‘Diamonds have nourished men’s fantasies and are synonymous with power, not even human, but from non-human divine forces. They are a gift from the Gods.’

PLINY THE ELDER

There has always been something magical about diamonds. They have been associated with wealth and royalty, with love and loyalty, but also with death and betrayal. Their early rarity contributed to their mystique.

The earliest reference comes from northern India, in a Sanskrit manuscript dated between 320 and 296 BCE. It was written by Kautiliya, a Minister at the court of King Chandragupta. It describes the quality of an ‘excellent’ diamond as ‘big, heavy, capable of bearing blows, with
symmetrical points, capable of scratching a [glass] vessel, revolving like a spindle and brilliantly shining.’

From this period until the 18th century, India was the world’s main source of diamonds, although there is some evidence of their use in polishing in China as early as 2,500 BCE. They were traded by land and sea to the east and west, and were sometimes carried off as booty in wars.

Diamonds had already arrived in Rome by the 1st century CE. They are referred to in the writings of Pliny the Elder, who died in 79 CE in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius at Pompeii. In his book *Natural History*, he wrote: ‘The substance that possesses the greatest value, not only among precious stones, but of all human possessions, is adamas; a mineral which for a long time was known to kings only, and to very few of them... These stones [diamonds] are tested upon the anvil, and will resist the blow to such an extent as to make the iron rebound and the very anvil split asunder.’ Romans were clearly using diamonds for engraving as well. Like Kautiliya, Pliny believed that the stone ‘overcomes and neutralizes poisons, dispels delirium, and banishes the groundless perturbations of the mind.’

Archeological digs have never unearthed a diamond,
but holes in ancient jewelry show its ‘footprints’, round holes with the kind of grooves left by a twin-diamond drill on beads from sites in Yemen dating back to the 4th century BCE. They have also been found in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and Egypt.

Diamonds are one of the main features in the 6th-century Indian text, the *Ratnapariksa*. It is a story about a king called Bala, who conquered all his enemies, even the gods. When they could not defeat him, they asked him instead to take part in their sacrificial ritual. He agreed, and was tied to a stake and burned to death. However because he was so pure and noble, his bones were turned into the seeds of gems. These were then plundered by flying creatures, which in their flight dropped them into the oceans, the mountains and the forests, where they

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**WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

It is likely that the name ‘diamond’ originally came from the Greek adjective *adamas*, (µ) which meant ‘the hardest known substance’, as in ‘adamant’. No one quite knows when this came to mean a diamond. A version of the word ‘diamond’ is used in almost every language. In Sanskrit, a diamond is a *vajra*, thunderbolt of the Hindu warrior god Indra. Early descriptions of *vajra* date to the 4th century BCE.◆
HARD FACTS

♦ Diamonds were first found in India over 4,000 years ago.
♦ A 13th-century French law proclaimed that only the king could wear diamonds.
♦ Until 1477, when Archduke Maximilian of Austria gave a diamond ring to Mary of Burgundy, only men wore diamonds.
♦ The gems are mined in about 25 countries and on every continent except Europe and Antarctica.
♦ 80 per cent of diamonds mined are used in industry. Only 20 per cent are turned into gems.
♦ The main diamond-producing countries are Russia, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Australia, South Africa, Canada, Angola, Namibia, Ghana, Brazil, Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic.
♦ Until 2002, between 4 and 15 per cent of diamonds came from conflict areas. They are known as ‘blood diamonds’ and it is still almost impossible to say for certain where a diamond comes from, despite an internationally agreed system to control them, called the Kimberley Process.
♦ Americans buy approximately 50 per cent of the world’s diamond jewelry.
♦ A diamond’s weight is measured in carats, a unit of measurement equal to 200 milligrams. A carat is a fifth of a gram.


grew into precious jewels.

The text goes on to describe the virtues of a diamond; what makes the best stone, its powers and virtues, and distribution among the different Hindu castes. It says: ‘The gems and the metals that exist on earth are all scratched by the diamond: the diamond is not (scratched) by them. A noble substance scratches that which is noble and that which is not; the diamond scratches even the ruby. The diamond scratches all and is not scratched by any.’ It says that a perfect diamond can be a force for good, bringing ‘happiness, prosperity, children, riches, grain, cows and meat’. And a protection against harm: ‘He who wears [such] a diamond will see dangers recede from him whether he be threatened by serpents, fire, poison, sickness, thieves, flood or evil spirits.’ The magical properties of the gem as a talisman are clearly outlined.

**Abode of the gods**

Diamonds were so beautiful that they were considered by many to be the abode of the gods. They were used to decorate religious icons and were thought to bring good fortune to those who owned them. The Hindu caste system originally extended even to the possession of diamonds – only kings were allowed to wear all colors. Brahmins
(priests) were allowed to wear white or colorless stones; Kshatriyas (warriors) were allowed to wear brown or red; Vashiyas (landowners), yellow, Shudras (laborers and artisans) grey or black. It goes without saying that those with no caste – outcastes, or Dalits, as they are now known, were not permitted jewels at all. Diamonds also became a Buddhist symbol of spiritual virtue. Tibetan Buddhism is known as the Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) and the Diamond Sutra is one of the most popular texts. The Greeks believed that diamonds were celestial tears; the Romans that they were splinters of fallen stars.

Indian jewels

It was not until the 13th and 14th centuries that diamonds became a significant commodity in Europe. Venice was the first diamond trading capital. The gems were traded to Antwerp and Bruges in Belgium, and Paris, France. When in 1499 the Portuguese Vasco da Gama sailed round the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa, he opened up another route for traders, centered on Goa in India, which at that time was ruled by Portugal.

In India, diamond production increased during the 300 years of the Moghul Empire from 1526 to 1857. Many beautiful artifacts were decorated with diamonds, and
one the world’s most famous gems, the Koh-i-noor, dates from this period.

**Europe in the Middle Ages**

In most of Europe, however, diamonds were little used for a thousand years after the rise of Christianity. This was partly because the early Christians associated them with idolatry, and partly for practical reasons – Arab and Persian traders restricted the flow of trade between India and Europe.

The Middle Ages saw a growing interest in gemstones in Europe, with many texts, known as ‘lapidaries’ examining their different qualities and their uses as medicines or poisons. As in earlier times, it was believed that diamonds had protective and curative powers. It was said that a diamond held in the mouth would correct the bad habits of liars and scolds.

Diamonds were worn as talismans against poisoning. Here is a description by Marbode, Bishop of Rennes in France between 1061 and 1081: ‘This stone has aptitude for magical arts, indomitable virtues it provides the bearer, nocturnal spirits and bad dreams it repels, black poisons flee, disputes and screams are changed. Cures insanity, strikes hard against enemies. For these purposes the stone should be set in silver, armored in gold, and
THE MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT

‘Koh-i-noor’ means ‘mountain of light’. The diamond was found in India many thousands of years ago. It entered the history books in the 14th century when it was owned by the Malwa rajas. In 1526, it became the property of Baber, founder of the Moghul Empire, and it belonged to the Moghuls for almost 200 years.

In 1739, King Nadir Shah of Persia invaded India. He captured the Moghuls’ treasures, but not the famous diamond, which he was told was hidden in the Emperor’s turban. He then devised a plan; he invited the Emperor to a feast and publicly asked to exchange turbans as a gesture of friendship.

The Emperor had to agree or lose face. Instead he lost the diamond, which remained in Persian hands, despite many attempts to wrest it from them – the most gruesome of which was the torture of Nadir Shah’s son, Shah Rukh. His eyes were put out, and boiling pitch was poured on his head, but he refused to reveal its hiding place. Finally, one of his descendants fastened to the left arm.’ His treatise was written in Latin and translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Irish, Danish and Hebrew. Lapidaries continued to be written until the 18th century.

Diamonds held a fascination for alchemists, who believed they could turn base metals into gold and
fled with the stone to the Punjab, where it was placed in the treasury in Lahore – and then apparently lost.

In 1849, the British retrieved the gem and presented it to Queen Victoria to mark the British East India Company’s 250th anniversary. It even turned up in the British TV series Dr Who in April 2006, when Dr Who met Queen Victoria, and the gem had been cut to fit into a contraption that looked like a telescope to repel evil spirits and save the Queen’s life.

The Koh-i-noor was displayed in the Great Exhibition of 1851. Queen Victoria had it re-cut, reducing the weight from 186 to 108.93 carats. In 1911, it was used in a crown made for Queen Mary, and in 1937, in another for Queen Elizabeth at the coronation of her husband, King George VI.

Since then, many people, including the Taliban in Afghanistan – who claimed that it originally belonged to their country – have tried to get it back. But to this day it remains in the Tower of London as part of the British Crown Jewels.

common things into ones of value. In 1366 Sir John Mandeville said he grew large diamonds from smaller ones: ‘I have oftentimes tried the experiment that is a man keep with them a little rock and water them with May dew often, they shall grow every year and the small will grow great.’
RHODES: DIAMOND DIGGER AND EMPIRE BUILDER

Cecil John Rhodes was born in 1853 in England. He was sent to join his brother in Natal, South Africa, because his lungs were weak. He invested the £3,000 he was given to take with him in diamond claims. It was just at the beginning of the diamond rush and Rhodes went on to become not only one of the richest men in South Africa, but also Prime Minister of the Cape. His views on black and white people served to lay the foundations of apartheid: ‘We have got to treat the natives where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them.’

He used his position to consolidate his holdings and to buy out his main rival, Barney Barnato, presenting him with the largest check ever written, for £5,338,650 (about $9 million at current rates). Rhodes then went on to form the De Beers Company, named after the De Beer brothers whose farm had diamonds. But in 1895 he supported an attack – known as the Jameson Raid – on Paul Kruger’s Afrikaner Transvaal state. When the raid failed, Rhodes was forced to resign as premier. He used his wealth to expand the British Empire to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia) and to found the Rhodes scholarships, which enabled foreign nationals (including Bill Clinton, who went on to become president of the US) to study in Oxford. Rhodes died in 1902 at the age of 49.
Rings and royalty
As in India, diamonds were associated with wealth and status. In Europe, royalty and nobles started to use diamonds along with the pearls that they bedecked themselves with in the 13th century. Louis IX of France, who ruled from 1214 to 1270, decreed that diamonds were only to be used by the King. It was not until 1477, when Archduke Maximilian of Austria gave a diamond ring to Mary of Burgundy, that diamonds became more widely worn by women as a symbol of love.

Cosimo the Elder in Italy (1389-1464) and Henry II of France (1519-59) placed diamonds in rings and wore them into battle for good luck. François I of France and Henry VIII of England, who both ruled in the first half of the 16th century, competed to show off the best jewels. By the 17th century lesser mortals such as wealthy merchants began to use them in their jewelry.

Diamonds around the world
Until this time, India was the main source of diamonds. However in 1725 gold miners found diamonds in Brazil, and from 1730 until 1870, Brazil became the world’s major source of diamonds. Then, in 1870, huge deposits were discovered in South Africa. The subsequent rush and the
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Diamonds were part of the power struggle between countries as well as individuals and companies. During the Second World War, they were smuggled from Africa to Germany. Control of diamonds, including industrial diamonds, was seen as being of vital importance by both sides. During the early years of the War, industrial diamonds were in short supply in the British aircraft industry and the Canadian mining industry. Germany had been stockpiling diamonds in preparation for war since 1936, and continued to import them from Brazil and Venezuela. It acquired large stockpiles when it invaded Belgium and took over Antwerp in May 1940. The British and American governments argued over diamonds, as the US initially refused to prohibit exports to Germany and wanted to buy Britain’s stocks in case Britain fell into German hands. But after Pearl Harbor, a compromise agreement was reached and stockpiles established in Canada.

The richness of the seams changed the face of the diamond world forever. It meant that diamonds were no longer so rare. By 1871, world annual production exceeded a million carats for the first time, thanks mainly to the South African finds.

The discovery took place in 1866, when a 15-year-old Afrikaner called Erasmus Jacobs was working on his
father’s farm, near Kimberley: ‘In the glare of the strong sun [I saw] a glittering pebble some yards away... I of course had no idea that the stone was of value... After reaching home I handed the mooi klip (pretty pebble) to my younger sister, who simply placed it among her playthings.’ A visiting neighbor, Schalk van Niekerk noticed the stone and Erasmus’s mother gave it to him as a present. He sold it to a trader called Jack O’Reilly for a few pounds. It was not until the stone was examined by surgeon and amateur mineralogist, Dr Guybon Atherstone, that he recognized it for what it was – a 21.25 carat diamond.

The news spread, and soon there was a diamond rush around the Orange (Gariep) River. By 1869, as diamonds in that area ran out, desperate men searched further afield, first in soft earth and later, in the town of Kimberley, in volcanic rock known because of its color as ‘blueground’. This would later be given the name kimberlite. For the next 15 years, the area around Kimberley went on to produce 95 per cent of the world’s diamonds, in quantities never seen before.

The mines were ruled by British emigrant families who were to be made famous (and wealthy) by diamonds: Cecil Rhodes, Barney Barnato, and their company, De Beers. Black miners did the digging in their mines while whites,
who earned many times more, were the overseers. The mining industry worked to create and then consolidate the separate systems for blacks and whites that became known as apartheid. Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Winston and then Chancellor of the Exchequer, noted on a visit to Kimberley that black miners ‘have to strip off all their clothes... stark naked, they then proceed to the searching room, where their mouths, their hair, their toes, their armpits, and every portion of their body are subject to an elaborate examination.’ He added that white men ‘would never submit to such a process, but the native sustains the indignity with cheerful equanimity.’

Today, De Beers’ seven mines in South Africa still produce 97 per cent of the country’s diamond output. The company continues to dominate the diamond industry.