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GARGOYLES

These carved monsters are commonly seen on Gothic buildings. Traditionally, these fanciful creatures served as waterspouts to divert rainwater away from buildings, preventing erosion. It has also been said that gargoyles protect their buildings from evil spirits.

In a word

The word **gargoyle** is derived from the French *gargouille,* which means "throat" or "gullet." It shares a root with the word "gargle," which describes the sound of water and air mixing in the throat.

When these carved sculptures do not serve as waterspouts, they are referred to as a **grotesques, chimeras** or **bosses**.

A bit of history

Although the golden age of gargoyles came during the European Middle Ages (1200-1500), gargoyles have been around much longer than that.

The oldest gargoyle-like creation is a 13,000-year-old stone crocodile discovered in Turkey.

Ancient Egyptian architecture used waterspouts in the shape of a **sphinx**, combining a lion with wings and the face of a human.

In Greece, the Temple of Zeus (5th century B.C.) originally had 102 marble gargoyles lining the edge of its roof.

Imagery

It is said that gargoyles are like snowflakes; it is hard to find two that are exactly alike.

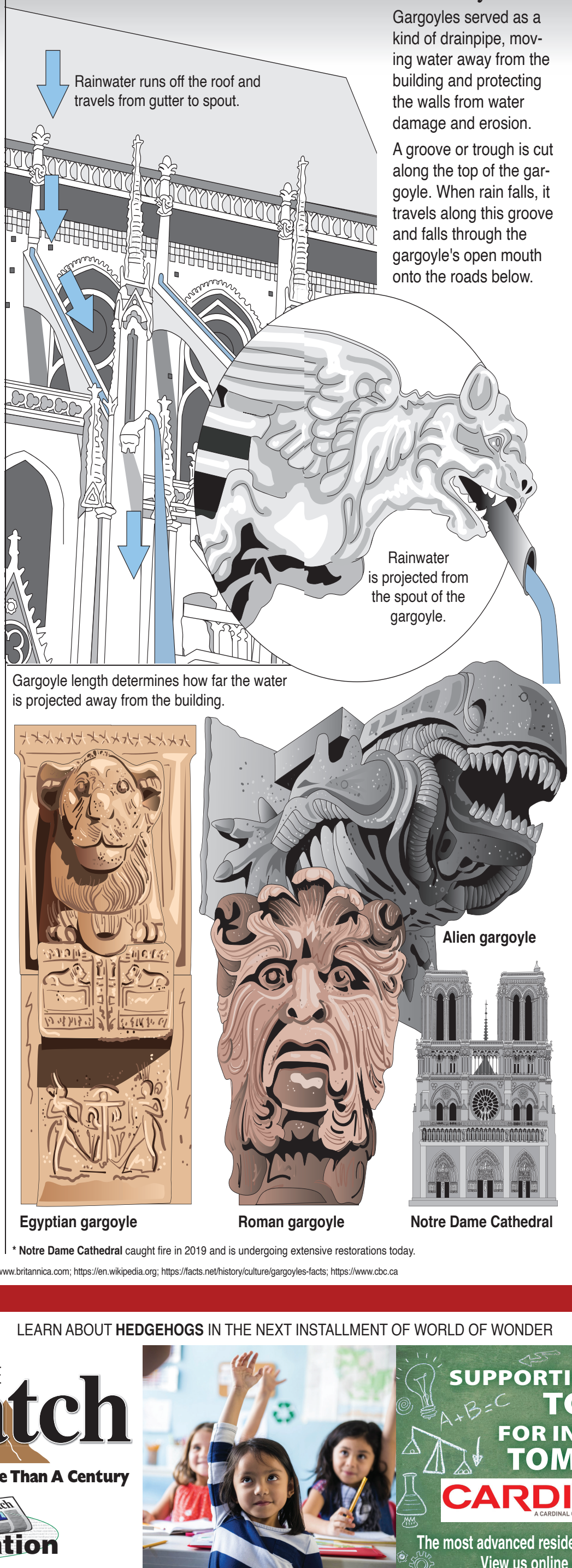
The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans and Romans all used animal-shaped waterspouts, a tradition carried into medieval times.

Modern gargoyles tend to have large wings and sharp teeth as a common feature.

Out of fashion

Gargoyles were used to divert rainwater until the early 18th century, when drainpipes came to be used to carry the water from the roof to the ground.

Gargoyles might also have gone out of style because people found them frightening, and they sometimes caused damage they when they aged, broke and fell.



* **Notre Dame Cathedral** caught fire in 2019 and is undergoing extensive restorations today.

How they work

Gargoyles served as a kind of drainpipe, moving water away from the building and protecting the walls from water damage and erosion.

A groove or trough is cut along the top of the gargoyle. When rain falls, it travels along this groove and falls through the gargoyle's open mouth onto the roads below.

Legend

According to French legend, **Saint Romanus** saved the town of Rouen from a dragon named **La Gargouille**. Romanus killed the creature and burned its body; however, because dragons can breathe fire, the head and neck of La Gargouille would not burn. Instead, its head was mounted on a church wall to protect the building and scare off spirits.

Some legends say that gargoyles are stone during the day but come to life at night.

Did you know?

Medieval churches may have placed gargoyles on their buildings as a message to illiterate villagers — they were designed to terrify nonbelievers and ward off evil.

During the Middle Ages, some gargoyles had human faces modeled after real people.

The famous gargoyles found on Paris' **Notre Dame Cathedral*** were not part of the original 13th-century cathedral. They were created during a restoration project in the mid-1800s.

The city of **Pittsburgh** embraced Gothic architecture in the late 19th century. More than 20 gargoyles and hundreds of grotesques can be seen guarding churches and government buildings.

During a 1990s restoration of the French Chapel of Bethlehem, sculptor Jean-Louis Boistel replaced the building's old and damaged gargoyles with some pop-culture icons. He created a **gremlin** from the movie "Gremlins" and a **xenomorph** from the movie "Alien."

There is a **Darth Vader** gargoyle on the Washington National Cathedral. It was placed there in the 1980s.

Walt Disney Television produced an animated series called "Gargoyles" between 1994 and 1997.

SOURCES: *World Book Encyclopedia*, World Book Inc.; https://www.britannica.com; https://en.wikipedia.org; https://facts.net/history/culture/gargoyles-facts; https://www.cbc.ca

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