by the phrase: "Aspiration to knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and woman."

The curriculum of the Samarkand madrasa, described by contemporaries as one of the most respected spiritual universities of the Orient, included algebra, geometry, trigonometry, logic, astronomy, philosophical reasoning, medicine, law, Arabic, Persian, music and poetry, reinforcing the institution's interdisciplinary scope. What made this madrasa exceptional was its active synergy with the Samarkand Observatory, also founded by Ulugh Beg. Education was not confined to theory but extended into practical research, creating a dynamic learning environment. The students at the madrasa were supported financially: in addition to lodgings and food, they received a stipend during their eight years of studies.

The education Ulugh Beg promoted emphasized vigorous study, critical thinking and open discussion. He taught at the madrasa himself. Contemporary sources, including letters from al-Kashi, describe how he actively participated in scholarly assemblies,

often moderating debates or challenging students to defend their positions with logic and evidence. He even tested his students with purposefully flawed arguments to encourage independent thinking and intellectual integrity.

Ulugh Beg also introduced thoughtful economic reforms. In 1428, he initiated a monetary reform that improved regional trade, issuing silver coins with precise weight standards to combat forgery and inflation. He supported caravanserais and urban infrastructure to facilitate economic growth. These efforts created the conditions for Samarkand's flourishing as a commercial, scientific and cultural capital.

Most notably, Ulugh Beg's passion for astronomy marked him out as one of the greatest observational astronomers before the modern age. A Timurid poet and statesman, Alisher Navoi, later wrote that "before his eyes, the sky drew near and descended" – a poetic tribute to Ulugh Beg's astronomical genius.

He personally oversaw the building of the Samarkand Observatory, which was completed around 1429. It was equipped with a massive, precision-built colossal meridian arc, often referred to as a "sextant" or "quadrant", with a radius spanning over 40 metres. This instrument enabled measurements of celestial bodies with an accuracy astonishing for the time – almost 150 years before the invention of the telescope.

Ulugh Beg and his team embarked on cutting-edge research at the Observatory. They calculated the length of the astronomical year as 365 days, 6 hours, 10 minutes and 8 seconds – deviating by only 58 seconds from today's accepted value. They also measured the inclination of the ecliptic and the Earth's axial precession, as well as the annual motion of the planets, with astonishing precision. Ulugh Beg developed one of the first complete trigonometric tables which in particular supported the development of architectural styles and navigational advancements around the world. The Zij-i-Sultani star catalogue created by Ulugh Beg and his team listed over one thousand stars with exceptional accuracy. It became an essential resource for astronomers well beyond Central Asia, influencing scientific developments in Europe, China and India.

Despite his achievements, Ulugh Beg faced opposition from certain conservative factions. His devotion to empirical observation and logical reasoning clashed with traditionalist views. His life came to a tragic end – executed on the orders of his power-hungry elder son in 1449. His observatory was looted by fanatics, ruined and lost to history, to be rediscovered by archaeologists only in the 20th century. His disciple Ali Qushji managed to rescue many books and most importantly the Zij-i-Sultani, and take them to Istanbul. It was a significant event for the Ottoman scientific community, and through his teaching and the spread of the texts from Samarkand's Observatory, Ulugh Beg's work became known in other parts of the Islamic world and, eventually, in Europe.

The 15th century historian Davletshah Samarqandi wrote after the death of Ulugh Beg: "Ulugh Beg... was a scholarly, just, powerful and generous ruler. He attained a high degree of learning and profoundly understood the essence of things. During his time, the level of scholarship reached great heights, and worthy individuals occupied important positions under his rule. In geometry, he was akin to Euclid, and in astronomy, to Ptolemy. By the unanimous opinion of the most distinguished and wise individuals, throughout the history of Islam and even earlier, from the times of Alexander the Great to the present day, there has never been a scholar-ruler comparable to Ulugh Beg Gurgan."

Today, the same sky that Ulugh Beg studied with such devotion stretches over Samarkand's domes and towers. The Madrasa and Observatory he built – now beautifully restored – and the star maps he left behind, translated into many languages and printed across the world, all stand as enduring reminders of a ruler who transformed Samarkand into beacon of reason, beauty and learning. Together, they remain a testament to the lasting power of wisdom and knowledge over ignorance and destruction.

Nataliya Petlevych

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