



## An Alternative Timeline for the Colossus of Rhodes

**Michael Denis Higgins**

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The Colossus was a 30-metre-high bronze statue of the god Helios, built to commemorate the victory of the Rhodians over Demetrius of Macedonia, and considered one of the [Seven Wonders of the Ancient World](#). Completed in 282 BCE, it fell in an earthquake only 56 years later in 226 BCE. The usual story is that the fragments remained untouched for 880 years until the invasion by the Umayyad caliph Muawiya I. However, literary and geological evidence suggest a more complex, and more likely, story involving several reconstructions, finishing with a devastating earthquake in 142 CE.

### **Creation of the statue**

In 305 BCE, the Macedonian army laid siege to Rhodes, and after their defeat, they left behind their military equipment, including several huge siege engines. These towers were made of wood, with bronze fittings, and sheathed in iron plates. Some of these materials must have been recycled for the construction of the statue and the rest was sold to pay for the project.



Figure 1: A silver coin from Rhodes with the head of Helios. © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 3.0.

The little we know about the statue comes from the frustratingly brief writings of Philo (280-220 BCE, or possibly much later), Strabo (64 BCE-24 CE) and Pliny (23-79 CE), however none of these authors

describe what it actually looked like, apart from its height. It is generally assumed that the head of Helios resembled that on Rhodian coins (Fig. 1) and that it topped a rather austere vision of the god, perhaps holding a torch with a spear or military cloak (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Conjectural reconstructions of the Colossus. Left: Gabriel, A. 1932. *La construction, l'attitude et l'emplacement du Colosse de Rhodes*. *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, 56, 331-359. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Right, Three-metre-high statue of Helios on the top of the Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna. After © Hubertl / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.

It was built on a framework of iron bars and stone slabs to which bronze castings were fitted. The dimensions of the statue resemble those of the siege towers, suggesting that the towers may have been repurposed as scaffolding for the project.

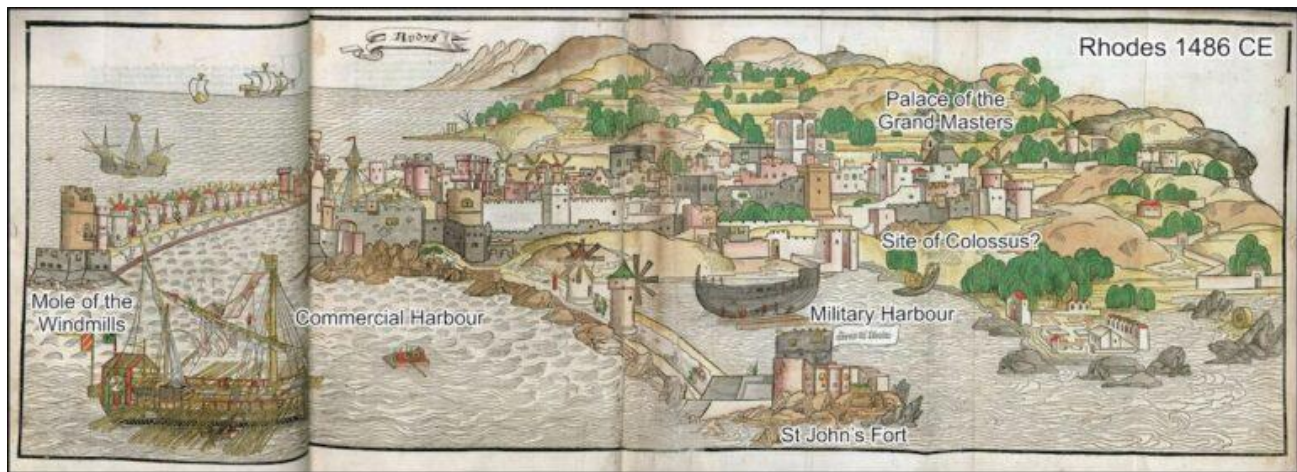


Figure 3: Rhodes City from the north in 1486 CE. Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinationes in Terram Sanctam* – First German edition, Mainz. Wikipedia, Public domain, annotated by the author.

In popular imagination, the Colossus stood astride the harbour entrance with ships sailing between his legs. This idea was first mentioned by an Italian pilgrim in 1395, who wrote that the Colossus stood with one leg at the end of the mole with the windmills and the other near St John's chapel, later a fort (Fig. 3). These sites are 750 metres apart, necessitating a statue 1500 metres high — a truly colossal edifice even by modern standards. This concept may have led to more recent ideas that the Colossus stood near the St John fort. There is little evidence for this and it is not an ideal spot, as it would have been exposed to the corrosive effects of salt spray. A more recent idea is that it stood on a small mound where the Palace of the Grand Masters now stands. Here it would be a bit farther from sea-spray and at a higher elevation, making it visible from a greater distance. It would be difficult to verify this hypothesis without demolishing much of the modern palace, restored somewhat too imaginatively by the Italians in 1937-40.

### History of the Statue

There is no doubt that the Colossus collapsed during a major earthquake around 226 BCE. Strabo, writing 250 years later, remarked that only the calves remained, poking up from the ruins. We know something about this earthquake because the military ship sheds that lined the western edge of the small harbour subsided by about one metre and were subsequently rebuilt. We also see evidence of this movement in the cliffs south of the city (Fig. 4). Now, one metre of movement is large and the accompanying seismic waves would have been enough to topple the Colossus — it was not designed with earthquakes in mind as there had been no significant events here for a long time. This is revealed by the well-developed erosional notch that corresponds to sea level when the Colossus was built.

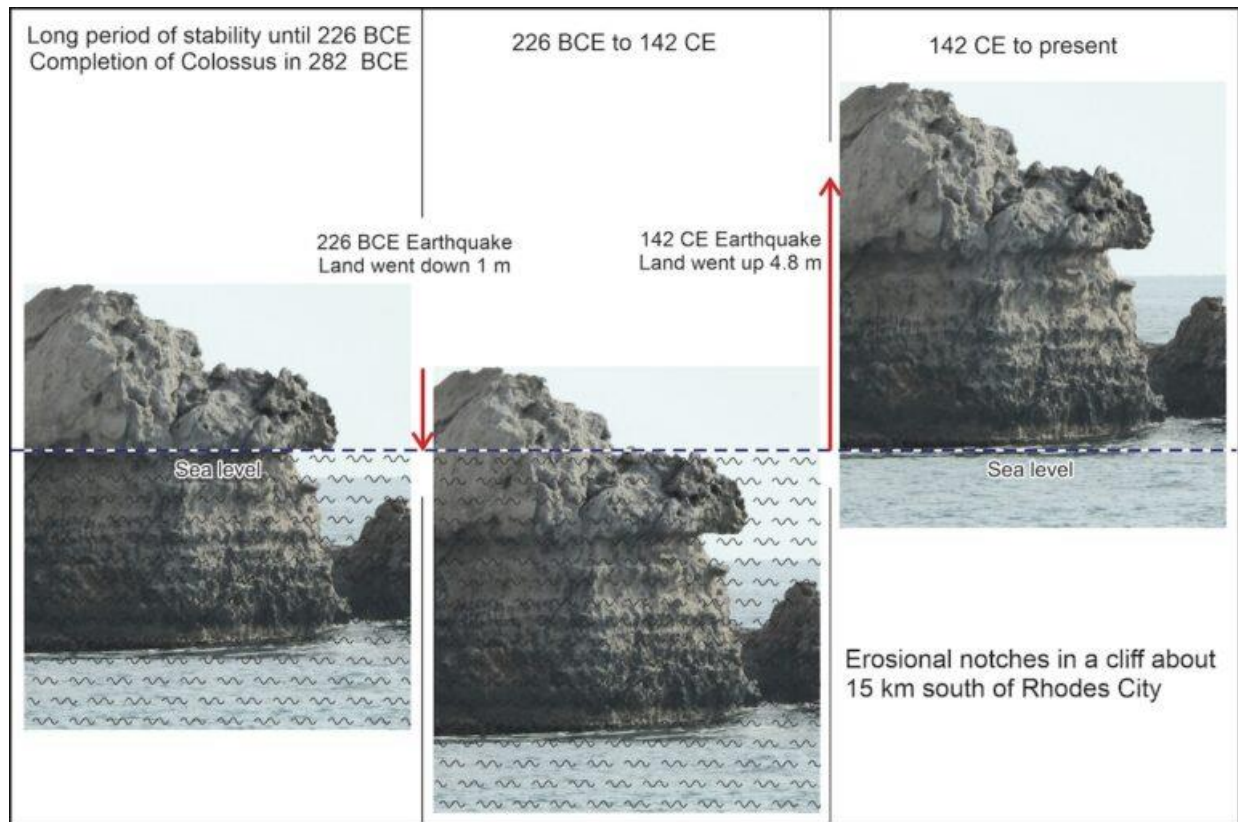


Figure 4: Erosional notches in cliffs record periods of sea-level stability, when waves erode at a single level in weakly tidal seas like the Mediterranean. Such notches are used to reconstruct the uplift and submergence produced during earthquakes. Image by the author, after Higgins (2023).

The oft-repeated story is that after the collapse the Rhodians consulted an oracle, who said that Helios was displeased and hence the statue should not be rebuilt. The offer of resources by Ptolemy III of Egypt — bronze metal, skilled workers and subsistence funds — did not change their minds. The account continues that the bronze fragments of the statue were left untouched on the ground for 880 years until the invasion of the Arabs in 654 CE (Fig. 5). They gathered the remains, transported them to Syria and sold them to a Jewish merchant. However, this seems a very unlikely scenario and the story was probably invented at a much later date for political reasons.

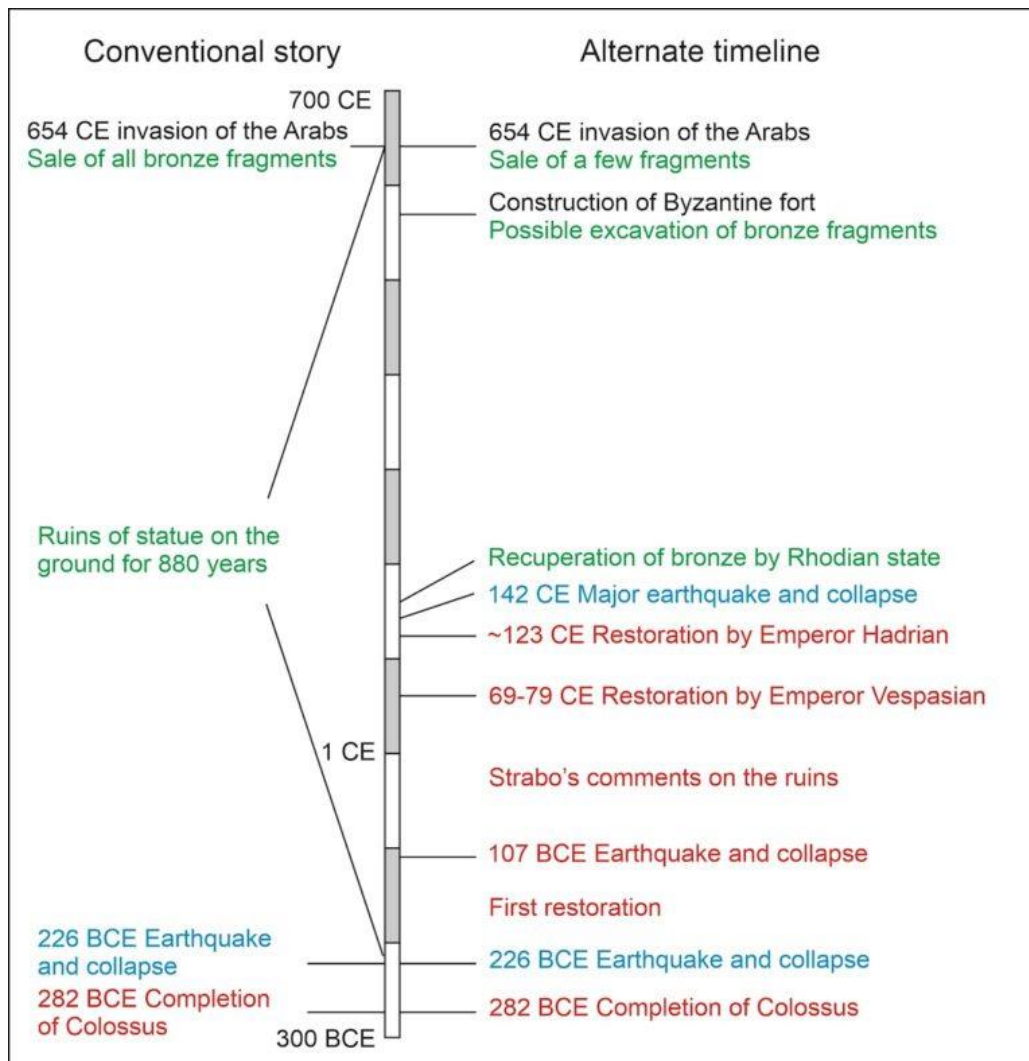


Figure 5: Timelines of the conventional and alternate histories of the Colossus. Blue – geological evidence; Red – literary evidence; Green – conjecture. Image by the author.

The yearly chronicle of the Greek historian Eusebius, composed in ~325 CE, suggests a shorter and more complex story (Fig. 5). The first restoration seems to have been shortly after the earthquake in 226 BCE, perhaps using the resources offered by Ptolemy. Eusebius states that the Colossus fell for a second time during an earthquake in 107 BCE, and Strabo's comments may refer to these ruins. This earthquake must have been relatively minor as it did not leave a notch in the cliffs (Fig. 4), so maybe the statue was corroded and ready to fall. Later Byzantine historians relate that the Colossus was restored during the reign of Vespasian (69-79 CE) and again during Hadrian's time, perhaps in association with an official visit in 123 CE. The latter may have been better described as repairs, as we do not know of a nearby earthquake between the reigns of Vespasian and Hadrian.

Such restorations would have involved considerable effort, but little in the way of new resources. The first step would have been to dismantle the remains and determine which bronze castings

could be remounted and which needed to be recast. The iron frame would have been severely corroded by salt spray and would have had to be re-smelted and re-forged.

If Hadrian did restore the Colossus then its final collapse must have been in 142 CE during an earthquake that raised the land by 4.8 metres. This huge earthquake must have generated a tsunami and affected the coast to the east as an international aid effort was organised. Rhodes's harbours must have been unusable, cutting off trade and access to the wealth needed to restore the statue.

Eusebius relates that in 189 CE Emperor Commodus removed the head of a colossus and substituted his own. Some people hold that this shows that the Rhodian statue was still standing, but geological evidence shows that this was not possible. Hence, the comment must refer to another colossal statue, probably in Rome.

We know nothing about the fate of the ruined statue but it seems unlikely that such a quantity of valuable metal would go unclaimed for long. The most likely story is that the bronze was taken by state officials and used to mint money. It would certainly have been needed to rebuild the city and harbour after the disaster of 142 CE. However, aspects of the conventional story may reveal some truths.

The Byzantine authorities constructed a fort in the late 6th century where the Crusaders would later build their Palace of the Grand Masters (Fig. 3). When the Colossus collapsed in 142 CE, some bronze and iron fragments may have been buried deep under the rubble, concealed from the workers recovering the metals. If these fragments were recovered during the construction of the fort then they may have been set aside and later removed by the Arabs, inspiring parts of the conventional story.

## **Conclusions**

It is impossible to know the true history of the Colossus, but we can at least choose the most likely timeline. The 226 BCE earthquake that first brought down the statue is well-attested by geological and literary evidence. It deepened the harbour and must not have affected trade significantly. Ptolemy III offered help to rebuild the statue and it seems unlikely that the Rhodians would refuse. Literary allusion to an earthquake in 107 BCE that brought down the Colossus is not attested by geological evidence. The statue must have been quite corroded by this time and could have fallen in a storm or a minor tremor. The literary evidence for restoration by Vespasian and Hadrian is disputable, but emperors, especially Hadrian, did like to leave their mark on their foreign tours. Geological and literary evidence agree that the earthquake in 142 CE was huge. It must have wrecked the town and rendered the harbours useless for trade. If the Colossus still existed and fell, then there would have been no financial resources or indeed interest in reconstruction.

**Michael D. Higgins** is an emeritus professor at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Canada. His book, [The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: Science, Engineering, and Technology](#), was published by Oxford University Press in 2023.

### **Further reading**

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