

REVIEW

A Tomb Not Fit For a President



By MARY BEARD

As Americans debate which figures from history should be memorialized and how, the focus is usually on statues of presidents and generals. But one of the most instructive examples is almost unknown today: an imposing marble sarcophagus that for many years was a fixture, and a curiosity, on the Mall in Washington, D.C., standing on the grass just outside the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building. An information panel placed next to the sarcophagus in the 1960s identified it as the "Tomb in Which Andrew Jackson REFUSED to be Buried." It stood, in other words, as a symbol of the down-to-earth essence of American republicanism and its distaste for the vulgar bric-a-brac of monarchy or autocracy.

The sarcophagus had been discovered in Lebanon in 1837 and brought to the U.S. a couple of years later by Commodore Jesse D. Elliott, the commander of a squadron of the U.S. Navy on patrol in the Mediterranean. The story was that it had once held the remains of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus, who ruled between 222 and 235 A.D.

Unlike some other emperors, Alexander has not remained a household name. A Syrian by birth, he came to the throne at age 13 after the assassination of his cousin Elagabalus, whose legendary excesses outstripped even those of Caligula and Nero. Elagabalus's party trick of smothering his dinner guests to death under piles of rose petals was brilliantly captured by the 19th-century painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Alexander was the youngest Roman emperor ever up to that point, and most of the 20 or so surviving ancient portraits of him (or believed to be of him) depict a rather dreamy, almost vulnerable, youth. Whether he was ever as ex-

When Andrew Jackson refused to be buried in a Roman sarcophagus, he showed the down-to-earth essence of democracy.

emplary as later ages imagined is doubtful. Nonetheless, ancient writers saw him as a relatively safe pair of hands, largely thanks to the influence of his mother, Julia Mamaea. In the end, while on military campaign together, mother and son were both assassinated by rebellious Roman troops.

Alexander's name was found nowhere on the coffin that he was supposed to have occupied, nor were there any other identifying marks on it. But the name "Julia Mamaea" was clearly inscribed on the other coffin in the pair. For Jesse Elliott, that made almost irresistible the connection between the pair of coffins he had acquired and the unfortunate young emperor and his mother. They had been murdered together and then must have been buried side by side, in appropriately imperial grandeur close to Alexander's birthplace, in what is now Lebanon. Or so he managed to convince himself.

Elliott did not intend Alexander's sarcophagus to become a museum piece. First he hoped to have it used for the remains of James Smithson, the founding donor of the Smithsonian Institution. When that plan failed, Elliott presented it in 1845 to the National Institute, a major collection of American heritage housed in the Patent Office, in "the fervent hope" that it would soon contain "all that is mortal of the patriot and hero, Andrew Jackson."

Jackson was 77 years old and in failing health; he would die a few

months later. But his reply to the letter from Elliott outlining this offer was famously robust: "I cannot consent that my mortal body shall be laid in a repository prepared for an Emperor or King—my republican feelings and principles forbid it—the simplicity of our system of government forbids it. Every monument erected to perpetuate the memory of our heroes and statesmen ought to bear evidence of the economy and simplicity of our republican institutions and the plainness of our republican citizens...I cannot permit my remains to be the first in these United States to be deposited in a Sarcophagus made for an Emperor or King."

Jackson was in a difficult position. As president, he had been accused of behaving like a Caesar, in a style of autocratic populism that a few of his successors have copied. This may have added to the intensity of his refusal: He was certainly not going to risk an imperial burial. No practical use was found for the sarcophagus, so in the 1850s it went from its temporary lodgings in the Patent Office to the Smithsonian, where it remained on display outside on the

Mall until finally demoted to storage in the 1980s.

In fact, it didn't take long for skeptics to undermine Elliott's claims for the imperial origins of the sarcophagus. The assassination of Alexander Severus was supposed to have taken place in Germany or Britain, some 2,000 miles from Beirut. The Julia Ma-

Visitors inspect the sarcophagus on the Mall in Washington, D.C., 1965.

maea commemorated in the inscription was stated to have died at the age of 30, making it impossible for her to have been Alexander's mother—unless, as one of Elliott's own junior officers later tartly observed, she had "given birth to her son, when she was but three years old, which is, to say the least, unusual." The woman who had once occupied the coffin was presumably one of the many other inhabitants of the Roman Empire with that same common name.

Besides, none of the people engaged in these debates appear to have realized that there was a rival candidate. An elaborate marble sarcophagus the Capitoline Museums at Rome, celebrated in a notable engraving by Piranesi and well known to keen 18th- and 19th-century tourists, was supposed to have been shared by Alexander and Julia Mamaea, shown reclining together in imperial splendor on its lid. Scholars now believe that the sarcophagus Elliott found was a typical product of the eastern Roman Empire, and could have belonged to anyone with enough ready cash.

But Jackson's rejection of it as "made for an Emperor or King" remained part of the object's history and mythology. Whatever taint of Caesarism might have clung to Jackson, it is hard not to be on his side, against Elliott's "fervent hope" of acquiring a celebrity occupant for his sarcophagus.

Ms. Beard is a professor of classics at the University of Cambridge. This essay is adapted from her new book "Twelve Caesars: Images of Power from the Ancient World to the Modern," published this week by Princeton University Press.



A portrait of Andrew Jackson painted shortly before his death in 1845.

FROM TOP: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS; EVERETT COLLECTION

WILCZEK'S UNIVERSE

FRANK WILCZEK

The Cyborg Naturalist of Walden Pond

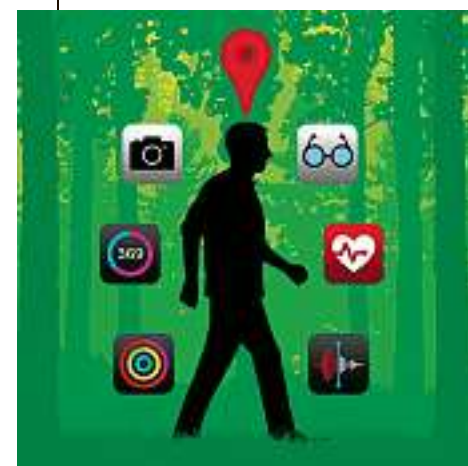


A FEW WEEKS AGO, walking in the woods around Concord, Mass., I let myself wander at random, communing with nature.

I took in beautiful scenery near and far—both available in focus, thanks to my progressive-lens eyeglasses. Occasionally I'd pull out my iPhone to take pictures or to zoom in on interesting micro-ecologies or big birds in the distance. I had fun searching for, and finding, a pair of brightly colored woodpeckers, whose activity had announced their presence. I took photos and recorded a stream of consciousness (with a background of birdsong and other sounds of the forest) on Voice Memos. Since the walk was also meant to be exercise, from time to time I consulted my iWatch to check on my heartbeat, mileage and calorie burn.

Eventually I realized I was quite lost. That was not a serious problem, of course—Google Maps came to my rescue.

But something bothered me. In what I'd intended as a pristine nature experience, here I was using very high technology indeed to bail myself out. (Google Maps relies on the Global Positioning System, or GPS—itsself a master class in modern physics that involves sophisticated orchestration of space satellites, atomic clocks and electromagnetic waves.) This small epiphany triggered a reconsideration of everything that happened during my "nature walk." The walk had been



TOMASZ WALENTA

technologically enhanced every step of the way. I'd been functioning as a man-machine hybrid: a cyborg.

What would Henry David Thoreau, the inspiring patron saint of those same woods, who championed direct experience, think of that?

My first thought was that he'd be appalled. But later I did some research. Thoreau reveled in his spy-glass's revelations, like this eagle from his "Journal":

"Lying on the ground with my glass, I could watch him very easily, and by turns he gave me all possible views of his wings curved upward slightly the more, like a stereotyped undulation. He rose very high at last, till I almost lost him in the clouds, circling or rather looping along westward, high over river and wood and farm, effectually concealed in the sky. We who live this plodding life here below never know how many eagles fly over us. They are concealed in the empyrean. I think I have got the worth of my glass now that it has revealed to me the white-headed eagle."

Famously, Thoreau always set out equipped with a notched walking staff, which he used not only for support but also to take measurements of water and snow levels. His hat, he wrote, was a tool:

"... attending to plants with more method, looking out the name of each one and remembering it. I began to bring them home in my hat, a straw one with a scaffold lining to it, which I called my botany-box."

And unlike his less-equipped friends, he was prepared for adversity:

"They all tore their clothes badly but myself, and I, who, it chanced, was the only one provided with needles and thread...When we came out of the woods, I was the best dressed of any of them."

Clearly, Thoreau was a bit of a cyborg himself.

Thinking more deeply, I pondered how far we walkers have come from our "natural" condition. Not only our gadgets but even the store of food that sustains us is the product of many machines and complex supply chains, as well as human labor. We've come a long way from our hunter-gatherer ancestors, who walked from necessity and relied on nature's endowment. Cyborgs are us.

EXHIBIT

PROTEST FASHION

WHAT TO WEAR TO A PROTEST?

In "Dressing the Resistance" (Princeton Architectural Press, October), costume designer Camille Benda shows that new fashions regularly accompany new social movements. The 2018 *gilets jaunes* protests in France got their name from demonstrators' uniforms—yellow high-visibility vests required in French cars for emergencies.

In 2014, Hong Kong residents rebelled against the Chinese government with a sea of yellow umbrellas, while Ukrainian protesters painted flowers and other decorative art on hard hats. Indian farmers protesting the lack of government aid during a drought in 2017 wore their wives' saris.

'The Singer Chenard' in French Revolutionary garb, 1792.

Ms. Benda also illustrates protest fashion from previous eras. In the early 1850s, American feminists began to wear Turkish-inspired trousers; among their leaders was Amelia Bloomer, who lent her name to the pants. The resulting controversy helped to energize the movement that would lead, decades later, to women winning the right to vote.

The book also includes a 1792 painting by Louis-Léopold Boilly of "The Singer Chenard" (left), a Parisian entertainer arrayed for a festival in the uniform of a worker during the French Revolution: short jacket, striped waistcoat, factory clogs and sans-culottes, a sort of rugged wool trousers that became a symbol of the working class. "Every single item he wears," Ms. Benda writes, "is an antifashion symbol."

—Peter Saenger



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