

Archimedes' Tomb and the Legends About Him

As mentioned in the text, Archimedes was killed by a Roman soldier in the chaos of the final fall of Syracuse after the Roman siege in 212 BCE under the Roman general Marcellus. In the course of writing a biography of Marcellus the polymath Plutarch included some information on mathematics and philosophy in general.

According to Plutarch's biography of Marcellus, the general was very upset that Archimedes had been killed and had his body buried in a suitably imposing tomb. It often happens when a nation is conquered that the conquerors are insufficiently appreciative of its cultural achievements and the conquered nation is unable to preserve the relics of that culture. Such was the case with Archimedes. According to Eutocius, a biography of Archimedes was written by a certain Heracleides, who is mentioned in some of Archimedes' letters. However, no copy of this biography is known to exist today. A century after Archimedes' death his tomb had fallen into neglect. In his *Tusculan Disputations*, written in 45 BCE, the famous Roman orator and statesman Cicero recalled his discovery of this tomb when he was quaestor in Sicily in 76 BCE:

When I was quaestor I tracked out [Archimedes'] grave, which was unknown to the Syracusans (as they totally denied its existence), and found it enclosed all round and covered with brambles and thickets; for I remembered certain doggerel lines inscribed, as I had heard, upon his tomb, which stated that a sphere along with a cylinder had been set up on the top of his grave . . . Slaves were sent in with sickles who cleared the ground of obstacles . . . So you see, one of the most famous cities of Greece . . . would have been ignorant of the tomb of its one most ingenious citizen, had not a man of Arpinum pointed it out.

During the Middle Ages and later Sicily was conquered many times, and the tomb of Archimedes was lost again. In popular tradition several tombs were erroneously believed to belong to Archimedes. However, the actual tomb may have been rediscovered in 1957, during an excavation.¹ Since Syracuse was taken in 212 BCE and Archimedes was reported by a twelfth-century Byzantine historian named Tzetzes to have been 75 years old at the time of his death, his dates are generally given as 287–212.

There are many famous legends connected with Archimedes. These are scattered among the various sources. Plutarch, for instance, says that Archimedes made many mechanical contrivances but generally despised such work in comparison with pure mathematical thought. Plutarch also reports three different stories of the death of Archimedes and tells us that Archimedes wished to have a sphere inscribed in a cylinder carved on his tombstone. The famous story that Archimedes ran naked through the streets shouting "Eureka!" ("I've got it!") when he discovered the principle of specific gravity in the baths is reported by the Roman architect Vitruvius. Proclus gives another well-known anecdote that Archimedes built a system of pulleys that enabled him (or King Hieron) single-handedly to pull a ship through the water. Finally, Plutarch and Pappus both quote Archimedes as saying in connection with his discovery of the principle of the lever that if there were another earth, he could move this one by standing on it.

¹ This claim was made by Prof. Salvatore Ciancio in 1965 on the basis of several criteria, including the location and date of the relics and a gold signet ring found in the crematory urn inside the tomb and bearing the ancient seal of the city of Alexandria. The famous sphere and cylinder were not part of the find. The claim was contradicted at the time by the Curator of Antiquities in Syracuse Prof. Bernabò Brea. Another counterclaim is made by D. L. Simms in "The trail for Archimedes' tomb," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 53 (1990), pp. 281–286. The actual site of the tomb and its discovery by Cicero have fascinated historians and artists for centuries. To see some of the lore of the tomb, visit the website <http://www.mcs.drexel.edu/~crorres/Archimedes/Tomb/TombIllus.html>.