

On the Front Lines of the French and Indian War

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Mosaic Mystery

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Seal Hunt

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of a
Greek Hero

An Islamic
Empire's
Forgotten
Capital

PLUS:

Tut's space glass

Two-month emperor

Napoleon's favorite general

The last U.S. slave ship



CONTENTS



48 Penguins on the island of South Georgia

FEATURES

24 WORLD OF THE GRIFFIN WARRIOR

A single grave and its extraordinary contents are changing the way archaeologists view two great ancient Greek cultures

BY ANDREW CURRY

32 MINARET IN THE MOUNTAINS

Excavations near a 12th-century tower reveal the summer capital of a forgotten Islamic empire

BY ERIC A. POWELL

38 A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

The twists and turns of a medieval English city's history emerge from an artifact-rich riverbed

BY KATE RAVILIOUS

44 PIECING TOGETHER A GOD'S JOURNEY

By tracking a Mesoamerican sculpture's lengthy voyage from Mexico to Denmark, researchers discover its true identity

BY BENJAMIN LEONARD

48 THE ANTARCTIC HUNT

How late 18th- and 19th-century seal hunters survived on the harsh island landscape of South Georgia

BY DANIEL WEISS

Cover: A mosaic-covered sculpture depicts the Mesoamerican god Xolotl
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In the 18th and 19th centuries, the beaches of South Georgia, a desolate 100-mile-long island in the South Atlantic Ocean, were prime hunting grounds for the lucrative—and hazardous—seal trade.

THE ANTARCTIC HUNT

How late 18th- and 19th-century seal hunters survived on the harsh island landscape of South Georgia

by DANIEL WEISS



IN LATE 1815 IN LONDON, Thomas Smith, then about 16 years old, signed up as an apprentice on *Norfolk*, a 650-ton former warship that had passed into private hands. Smith had heard that the vessel was bound for Africa in search of gold and ivory, an impression reinforced by eager talk among the more experienced sailors of hunting down huge elephants. As the ship sailed south, the youngster learned that *Norfolk's* actual destination was South Georgia, a bleak, windswept island in the South Atlantic Ocean some 1,200 miles east of the southern tip of South America. There, he would indeed be hunting elephants—sea elephants, or elephant seals, as they are now known.

Smith hung back warily during the first attack on a herd of elephant seals, enormous beasts that weigh up to five tons, but found there was little to fear. The seals “commenced snorting and some of them roaring, at the same time [that] most of them were endeavoring to make their escape into the water,” he writes in his autobiography. “Poor innocent animals! I could not but pity them, seeing the large tears rolling down from their eyes; they were slaughtered without mercy.” Far more dangerous, Smith would learn, were the harsh conditions of the 100-mile-long island where he and his fellow crewmembers had to fend for themselves for days or weeks on end while hunting elephant seals, whose blubber they rendered into oil, as well as fur seals, whose pelts they harvested.

During an unsuccessful attempt to locate Antarctica, in January 1775, famed explorer Captain James Cook surveyed South Georgia, claimed it for Britain, and named it in honor of King George III. Cook wrote the island off as a largely barren, unpromising spot, with forbidding, icy mountains rearing up into the clouds, and the valleys between covered in snow “many fathoms deep,” even though it was the height of summer. Despite lying 900 miles northeast of the Antarctic Peninsula, South Georgia is south of the Antarctic Convergence,



the boundary between frigid Antarctic waters and warmer subantarctic waters, leading to cooler temperatures. “Not a tree was to be seen,” Cook writes, “nor a shrub even big enough to make a toothpick.” The explorer did note, however, that the island’s beaches teemed with seals, or “sea bears,” along with the largest flocks of penguins he had ever seen.

British sealers began to target the marine mammals in 1786. American hunters from New England soon joined them. For the next few decades, South Georgia was the scene of an entirely unregulated, unbridled frenzy. Each year, up to 20 ships would arrive during the seals’ breeding season, in the southern hemisphere’s summer, fill their holds with oil and sealskins, and sail off to sell their goods in London, New York, or Canton, in southern China. In the pre-petroleum era, seal oil was in steady demand and was used for lighting and lubrication, and for treating leather, rope, and textiles. Prices for sealskins were more variable, though Smith reports that the pelts harvested on his first voyage to South Georgia sold for a respectable £2 apiece. (See “The Fur of the Sea Bear” on p. 52.)



Fur seals cover the beaches of South Georgia. Their activity, along with that of elephant seals, threatens to destroy the archaeological remains left behind by the sealers who once hunted the marine mammals during the 18th and 19th centuries.

“As often happens with sealing, a new ground is found and very rapidly overexploited, causing the seal population to collapse,” says Robert Burton, a natural history writer who has studied seals on South Georgia and in the broader Antarctic region. By the early 1820s, the island’s seal population had been seriously depleted, and the sealers moved on to more promising terrain. British sealer and Antarctic explorer James Weddell estimated that, by this time, at least 1.2 million fur-seal pelts had been taken from South Georgia. Sealers returned later in the century when the seal population rebounded, but the catch was never again as high as it had been during those first few, overwhelmingly bountiful, decades.



A brick and stone hearth was revealed during a recent excavation in front of three cast-iron try-pots used to render elephant seal blubber into oil.

JUST OVER TWO CENTURIES after Smith first sailed to South Georgia, in February 2019, a team of archaeologists from the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) of the University of Cambridge traveled to the island. The rusting ruins of a number of early twentieth-century whaling stations on South Georgia have been the focus of archaeological study since 1989, but until now, the far more elusive traces of sealing, the island's earliest industry, have gone unexplored. During a three-week expedition organized by the South Georgia Heritage Trust, with Burton serving as project manager, the CAU team uncovered evidence at a number of coastal sites of how late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sealers, like those on *Norfolk*, processed their prey and took shelter from the island's extreme weather.

Although the archaeologists endured far less arduous conditions than the sealers, they faced a number of unusual challenges. The physical remains found so far at sealing sites have been scant, possibly because they were used for only a portion of each year, and the sealers, who possessed few material goods, had to bring everything they used ashore by boat. With 19 landing spots on their itinerary, the team frequently had a day, or even less, to investigate a given site, and time could be cut even shorter by an unexpected storm. Drones operated by the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute helped survey more territory as part of a coastal mapping project carried out in partnership with the expedition. But they, too, were grounded at times due to inclement weather. The archaeologists also had to contend with—at times amusing—interference from the island's wildlife. They would turn their heads to find a snarling fur seal charging with unexpected speed, look up to see a petrel flying off with one of their camera cases, or lay down a grid, only for a penguin to trip over the tape and tear it up.

Documenting the remains of the sealing industry has grown urgent in recent decades as they are in danger of disappearing. Twentieth-century whalers hunted elephant seals on South Georgia as a sideline, but both sealing and whaling on the island ended in the mid-1960s. Since then, the population of fur seals, which was once nearly extinguished on the island, has exploded.

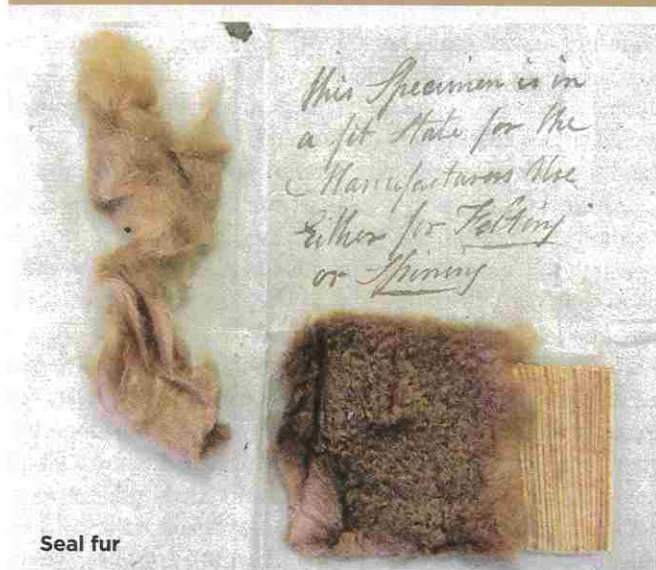
“During breeding season, the beaches are absolutely full of fur seals, as well as huge elephant seals and penguins,” says CAU researcher Marcus Brittain, who was the lead archaeologist on the recent expedition. The activity of all these seals threatens to destroy the traces left behind by the sealers who once hunted them. When seal populations were lower, silt accumulated around these remains, and thick stands of tussock grass—the island's only vegetation—grew on top of them, offering protection from the elements. “Now that the seal populations have returned, they are churning into and eroding all of that tussock grass, and the strong storms that hit the island are taking their toll as well,” says Brittain. “The archaeology is being revealed, but is now, unfortunately, at risk.”

The most prominent remains of sealing on South Georgia are try-pots, the large cast-iron cauldrons that sealers used to render elephant seal blubber. “They would go through the bloody motions of killing the animals,” says Brittain. “Then they would chop them up into what they called Bible leaves—blubber chunks about the size of a page from a bible.” The sealers would then throw these chunks into try-pots, where they would boil the blubber and turn it into oil. Brittain and his team documented try-pots at a number of locations, but those at Elsehul, a protected spot near the northwest tip of the island, suggest it was a major processing site. In the 1980s, a trio of try-pots at Elsehul began to emerge from the soil as it eroded, and are now fully aboveground. The archaeologists found that these try-pots were placed in a stone building with walls that were nearly two feet thick. Excavation directly in front of the try-pots revealed a brick and stone hearth above which, Brittain says, the cauldrons were likely suspended as they simmered away.

THE SHIPS THAT SAILED to South Georgia were far too large to approach the island's coast. They tended to remain in deeper waters while gangs of sealers went ashore via the island's dozens of fjords using shallops, smaller boats equipped with oars and sails. “There would be a prolonged time during which the sailors would be ashore, in pretty tough conditions,” says Brittain. “It's a very changeable climate there. You can be in bright sunshine one minute and then a thick snowstorm with horizontal winds the next.”

Securing shelter was essential. Often, says Damien Sanders, a maritime historian and archaeologist who produced an annotated edition of Smith's autobiography, the sealers would drag their boat up the beach, turn it upside down, crawl underneath, light a small blubber fire, and go to sleep. As Smith discovered one night during his first voyage to South Georgia, though, this could end badly. After a long day of slaughtering seals and a hearty dinner of fried elephant seal hearts and tongues, washed down with coffee, Smith writes in his autobiography, he and his fellow sealers lay down to sleep under their boat on the beach at what was then known as Disappointment Bay. When the wind picked up, they tried to hold the boat in place. “Towards midnight the gusts became so severe in spite of all our efforts to keep her down, that she was blown from us about fifty feet into the air,” he writes. “She came down on

The Fur of the Sea Bear



Seal fur

RECORDS OF VOYAGES TO South Georgia, and other islands in the South Seas, make clear that millions of fur-seal pelts were exported from these remote locations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What became of these pelts once they were sold in London, New York, and southern China is less well understood. To try to find out how the pelts were used in England, Robert Burton, who served as the South Georgia Heritage Trust's project manager for a recent archaeological expedition to the island, searched British newspaper archives.

Burton found that when sealskins first arrived in London in the late eighteenth century, there was little demand for them and they were used to produce thin leather for gloves and shoes. In 1795, a trunk maker named Thomas Chapman developed an involved process of preparing seal fur for use in place of expensive beaver fur in hats. But Chapman had poor luck—deeper-pocketed competitors outbid him for pelt shipments and poached his methods. In any case, by the end of the eighteenth century, silk had largely replaced the fur covering in hats.

Seal fur was more popular when spun into wool. Burton has discovered a number of newspaper ads for shawls made from the material, including one that addressed itself "To Ladies of Fashion" and hawked "Patent Georgian Satin Cloth, made from the Fur of the Seal or Sea Bear of the South Seas...softer and more delicate than the India Shawl." He also found a description in the January 19, 1804, *Morning Post* of a "Georgian satin cloth coat and breeches" made from seal wool worn by Lord Somerville at a coach parade to celebrate Queen Charlotte's birthday. The coat was, reportedly, "of the most delicate texture imaginable." Burton even managed to track down a sample of seal wool produced by Chapman in the Sheffield City Archives. "It had the smooth, cool feeling of ivory," he says. "It would have made a lovely material."—D.W.



This cave in Whistle Cove on South Georgia's northern coast appears to have been used by sealers as a shelter. A stone and grass wall, remains of which are visible in front of the cave, would have provided additional protection and insulation.

the sand a hundred feet from where she was, and then rolled over with the force of the wind a hundred feet more, before she reached the water." The boat was severely damaged, and Smith and his fellow sealers spent the rest of the night trudging up and down the beach to keep from freezing.

In some areas of the island, sealers found caves where they could sleep with greater protection. But even then, Smith learned, one was still at the mercy of fearsome storms. During a later voyage to the island, having cleared all the elephant seals from one beach and rowed for miles through icy, choppy waters, he and his fellow sealers were overjoyed to discover a spacious cave in what was then known as Snow Squall Bay. There they spent the night. "Towards morning," Smith writes, "we were aroused by the sound of the wind and the roaring and beating of the sea against the cavern." The storm trapped them inside for three days and swept away one of their boats, which they had left outside the cave's entrance.

Sealers in a different cave, in Whistle Cove, midway up the northern side of the island, may have had an easier time of it, based on the archaeologists' findings. Near the cave's surface, the team first unearthed tin cans that likely held British soldiers' rations from the 1982 Falklands War, which was fought, in part, on South Georgia. About one and a half feet farther down, they came upon an assemblage that they believe was left behind by sealers, based on the presence of a clay pipestem thought to date to the late eighteenth or nineteenth century. Charcoal and charred bones believed to have belonged to penguins were also present. "It looks like they were burning penguins as a heat source," says CAU archaeologist Andrew Chaplin. The birds' high fat content made them a ready source of fuel.

Memoirs written by South Georgia sealers such as Smith often give the impression that they relied entirely on makeshift shelters and did little to build more permanent dwellings. But the archaeologists uncovered a number of wood and stone structures on the island that must have required a good deal of skill and effort to construct. "Reading the sealers' accounts,

you get the sense that people would just go down, whack some seals, pack up, and get out of there,” says University of Cambridge archaeologist Ian Ostericher. “Instead, it looks like there was a much more substantial occupation, and that they were spending quite a bit of time and energy to make sure they had a fairly comfortable base station.”

In front of the entrance to the cave in Whistle Cove, for example, the team found the remains of a stone and tussock-grass wall that would have provided additional protection against the wind and the cold. And, nestled into a naturally sheltered U-shaped rock crevice at Albatross Cove, at the southeastern end of the island, they uncovered the floorboards and collapsed roof remains of a carefully constructed timber hut that Brittain believes was probably used by generations of sealers. When they dug a trench in front of the floorboards, the team unearthed the remains of a wall with two layers—the inner one formed of woven tussock grass and the outer one of stone—that appears to have been designed to provide added insulation. Near the remains of the hut was a stone hearth that, like a number of those found on the island, contained a concretized substance thought to be



At Albatross Cove on South Georgia's southern tip, archaeologists unearthed the floorboards of an expertly built wooden hut. Nearby, they found a clay tobacco pipe dating to the mid- to late 19th century.

burned blubber mixed with bits of burned bone. Ostericher took a sample of this substance and plans to analyze it to see whether discrete layers can be discerned, almost like tree rings, possibly indicating use over multiple years.

Determining the exact date of the Albatross Cove hut—or any of the remains of sealing discovered on South Georgia—is challenging. A clay tobacco pipe unearthed by Chaplin at Albatross Cove appears to date to the mid- to late nineteenth century, and more precise dating may be obtainable if its manufacturer can be identified based on its markings—an

ivy leaf, incised lines, and the initials S and T. Makers' marks might also be found on the try-pots. In addition, Brittain hopes dendrochronology can be used to help date the wood in structures at Albatross Cove and several other sites. However, these dates could be misleadingly early as any wood used on South Georgia had to have arrived from elsewhere, either in the form of driftwood or parts of ships.

AT THE END OF SMITH'S first voyage to South Georgia, *Norfolk* returned to London bearing a healthy cargo of 3,500 barrels of elephant seal oil and 5,000 seal-skins. More experienced crewmembers received a portion of the profits, but Smith's apprentice wages barely covered the cost of his clothing. Lacking other options, he prepared to return to South Georgia. "I was compelled," he writes, "with a full view of all my future toils and miseries, to...go a second voyage to that desolate island, unfit for human beings to inhabit." Smith sailed to South Georgia three times in all, and endured a seemingly endless stream of misadventures and near-death experiences on the island. Among the

most harrowing took place in the vicinity of Albatross Cove, in December 1818, according to Sanders' research, at a time when the hut there does not appear to have been available for use. After a furious stretch of work in which he had helped amass some 20 tons of elephant seal blubber and then load it onto a shallop anchored in what was then known as Cooper's Harbor, of which Albatross Cove is a part, Smith was invited by a fellow crewmember and friend to spend the night on the boat. It seemed a welcome place to rest his work-weary bones, but early the next morning a gale blew in and great waves drove the shallop against the rocks. After clinging to a carved panel on the stern for dear life, Smith was caught by the sea and "thrown onto the beach

with great violence." Smith's friend and another crewmember were both swept away to their deaths.

The disaster saddened Smith, but there was more work to be done. After salvaging what blubber they could from the wrecked shallop, Smith and others sailed southeast some 450 miles to the South Sandwich Islands. Elephant seals were growing scarce on South Georgia, and it was time to seek out a new place to hunt. ■

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