

This month's sculpture from Hadrian's Villa is a dark grey limestone relief decorated with mythological scenes.

The relief was unearthed in 1769 during excavations undertaken by the art dealer and archaeologist Gavin Hamilton who sold it to Lord Lansdowne. The latter was an avid collector of antiquities who owned a fine collection of classical sculptures until most of it was sold and dispersed in 1930 (including the Lansdowne Antinous, the Lansdowne Amazon and the [Lansdowne Hercules](#)).



The Lansdowne relief, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Today the Lansdowne Relief is displayed in the Greek and Roman Gallery of the [Fitzwilliam Museum](#) in Cambridge, England. It is the Department of Antiquity's newest acquisition, although it has been on loan to the Museum since 2004 and on display since 2010.

The Relief is beautifully decorated with scenes from Greek mythology, all of which are connected to the sea. The first scene depicts Odysseus and the sirens. Odysseus was curious as to what the Sirens would sing to him and, following Circe's instructions, plugged his men's ears with beeswax and had them bind him to the mast of the ship.



The Lansdowne relief, detail depicting Odysseus and the Sirens, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

The second scene, in the middle of the relief, depicts the wine god Dionysos fleeing the Tyrrhenian pirates after being kidnapped and taken aboard their boat. The pirates, who promised to take him to Naxos sailed to Asia instead, intending to sell him into slavery. In anger Dionysos filled their vessel

with vines and wild animals, and when the pirates jumped into the sea he transformed them into dolphins.



The Lansdowne relief, detail of Dionysos on a boat fleeing pirates, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum,

Cambridge

The third scene depicts the Argonauts sailing past the rapacious Stymphalian birds. The Stymphalian Birds were a flock of man-eating birds which haunted Lake Stymphalis in Arcadia. Heracles defeated them as his sixth labour, using first a pair of *krotala* (clappers, similar to modern castanets) to frighten and drive them away with the noise, then shooting them down with a bow and arrows or with a slingshot. The surviving birds were forced to take refuge on the island of Aretias (modern-day Giresun Island on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea), where they later faced the Argonauts. The birds were frightened away by the sound of the Argonauts' swords clanging on shields.



The Lansdowne relief, detail with scene depicting the Argonauts with the man-eating Stymphalian birds, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Framing the relief are friezes showing scenes of hunting, sea creatures and figures emerging from garlands and leaves. It is possible that small statuettes stood in the empty niches which are now empty.



The Lansdowne relief, detail of the frieze showing scenes of hunting, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



The Lansdowne relief, detail of the frieze showing sea creatures, found at Hadrian's Villa, 120-138 AD, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

The relief was found in an area of Hadrian's villa known as the Pantanello (little swamp). The

discoveries at the Pantanello were considerable and many sculptures and architectural fragments are now in major international collections including a [colossal head of Hercules](#) and two busts of Hadrian.

Read more about this relief [here](#).

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