

Briefings

edited by FAYE FLAM

Risqué Relics

What's an editor to do? Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, was about to publish an article by Harvard archeologist Lawrence Stager on the people of the ancient seaport of Askelon, in present-day Israel. The trouble was the illustrations: 1800-year-old oil lamps depicting sex scenes that would easily garner an X rating today. The pictures illustrated important points in the article. But if Shanks published them, how would his readers—who include an unusual number of devout Christians and Jews—react? His solution: Ask the readers.

These were no demure nudes. The lamps showed couplings between various gender combinations, all working parts in plain view. The dirty digs came

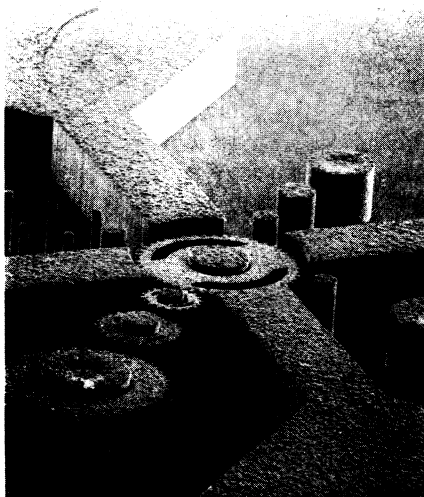


Carl Andrews

from an ancient bathhouse, says Joe Greene, an archeologist colleague of Stager. "It's not clear what sort of a bathhouse it was," he adds. Though Christian and Jewish families lived in the area, Stager blames the X-rated artwork on the pagan Romans, who he says were more accepting of casual sex and male homosexuality than the other groups.

Shanks published the results of his reader poll and the accompanying comments in the July issue. A solid majority—80%—voted for publication, though 30% thought the pictures should appear on a perforated page to keep them from

Dawn of a micromachine age? A scanning electron micrograph shows a gear train the size of a speck of dust, built by Henry Guckel and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin's Center for Applied Microelectronics. Guckel, who described his work last month at the Transducers '91 conference in San Francisco, is not the only micro-engineer making tiny gears and other mechanical parts, but his creations are among the most elaborate. Besides gear trains, he has devised belt-and-pulley systems, hose clamps, and other components of future microrobots or recording heads. The nickel parts shown here, ranging in diameter from about 8 microns (smallest axle) to 250 microns (largest gear), were formed in polymer molds that had been carved with synchrotron radiation.



Guckel, et al.

the eyes of children. Many of the 20% who said no also worried about their kids, who, they said, often read the semipopular journal. "Some people even use this in Sunday school," says Steve Feldman, who works for the journal.

The majority ruled: The pictures appear in the same issue, in full detail. There are no little black rectangles hiding anything, though the illustrations are printed opposite an ad, so readers can tear them out without losing any of the article. Chances are, many readers will leave their copy intact. Wrote one respondent: "Don't underestimate the value of the added excitement of sex in interesting a child in any subject, including archeology."

Skylab Rides Again

A wave of nostalgia is hitting NASA this year. First it was a congressional proposal to bring back the Saturn V, the heavy-lift launch vehicle that took the Apollo missions to the moon (*Science*, 15 February, p. 733). Now it's a scheme to dislodge the old Skylab module from its display position in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington and launch it into orbit,

following the trail blazed by its twin 18 years ago.

The Skylab advocates are an anonymous group of NASA space station engineers who are apparently frustrated by the project's many setbacks. Calling themselves the Center for Strategic Space Studies, they propose a rough-and-ready solution: Postpone the new space station and refurbish Skylab.

In a 12-page report, the engineers note that while the need for a large, permanently man-tended station "is not intuitively obvious nor deducible," the value of a manned orbital laboratory is "readily established" for biological and materials science. They argue that "Skylab Plus" could provide just such a laboratory by the mid-1990s, for \$3.5 billion. The total cost just barely exceeds what NASA wants to spend on the current station in a single year.

Could the Smithsonian-based Skylab be made space-worthy? The engineers clearly think so, but they don't go into much detail. They do explain how to launch the massive, one-piece station, which is too large to fit on the space shuttle: either build a new heavy-lift launcher (the Saturn V, maybe?) or buy a rocket from either the Soviets or the Europeans.

Although the engineers appear to be serious, don't count on official Washington's paying much attention to them. A spokesperson for the National Space Council said the council had received the report a few days earlier, but no one had bothered to read it.

A Fortunate Few Get Pews

The careers of 20 "promising" junior biomedical scientists just got \$200,000 brighter. In June, Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia named its seventh annual set of 20 winning researchers, each of whom will receive the hefty grant over a period of 4 years.

Established in honor of Sun Oil Company Founder Joseph Pew, the Pew Trusts describes its mission as supporting people and institutions who seek to "improve the quality of life." The foundation selects its biomedical recipients based on the potential of their research to "help advance human health."

The rules restrict candidates to junior researchers—ones who have not served in any faculty position for more than 3 years. Winners' fields span the diversity of biomedicine. This year, for example, Cristine Holt of the University of California, San Diego, won for her work in developmental neurobiology; Frank Rauscher III of the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia won for his study of tumor suppressor genes; and Alfred Malouf of the University of Washington won for his work in neurophysiology and epilepsy.

On July 9, the Pew Trusts announced a second set of grants, this time to 10 researchers specializing in environmental conservation. The foundation awarded \$150,000 to each of the 10, whose achievements lie in areas ranging from rain forest ecology to energy conservation. Program director James Crowfoot says the foundation selected the winners for their combination of scholarship and environmental activism.