

**The Seven Wonders and the Seven Hills in
Du Bellay's *Les Antiquitez de Rome***

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Seven is a magic number. According to Genesis, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. We have the seven sacraments,¹ the Seven Deadly Sins,² the Seven Seas, the Seven Against Thebes,³ the Seven Sages or Seven Wise Men of antiquity,⁴ and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.⁵ We have a constellation of seven stars known as the Pleiades,⁶ whose name was adopted by seven poets in ancient Alexandria⁷ and later by seven young poets in the French Renaissance, who called themselves the Pléiade.⁸ Among these was Joachim Du Bellay, who, in 1558, published a collection of sonnets known as **Les Antiquitez de Rome**. In this work, Du Bellay contrasts vibrant ancient Rome with the shadowy relics of antiquity visible in Rome of the Renaissance.

In sonnet II, “Le Babylonien ses haults murs vantera” (“The Babylonian will boast of its high walls”), he reaches back to other sites in the ancient world, cataloguing and personifying the seven wonders of the world in the quatrains and the first two verses of the tercets. He then elaborates his intention to celebrate the seven hills of Rome, “sept miracles du monde” (“seven miracles of the world”). This he does throughout the collection, but most specifically in sonnet IV, “Celle qui de son chef les estoilles passoit” (“She whose head rose above the stars”), in which he compares Rome to a fallen giant entombed beneath her seven hills.⁹

Sonnet II

Le Babylonien ses haults murs vantera
Et ses vergers en l'air, de son Ephesienne
La Grece descrira la fabrique ancienne,
Et le peuple du Nil ses pointes chantera:

La mesme Grece encor vanteuse publiera
De son grand Juppiter l'image Olympienne,
Le Mausole sera la gloire Carienne,
Et son vieux Labyrinth' la Crete n'oublira:

L'antique Rhodien elevera la gloire
De son fameux Colosse, au temple de Memoire:
Et si quelque œuvre encor digne se peult vanter

De marcher en ce ranc, quelque plus grand' faconde
Le dira: quant à moy, pour tous je veulx chanter
Les sept costaux romains, sept miracles du monde.

In “Le Babylonien ses haults murs vantera,” Du Bellay personifies the hanging gardens and walls of Babylon as “the Babylonian,” referring in the first verse to Babylon’s high walls and in the first hemistich of the second to its gardens: “Et ses vergers en l’air” (“And its gardens in the air”).¹⁰

The second hemistich of the second verse evokes the temple of Diana, or Artemis, at Ephesus and continues in the third verse: “de son Ephesienne / La Grece descrira la fabrique ancienne” (“of her Ephesian one / Greece will describe the ancient workmanship”). This is the very temple mentioned in an incident referred to as the riot of Ephesus in Acts 19, verses 23–41. Paul had said that man-made gods were no gods at all. A silversmith named Demetrius, worried about his business of making silver shrines for Artemis, called together all the workmen in related trades and warned: “There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.” The people all gathered in the theater and shouted in unison for two hours; “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” The town clerk quieted the people by saying, “Men of Ephesus, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash.” I am quoting from the **New International Version of the Holy Bible**, published by the International Bible Society (East Brunswick, NJ) in 1984. Most other versions, including the King James and **The New English Bible**, published by Oxford University Press (NY: 1971), call the goddess by her Roman name, Diana.¹¹

In the final verse of the first quatrain, we turn to Egypt with its pyramids of Cheops, Chefren, and Mycerinus, or, if you prefer, Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, constructed in the Old Kingdom from around 2700 to 2300 B.C.¹² “Et le peuple du Nil ses pointes chantera” (“And the people of the Nile will sing of their pointed tops”).

Continuing the verbs in the future tense in the second quatrain, Du Bellay returns to Greece to another of its wonders, the statue of Jupiter (or Zeus) at Olympia by Phidias of Athens, who also made the statue of Athena in the Parthenon. The statue was thirty feet high and made of cryselephantine; that is, of gold and ivory. It was completed around 430 B.C. and was destroyed in 426 A.D. by an earthquake or 50 years later in Constantinople.¹³ “La mesme Grece encor vanteuse publiera / De son grand Juppiter l’image Olympienne” (“That same Greece once again boastful will proclaim / Of its great Jupiter the Olympian image”).

The third verse of the second quatrain is devoted to the tomb of Mausolus at Halicarnassus, a city of ancient Caria in southwest Asia Minor, constructed in 353 B.C. by Artemesia, his sister and widow.¹⁴ This tomb was so magnificent that it has given us the word “mausoleum” for stately and splendid funeral monuments. “Le Mausole sera la gloire Carienne” (“The Mausoleum will be the Carian glory”). The adjective “Carienne,” which completes this verse, is derived from the name Caria, the region of which Mausolus was king.

The first quatrain closes with a reference to the Cretan labyrinth, now thought to have been the palace of Knossos in Crete,¹⁵ associated in legend with Theseus, the Minotaur, King Minos, Queen Pasiphaë, Ariadne, and Phædra. “Et son vieux labyrinth’ la Crete n’oublira” (“And Crete will not forget its ancient labyrinth”).

The tercets begin with the Colossus of Rhodes, a bronze statue of Apollo one hundred feet high constructed from around 292 to 280 B.C. It broke off at the knees during an earthquake around 225 A.D. In 653 A.D., Arabs broke up what remained and sold it for scrap. It is reported that it took 900 or more camels to carry the pieces away.¹⁶

“L’antique Rhodien elevera la gloire / De son fameux Colosse, au temple de Memoire” (“The antique Rhodian will raise the glory / Of its famous Colossus, in the temple of Memory”).

With the Colossus of Rhodes, Du Bellay completes his catalogue of the seven wonders of the world: the walls and hanging gardens of Babylon, the temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Pyramids of Egypt, the statue of Jupiter at Olympia, the tomb of Mausolus at Halicarnassus, the Cretan labyrinth, and the Colossus of Rhodes. In the third verse of the first tercet, he begins to state his intention to sing of the seven hills of Rome, the number seven serving as a link between the seven wonders of the ancient world and the wonders of ancient Rome. Before doing so, however, he declares that if there is still some other work worthy of being included, some greater eloquence will tell of it. As for him, he wishes to sing of the seven Roman hills, “sept miracles du monde,” no longer “merveilles” (“wonders”), but “miracles” (“miracles”).

Even with miracles and magic numbers, problems arise. Du Bellay himself hints at this when he refers to the possibility that other works may be worthy of being included, for the wonders mentioned among the seven varied from list to list. The seven wonders traditionally are those mentioned in an epigram of Antipater of Sidon in the mid second century B.C. and in an incomplete prose list that is given under the name of Antipater’s older contemporary, the engineer Philo of Byzantium, but that may well be much later.¹⁷ In his list, Du Bellay includes the Cretan labyrinth, which does not appear in some of the other lists, but does not include the lighthouse (Pharos) of Alexandria, which does.¹⁸ Other authors include variously the Escalapion of Epidaurus, the statue of Athena of Athens, the statue of Apollo at Delos, the Capitol in Rome, the temple of Hadrian at Cyzicus (a city in Northwest Asia Minor in Mysia on a peninsula in the Sea of Marmara), and the temple at Jerusalem.¹⁹ Indeed, the seven poets included as members of the Pléiade varied from time to time from Pierre de Ronsard’s first list of seven poets called the “Brigade” in 1553 to the final list of seven Pléiade poets in 1882: Jean Dorat, Pierre de Ronsard, Joachim Du Bellay, Jean–Antoine de Baïf, Remy Belleau, Etienne Jodelle, and Pontus de Tyard.²⁰

Sonnet IV

Celle qui de son chef les estoilles passoit,
Et d’un pied sur Thetis, l’autre dessous l’Aurore,
D’une main sur le Scythe, & l’autre sur le More,
De la terre & du ciel la rondeur compassoit:

Juppiter ayant peur, si plus elle croissoit,
Que l'orgueil des Geans se relevast encore,
L'accabla sous ces monts, ces sept monts qui sont ore
Tumbeaux de la grandeur qui le ciel menassoit.

Il luy mist sur le chef la croppe Saturnale,
Puis dessus l'estomac assist la Quirinale,
Sur le ventre il planta l'antique Palatin,

Mist sur la dextre main la hauteur Celiene,
Sur la senestre assist l'eschine Exquillienne,
Viminal sur un pied, sur l'autre l'Aventin.

In Sonnet IV, "Celle qui de son chef les estoilles passoit," Rome, though not mentioned even once by name in the poem, is pictured as a conquering giant who goes from triumphant verticality to horizontal entombment beneath her seven hills. First, she is shown with her head in the stars, her feet planted in the farthest reaches of the known world, and with her arms encircling the globe. In describing Rome's mighty empire, Du Bellay uses mythological references, then the names of peoples from widely separated lands. After the first verse, in which Rome's head is in the stars, comes the second, in which one of her feet is on Thetis and the other on Aurora; that is, one foot on the oceans and the other to the east. Thetis, representing the oceans, was a sea nymph, a Nereid, one of the fifty daughters of Nereus, the eldest son of Pontus and Gæa, and of Doris, daughter of Oceanus. She was the wife of Peleus and the mother of Achilles. Aurora, the Dawn, symbolized the sun rising in the east.²¹ With one hand on the Scythians, a barbaric people living to the north and northeast of the Black Sea,²² and the other on the Moor, that is, on North Africa, Rome encompassed the earth and the sky.

Then, in the second quatrain, Rome's position changes. Because Jupiter was afraid that if Rome continued to grow, the pride of the giants would rise once again, he weighed her down beneath the seven hills, which Du Bellay calls, "Tumbeaux de la grandeur qui le ciel menassoit" ("Tombs of the greatness which menaced the sky"). Here, the poet refers to the battle of the Olympians with the Giants, a remarkable representation of which is found in the Gigantomachia from the acropolis of Pergamon in Asia Minor.²³

In the tercets, Du Bellay names the seven hills: the Capitoline, which he calls the Saturnale, from Saturnia, the name of a Latin village which once was there;²⁴ the Quirinal; the Palatine; the Cælian; the Esquiline; the Viminal; and the Aventine,²⁵ each hill covering a part of Rome's body. The Capitoline (Saturnale) is on her head. The Quirinal is on her chest, and the Palatine, on her abdomen. The Cælian is on her right hand and the Esquiline on her left. The Viminal is on one foot, the Aventine on the other. Du Bellay has taken Rome, the city and the goddess Roma, her mythological incarnation,²⁶ from her victorious stance, with her head in the stars and her feet stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the rising sun, to her fallen state covered with her seven hills, just as the remains of ancient Rome were covered for the visitors of the

Renaissance, with her monuments either buried under the dust, rubble, and debris of centuries or used as quarries for the builders of medieval and Renaissance Rome.²⁷

Thus, Du Bellay has shown us the seven hills, his seven miracles, covering the city he is going to celebrate in his poetic recreation of their dusty remains. With the magic of poetry, he will again give life to these seven hills, resurrecting ancient Rome through the miracle of poetic reincarnation.

Notes

¹ The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches are baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, matrimony, penance, holy orders, and extreme unction: **The Oxford Dictionary of the the Christian Church**, ed. F. L. Cross (London: Oxford UP, 1958), p. 1246.

² The Seven Deadly Sins are pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth: **The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church**, p. 1245.

³ In classical mythology, the Seven Against Thebes were seven heroes — Adrastus, Amphiarus, Capaneus, Hippomedon, Parthenopœus, Polynices, and Tydeus — who led an expedition against Thebes to depose Eteocles in favor of his brother, Polynices. **The Seven Against Thebes** was also the name of a tragedy by Æschylus. Oskar Seyffert, **Dictionary of Classical Antiquities**, rev. and ed. Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (NY: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 579.

⁴ The Seven Sages were seven wise men of ancient Greece who served their country as rulers, lawgivers, and advisers: Cleobulus of Lindus in Rhodes, Periander of Corinth, Pittacus of Mitylene, Bias of Priene in Caria, Thales of Miletus, Chilon of Sparta, and Solon of Athens. See Seyffert, p. 580.

⁵ According to the story related by Gregory of Tours, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus were seven young men who fell asleep in a cave during the Decian persecutions of around 250 A.D. and awakened about two hundred years later, in the reign of Theodosius II, who died in 450 A.D., to testify to the resurrection of the dead. Their names are usually given as Maximianus, Malchus, Martianus, Dionysius, Johannes, Serapion, and Constantius. See **Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church**, p. 1246, and **Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities**, ed. Harry Thurston Peck (NY: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965), p. 1459.

⁶ The name Pleiades was given to a constellation of seven stars in memory of the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione, who were changed into stars. Their names were Maia, Taygete, Electra, Alcyone, Asterope, Celæno, and Merope. See the **Oxford Companion to Classical Literature** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937; Oxford, 1962), p. 334.

⁷ The seven Alexandrian poets named the Pleiades in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus were, according to the **Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle**, Lycophron, Theocritus, Aratus, Nicander, Homer of Byzantium, Apollonius of Rhodes, and

Callimachus (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1884; Geneva–Paris: Slatkine, 1982), vol. 12, deuxième partie, p. 1171. Other names are mentioned in various sources. **Harper’s Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities** gives the name of Philiscus instead of that of Callimachus (p. 269). According to James H. Mantinband in his **Concise Dictionary of Greek Literature** (NY: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 324: “The usual list includes: Lycophron, Sositheus, Alexander of Ætolia, Sosiphanes, Dionysiades, Homer of Byzantium. There is some doubt about the seventh. Philicus of Corcyra is the one most frequently mentioned.”

⁸ Henri Chamard, **Histoire de la Pléiade** (Paris: Henri Didier, 1939), pp. 4–5.

⁹ Joachim Du Bellay, **Les Antiquitez de Rome**, in **Œuvres poétiques, II: Recueils de sonnets**, ed. Henri Chamard, rev. Henri Weber (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1970). References to the text of **Les Antiquitez de Rome** are to this edition. Sonnet II appears on pp. 4–5. Sonnet IV is on p. 7.

¹⁰ The third person singular possessive adjective in French is more suited to rendering the personification than English, for the adjective “ses” could mean *his*, *hers*, or *its*, depending on the gender of the referent. Therefore, a better translation would probably be, “The Babylonian will boast of his high walls / And his gardens in the air.”

¹¹ Ephesus was a city in the west of Asia Minor south of Smyrna, and the Artemis of Ephesus was of Asiatic, not Greek, origin. This is shown by the fact that eunuchs were used in her worship, which was foreign to Greek practices. Furthermore, although the Greeks identified her with their own Artemis because she was goddess of the moon, she was not regarded as a virgin, but as a mother figure and was represented with a multitude of breasts or ovoid shapes. See Seyffert, p. 72.

¹² The most famous of the Old Kingdom pyramids are those of Cheops (c. 2570 B.C.), Chefren (c. 2530 B.C.), and Mycerinus (c. 2500 B.C.), built in Giza during the Fourth Dynasty. See H. W. Janson, **History of Art** (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice–Hall, 1966), pp. 38–40.

¹³ Gisela M. A. Richter, **The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks**, rev. ed. (NY and London: Yale UP, 1965), pp. 217–222; **The Encyclopædia Britannica**, 1972 ed., vol. 20, p. 272.

¹⁴ **Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle**, vol. 11, première partie, p. 96.

¹⁵ Janson, pp. 69–70.

¹⁶ Richter, p. 295; **The Encyclopædia Britannica**, 1972 ed., vol. 20, p. 272.

¹⁷ **Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle**, vol. 11, première partie, p. 96.

¹⁸ Pharos is the name of an island next to Alexandria on which a lighthouse of white marble was built for Ptolemy Philadelphus by Sostratus of Cnidus in 270 B.C. See Seyffert, pp. 476–477. The name Pharos has given us the French word “phare,” meaning *lighthouse*, *beacon*, or *headlight*.

¹⁹ **Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle**, vol. 11, première partie, p. 96.

²⁰ Chamard, pp. 4–5.

²¹ J. E. Zimmerman, **Dictionary of Classical Mythology** (NY: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 38, 88, and 269–270.

²² Edward Tripp, **Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology** (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1970), p. 524.

²³ Zimmerman, p. 11; Seyffert, pp. 253, 469–471.

²⁴ **Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle** (Paris, 1875; Geneva–Paris, 1982), vol. 13, deuxième partie, p. 1342.

²⁵ Zimmerman, pp. 39 and 227.

²⁶ Joel Schmidt, **Larousse Greek and Roman Mythology**, ed. Seth Bernardete (NY: McGraw–Hill, 1980), p. 242.

²⁷ Roberto Weiss, **The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity** (NY: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 98–104.

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