

Seven Ancient Wonders

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Extract

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THE GREATEST STATUE IN HISTORY

It towered like a god above the mouth of Mandraki harbour, the main port of the island state of Rhodes, much like the Statue of Liberty does today in New York.

Finished in 282 BC after twelve years of construction, it was the tallest bronze statue ever built. At a stupendous 110 feet, it loomed above even the biggest ship that passed by.

It was crafted in the shape of the Greek Sun-god, Helios—muscled and strong, wearing a crown of olive leaves and a necklace of massive golden pendants, and holding a flaming torch aloft in his right hand.

Experts continue to argue whether the great statue stood astride the entrance to the harbour or at the end of the long breakwater that formed one of its shores. Either way, in its time, the Colossus would have been an awesome sight.

Curiously, while the Rhodians built it in celebration of their victory over the Antigonids (who had laid siege to the island of Rhodes for an entire year), the statue's construction was paid for by Egypt—by two Egyptian Pharaohs in fact: Ptolemy I and his son, Ptolemy II.

But while it took Man twelve years to build the Colossus of Rhodes, it took Nature 56 years to ruin it.

When the great statue was badly damaged in an earthquake in 226 BC, it was again Egypt who offered to repair it: this time the



new Pharaoh, Ptolemy III. It was as if the Colossus meant more to the Egyptians than it did to the Rhodians.

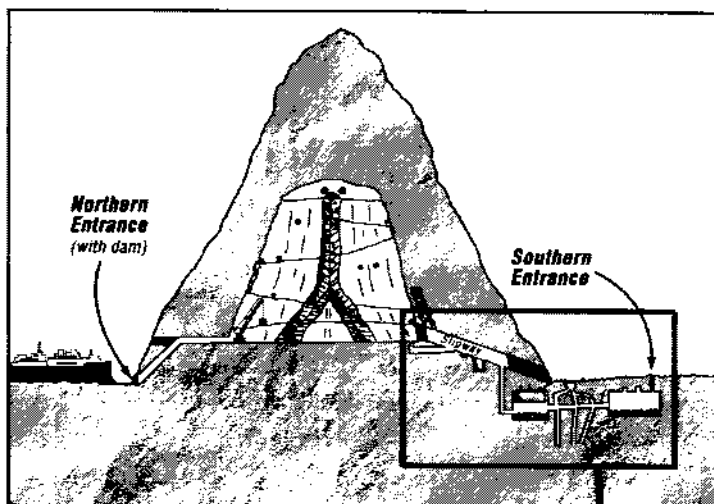
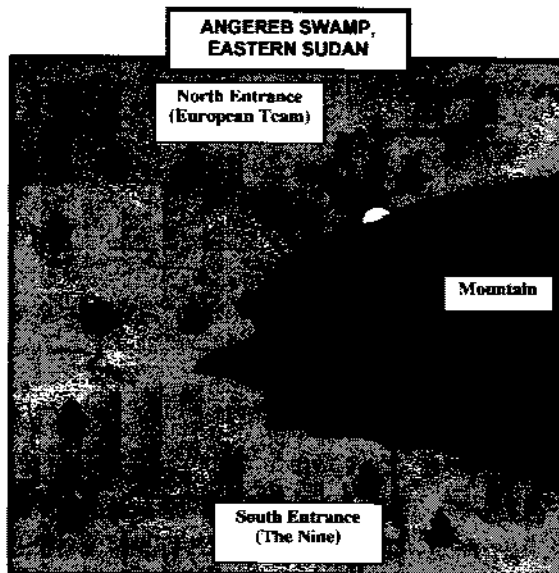
Fearing the gods who had felled it, the people of Rhodes declined Ptolemy III's offer to rebuild the Colossus and the remainder of the statue was left to lie in ruins for nearly 900 years—until 654 AD when the invading Arabs broke it up and sold it off in pieces.

One mysterious footnote remains.

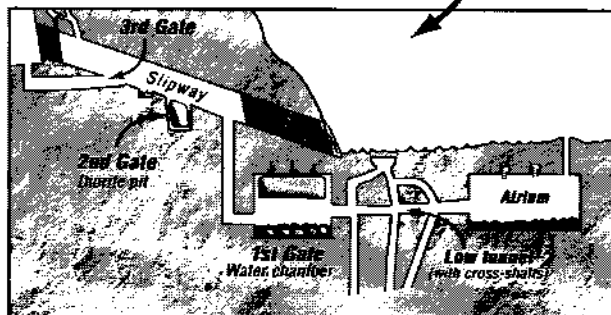
A week after the Rhodians declined Ptolemy III's offer to re-erect the Colossus, the *head* of the mammoth fallen statue—all sixteen feet of it—went missing.

The Rhodians always suspected that it was taken away on an Egyptian freighter-barge that had left Rhodes earlier that week.

The head of the Colossus of Rhodes was never seen again.



THE SOUTHERN ENTRANCE





**ANGEREB SWAMP
BASE OF THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS
KASSALA PROVINCE, EASTERN SUDAN
14 MARCH, 2006, 4:55 P.M.
6 DAYS BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF TARTARUS**

The nine figures raced through the crocodile-infested swamp on foot, moving fast, staying low.

The odds were stacked against them.

Their rivals numbered in excess of 200 men.

They had only nine.

Their rivals had massive logistical and technical support: choppers, floodlights for night work, and boats of every kind—gunboats, houseboats, communications boats, three giant dredging barges for the digging—and that wasn't even mentioning the temporary dam they'd managed to build.

The Nine were only carrying what they'd need inside the mine.

And now—the Nine had just discovered—a *third* force was on its way to the mountain, close behind them, a much larger and nastier force than that of their immediate foes, who were nasty enough.

By any reckoning it was a hopelessly lost cause, with enemies in front of them and enemies behind them, but the Nine kept running anyway.

Because they had to.

They were a last-ditch effort.

The last throw of the dice.



They were the very last hope of the small group of nations they represented.

Their immediate rivals—a coalition of European nations—had found the northern entrance to the mine two days ago and were now well advanced in its tunnel system.

A radio transmission that had been intercepted an hour before revealed that this pan-European force—French troops, German engineers and an Italian project leader—had just arrived at the final entry trap on their side of the mine. Once they breached that, they would be inside the Grand Cavern itself.

They were progressing quickly.

Which meant they were also well versed in the difficulties found inside the mine.

Fatal difficulties.

Traps.

But the Europeans' progress hadn't been entirely without loss: three members of their point team had died gruesome deaths in a snare on the first day. But the leader of the European expedition—a Vatican-based Jesuit priest named Francisco del Piero—had not let their deaths slow him down.

Single-minded, unstoppable and completely devoid of sympathy, del Piero urged his people onward. Considering what was at stake, the deaths were an acceptable loss.

The Nine kept charging through the swamp on the south side of the mountain, heads bent into the rain, feet pounding through the mud.

They ran like soldiers—low and fast, with balance and purpose, ducking under branches, hurdling bogs, always staying in single file.

In their hands, they held guns: MP-7s, M-16s, Steyr-AUGs. In their thigh holsters were pistols of every kind.

On their backs: packs of various sizes, all bristling with ropes, climbing gear and odd-looking steel struts.



And above them, soaring gracefully over the treetops, was a small shape, a bird of some sort.

Seven of the Nine were indeed soldiers.

Crack troops. Special forces. All from different countries.

The remaining two members were civilians, the elder of whom was a long-bearded 65-year-old professor named Maximilian T. Epper, call-sign: *Wizard*.

The seven military members of the team had somewhat fiercer nicknames: *Huntsman*, *Witch Doctor*, *Archer*, *Bloody Mary*, *Saladin*, *Matador* and *Gunman*.

Oddly, however, on this mission they had all acquired new call-signs: *Woodsman*, *Fuzzy*, *Stretch*, *Princess Zoe*, *Pooh Bear*, *Noddy* and *Big Ears*.

These revised call-signs were the result of the ninth member of the team:

A little girl of ten.

The mountain they were approaching was the last in a long spur of peaks that ended near the Sudanese–Ethiopian border.

Down through these mountains, flowing out of Ethiopia and into the Sudan, poured the Angereb River. Its waters paused briefly in this swamp before continuing on into the Sudan where they would ultimately join the Nile.

The chief resident of the swamp was *Crocodylus niloticus*, the notorious Nile crocodile. Reaching sizes of up to 6 metres, the Nile crocodile is known for its great size, its brazen cunning, and its ferocity of attack. It is the most man-eating crocodilian in the world, killing upwards of 300 people every year.

While the Nine were approaching the mountain from the south, their EU rivals had set up a base of operations on the northern side, a base that looked like a veritable floating city.

Command boats, mess boats, barracks-boats and gunboats, the small fleet was connected by a network of floating bridges and all were facing toward the focal point of their operation: the massive coffer dam that they had built against the northern flank of the mountain.

It was, one had to admit, an engineering masterpiece: a 100-metre-long, 40-foot-high curved retaining dam that held back the waters of the swamp to reveal a square stone doorway carved into the base of the mountain 40 feet *below* the waterline.

The artistry on the stone doorway was extraordinary.

Egyptian hieroglyphs covered every square inch of its frame—



but taking pride of place in the very centre of the lintel stone that surmounted the doorway was a glyph often found in pharaonic tombs in Egypt:



Two figures, bound to a staff bearing the jackal head of Anubis, the Egyptian god of the Underworld.

This was what the afterlife had in store for grave-robbers—eternal bondage to Anubis. Not a nice way to spend eternity.

The message was clear: do not enter.

The structure inside the mountain was an ancient mine delved during the reign of Ptolemy I, around the year 300 BC.

During the great age of Egypt, the Sudan was known as ‘Nubia’, a word derived from the Egyptian word for gold: *nub*.

Nubia: the Land of Gold.

And indeed it was. It was from Nubia that the ancient Egyptians sourced the gold for their many temples and treasures.

Records unearthed in Alexandria revealed that this mine had run out of gold 70 years after its founding, after which it gained a second life as a quarry for the rare hardstone, diorite. Once it was exhausted of diorite—around the year 226 BC—Pharaoh Ptolemy III decided to use the mine for a very special purpose.

To this end, he dispatched his best architect—Imhotep V—and a force of 2,000 men.

They would work on the project in absolute secrecy for three whole years.

The northern entrance to the mine had been the main entrance.

Originally, it had been level with the waterline of the swamp, and through its doors a wide canal bored horizontally into the mountain. Bargeloads of gold and diorite would be brought out of the mine via this canal.

But then Imhotep V had come and reconfigured it.

Using a temporary dam not unlike the one the European force was using today, his men had held back the waters of the swamp while his engineers had lowered the level of the doorway, dropping it 40 feet. The original door was bricked in and covered over with soil.

Imhotep had then disassembled the dam and allowed the swampwaters to flood back over the new doorway, concealing it for over 2,000 years.

Until today.

But there was a *second* entrance to the mine, a lesser-known one, on the south side of the mountain.

It was a back door, the endpoint of a slipway that had been used to dispose of waste during the original digging of the mine. It too had been reconfigured.

It was this entrance that the Nine were seeking.

Guided by the tall white-bearded Wizard—who held in one hand a very ancient papyrus scroll, and in the other a very modern sonic-resonance imager—they stopped abruptly on a mud-mound about 80 metres from the base of the mountain. It was shaded by four bending lotus trees.



'Here!' the old fellow called, seeing something on the mound. 'Oh dear. The village boys *did* find it.'

In the middle of the muddy dome, sunken into it, was a tiny square hole, barely wide enough for a man to fit into. Stinking brown mud lined its edges.

You'd never see it if you weren't looking for it, but it just so happened that this hole was exactly what Professor Max T. Epper was searching for.

He read quickly from his papyrus scroll:

*'In the Nubian swamp to the south of Soter's mine,
Among Sobek's minions,
Find the four symbols of the Lower Kingdom.
Therein lies the portal to the harder route.'*

Epper looked up at his companions. 'Four lotus trees: the lotus was the symbol of the Lower Kingdom. Sobek's minions are crocodiles, since Sobek was the Egyptian crocodile god. In a swamp to the south of Soter's mine—Soter being the other name for Ptolemy I. This is it.'

A small wicker basket lay askew next to the muddy hole—the kind of basket used by rural Sudanese.

'Those stupid, stupid boys.' Wizard kicked the basket away.

On their way here, the Nine had passed through a small village. The villagers claimed that only a few days ago, lured by the Europeans' interest in the mountain, four of their young men had gone exploring in the swamp. One of them had returned to the village saying the other three had disappeared down a hole in the ground and not come out again.

At this point, the leader of the Nine stepped forward, peered down into the hole.

The rest of the team waited for him to speak.

Not a lot was known about the leader of this group. Indeed, his past was veiled in mystery. What *was* known was this:

His name was West—Jack West Jr.



Call-sign: *Huntsman*.

At 37, he had the rare distinction of being both militarily *and* university trained—he had once been a member of the most elite special forces unit in the world, while at another time, he had studied ancient history at Trinity College in Dublin under Max Epper.

Indeed, in the 1990s, when the Pentagon had ranked the best soldiers in the world, only one soldier in the top ten had *not* been an American: Jack West. He'd come in at No. 4.

But then, around 1995, West disappeared off the international radar. Just like that. He was not seen at international exercises or on missions again—not even the allied invasion of Iraq in 2003, despite his experience there during Desert Storm in '91. It was assumed he had quit the military, cashed in his points and retired. Nothing was seen or heard of him for over 10 years . . .

. . . until now.

Now, he had re-emerged.

Supremely fit, he had dark hair and laser-sharp brown eyes that seemed perpetually narrowed. Apparently, he had a winning smile, but that was something rarely seen.

Today, like the rest of his team, he wore a decidedly non-military uniform: a rugged caramel-coloured canvas jacket, tattered cargo pants and steel-soled Salomon hiking boots that bore the scars of many previous adventures.

His hands were gloved, but if you looked closely at the left cuff of his jacket, you might catch a glimpse of silver steel. Hidden under the sleeve, his entire left forearm and hand were artificial, mechanical. How they came to be that way not many people knew; although one of those who did was Max Epper.

Expertly trained in the art of war, classically trained in the lore of history, and fiercely protective of the little girl in his care, one thing about Jack West Jr was clear: if anyone could pull off this impossible mission, it was him.

Just then, with a squawk, a small brown peregrine falcon swooped in from above the treeline and landed lightly on West's shoulder—the high-flying bird from before. It eyed the area around West imperiously, protectively. Its name, Horus.

West didn't even notice the bird. He just stared down into the dark square hole in the mud, lost in thought.

He brushed back some mud from the edge, revealing a hieroglyph cut into the rim:



'We meet again,' he said softly to the carving.

He turned. 'Glowstick.'

He was handed a glowstick which he cracked and tossed down the hole.

It fell for 20 feet, illuminating a pipe-like stone shaft on its way down, before—*splonk!*—it landed in water and revealed—

Lots of crocodiles. Nile crocodiles.

Snapping, snarling and grunting. Sliding over each other.

'More of Sobek's minions,' West said. 'Nice. Very nice.'

Just then the team's radioman, a tall Jamaican with bleached dreadlocks, a heavily pockmarked face and tree-trunk-sized arms, touched his earpiece in alarm. His real name was V.J. Weatherly, his original call-sign *Witch Doctor*, but everyone here just called him *Fuzzy*.

'Huntsman,' he said, 'the Europeans just breached the Third Gate. They're inside the Grand Cavern. Now they're bringing in some kind of crane to overshoot the lower levels.'

'Shit . . .'



'It gets worse. The Americans just crossed the border. They're coming in fast behind us. Big force: 400 men, choppers, armour, with carrier-launched fighter support on the way. And the ground force is being led by the CIEF.'

That really got West's attention.

The CIEF—the Commander-in-Chief's In Extremis Force, pronounced 'seef'—was America's very best special operations unit, a unit that answered only to the President and possessed the real-life equivalent of a licence to kill. As West knew from hard experience, you didn't want to be around when the CIEF arrived.

He stood up. 'Who's in command?'

Fuzzy said ominously, 'Judah.'

'I didn't think he'd come himself. Damn. Now we'd really better hurry.'

West turned to his team.

'All right. Noddy—you've got sentry duty. Everybody else . . .'

He pulled an odd-looking helmet from his belt, put it on.

' . . . it's time to rock and roll.'

And so into the subterranean dark they went.

Fast.

A steel tripod was erected above the pipe-like shaft and, led by West, one after the other, eight of the Nine abseiled down it on a rope strung from the tripod.

One lone man, a dark-haired Spanish commando—once known as *Matador*, now *Noddy*—remained up top to guard the entrance.