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MARCUS CURTIUS ON BUTONS

by Joy Journeay

Some time ago I purchased this ivory button, not having a clue about the subject. While researching Greek mythology I was lucky to stumble upon a Josiah Wedgewood button of the same image at the Josiah Wedgewood Museum website.

The button depicts Marcus Curtius just as he leaps into the flames of Hades. When an earthquake in 362 BC created a large chasm in the Roman Forum, the Romans tried unsuccessfully to fill the deep pit. An oracle informed them that the gods required the sacrifice of their most valuable possession before the pit would close. The skeptical leaders were unable to determine what the most precious possession could be, and dismissed the warning.

Marcus Curtius, a young Roman soldier, announced that the courage and might of Rome was its most precious possession. The Roman leaders doubted, but Curtius took immediate action. In full armor he mounted his horse, leapt into the chasm, ... and the pit closed.

ABOVE: Painting on ivory, under glass, set in brass. Large.

RIGHT: Josiah Wedgewood jasperware cameo. White on blue jasper, mounted within Pinchbeck brass. 1795.

Pinchbeck brass was developed by the London clockmaker Christopher Pinchbeck, and is a form of brass (an alloy of copper and Zinc) in proportions to resemble gold.