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Unlocking the Past

Wherever people live, they leave traces behind them. Some of these are temporary, others survive the test of time. What we know about the history of humanity we owe to such traces: impressive buildings; magnificent works of art, music and literature; great achievements in the fields of science and technology – but also everyday objects, transit routes, the remains of settlements or ritual sites. All over the world, scientists are investigating the often hidden traces of past eras and cultures. They preserve the remains of the past for the future, and explore the wide range of human activity over many millennia.

01 Multi-Colored Deities – The Aesthetics of Antiquity

It was long believed that the sculptures and buildings of ancient Greece and Rome were of pure unpainted stone, often white marble. Archaeologist Vinzenz Brinkmann, however, argues that many sculptures and temples in ancient Greece were actually brightly colored and often decorated in highly provocative fashion.

02 The Queens of Meroë – The Forgotten Kingdom on the Nile

From the 3rd century B.C., a self-assured state emerged on the site of contemporary Sudan that determined the fortunes of the region for seven centuries. Heavily influenced by African traditions, an advanced civilization increasingly distinct from the rest of Ancient Egypt developed in the capital Meroë. This was a matriarchal society in which women played a decisive role, even ruling as queens.

03 Angkor Wat – Saving the Temple City

Since the mid-1990s, geologists Esther and Hans Leisen have been regular visitors to a mysterious region on the edge of the Cambodian jungle. Under difficult climatic and working conditions, and together with a team from Cambodia, they aim to save the largest sacred structure on earth, the Angkor Wat temple complex.

04 Return of the Ice Mummy

A team of archaeologists has made a spectacular find in the Altai mountains of Mongolia. They came upon the frozen remains of a 2,500-year-old Scythian warrior. The scientists hope the mummy will provide new clues about the lives of this nomadic people.

05 The Secrets of the Palm Leaves – Salvaging the History of Laos

For centuries, the people of Laos recorded their country's cultural memory by writing on dried palm leaves. When the Communists seized power in 1975, history and tradition were forgotten, and there was a very real danger that the only manuscripts of their kind in the world would be lost forever. Professor Harald Hundius is committed to salvaging these treasures.

06 Diving into Antiquity – Sunken Ships in the Aegean

On the bed of the Aegean Sea lie the wrecks of ships that in ancient times plied the dangerous waters between Greece and what is today Turkey. By undertaking highly risky dives down to these historic hulks, scientists are trying to find out more about everyday lives in Antiquity.

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07 A Pharaoh's Treasure Chest – The Egyptian Museum in Cairo

Some 150,000 artifacts are on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, including the mummies of legendary Pharaohs and golden treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamun. But few people realize that an estimated 90,000 other items are stored in the museum basement, many of which have been neither examined nor catalogued. For the first time ever, a camera crew was permitted to accompany museum specialists as they explored areas of their workplace that have been closed to the outside world for decades.

08 Persepolis – Vision of a World Empire **HD**

In the year 520 B.C., the Persian King Darius I started work on the construction of a new capital. Persepolis became one of the most magnificent cities of antiquity. Then in the year 330 B.C. it was destroyed by the army of Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia. Now an Iranian and a German architect have created a virtual reconstruction of Persepolis, using urban-planning software.

09 Naples Underground – The Catacombs of the Old City

The ancient city of Neapolis, founded by the Greeks, is located directly below the old town of Naples. The site can now be accessed via passageways discovered by the Italian cave explorer Enzo Albertini.

10 Allianoi – Can the Ancient Roman Spa Be Saved?

The Allianoi archeological site in Turkey contains one of the most intact spa settlements of the Roman era. But work is underway nearby on constructing a dam. If the dam is flooded, Allianoi will be submerged and lost forever.

11 Mohenjo Daro – A Mystery of Indus Culture

The metropolis of Mohenjo Daro, which dates back to the third millennium B.C., was discovered in the 1920s on the banks of the Indus River in what is today Pakistan. The city was the center of a civilization as sophisticated as that of Egypt or Mesopotamia. Archeologists are still puzzling over the question of why it declined 4,000 years ago.

12 Egypt – Journey to the Land of the Pharaohs

German archeologist Nadine Möller looks for evidence of urban life in ancient Egypt. Her work has led to a number of significant new findings – that the currency of the pharaonic era was grain, for example. Möller has also discovered that many traditions and skills of the period still play a role in the everyday lives of people today.

13 Searching for Gold – The Quest for the Golden Fleece

German scientists Andreas Hauptmann and Thomas Stöllner are specialists in tracking down the gold of the ancient world. On the basis of their research in Turkey and Georgia, they have concluded that there is more than a grain of truth in the myth of the Golden Fleece.

14 Pakistan – Clues in the Rock

Early Buddhism has left unmistakable traces in what is now Pakistan. On the banks of the Indus River and in the craggy rocks of Peshawar province, archaeologists have unearthed numerous Buddhist cult and art objects dating from the Kingdom of Gandhara. What does the future hold for these finds, against a backdrop of illegal trade and religious fanaticism?

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15 The Bronze Cartel – Economic Boom on the Med

The first steps towards globalization took place 3,500 years ago. Bronze represented a significant leap in technological development. Trade in its components, copper and tin, also stimulated exchange of a different kind over large distances – that of knowledge and culture. This resulted in unprecedented economic growth in the Mediterranean region.

16 Subterranean Springs – The Mayans' Secret Shrines

The Mayan Indians named them dzonot or sacred springs – the water holes in the karstic rock that ensured their survival during droughts on the Yucatan Peninsula in southeast Mexico. The individual cenotes are linked together by a shared groundwater system. The Mayans carried out sacrifices, both animal and human, at cenotes in honor of the rain god Chak.

17 The Romans' Revenge – Battle at the Harzhorn

If the history books are to be believed, the Romans suffered a devastating defeat in Germania in 9 A.D. and never returned. Now evidence of a battle that took place between Germanic and Roman troops in the 3rd century A.D. has been unearthed in northern Germany. Did the Romans attempt a late campaign of retaliation?

18 The Glacial Mummy – A Stone Age Crime

Ötzi the Iceman, the world's oldest preserved mummy, died 5,300 years ago. Discovered by accident in the early 1990s in a melting glacier between Austria and Italy, the body and equipment found with it have provided researchers with great insights into the life of Stone Age man. But the circumstances of his death make Ötzi's story one of the world's oldest crimes.

19 The Inca Legacy – Discoveries in Peru

Traces of the Incas are everywhere in Peru, and not only to be found at such spectacular archaeological sites as Machu Picchu or Choquequirao. Old traditions live on: Peruvians still eat freeze-dried potato pulp known as chuño, take to the Pacific waves in Inca boats, and sing in the ancient Quechua language.

20 A European Legend – The Holy Lance

According to legend, the Holy Lance was used by a Roman soldier to pierce the body of Jesus as he hung on the cross. Over centuries, any ruler in possession of this lance was viewed as invincible in Europe – and it became one of the treasures of the Holy Roman Empire. Today, archaeologists continue to research this controversial cult object against a backdrop of religion and politics.

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21 Herakleion – Egypt's Sunken Port City **HD**

Archeologists searched for a long time in vain for one of Egypt's most important port cities, Herakleion on the Nile Delta, submerged in the 7th century. Then finally they made a sensational discovery: Six kilometers off today's coastline, they found temples, colossal statues and gold jewelry on the site of the once magnificent ancient commercial hub.

22 Baltic Battle – The Mystery Surrounding Sweden's Historic Defeat **HD**

A sea battle against Denmark accelerated Sweden's decline as a major regional power on the Baltic Sea. Few details were known about this clash until now. Meticulous research in both Danish and Swedish archives, as well as the discovery of a wreck, have shed new light on what happened.

23 The Thuringians – An Enigmatic Equestrian Tribe **HD**

In the 5th and 6th centuries, the West Germanic Thuringians were one of the most powerful tribes between the Rhine and the Danube. Not much is known about them. But during roadworks in central Germany one of their burial sites came to light. Among the dead were several horsemen. The burial objects provide a rare insight into the lives of people in the Thuringian Kingdom.

24 Tiwanaku – The Eternal City **HD**

For 2,500 years, Tiwanaku was at the heart of the Aymara culture on Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. The people who lived here demonstrated astonishing knowledge of architecture, agriculture and astronomy. In the 11th century, a devastating drought forced them to leave the city, which fell into decline. For a long time, it wasn't known what happened to the survivors of Tiwanaku.

25 The Amber Road – Ancient Trading Route for Magical Stones

In ancient times, amber from the Baltic Sea coastline was a highly-prized substance. The Romans used their extensive network of roads to ensure they gained access to the valuable resin. Numerous archeological finds illustrate this trading route between northern and southern Europe, which also provided the opportunity for cultural exchange.

26 Srivijaya – Treasure Hunt in Asia

The Srivijaya Empire was centered on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. For 600 years, it dominated maritime trade between China and Africa, until it declined and became the stuff of legend. In the early 20th century, researchers verified its existence with the help of ancient manuscripts. Since then, magnificent finds have provided evidence of Srivijaya's immeasurable wealth.

For further information
please contact:

Deutsche Welle
Sales and Distribution
53110 Bonn, Germany
www.dw-transtel.de

Alexandra Lenz
T +49.228.429-2715
F +49.228.429-2719
sales@dw.de