Face to face
Uncovering masks from around the world

Global responsibility
The Director shares thoughts on the Museum’s future
Different voices

For the first time since the Second World War the Museum has had to close its doors for an extended period of time, and the galleries which normally teem with curious visitors have fallen quiet. Behind the scenes, with many staff working from home or on furlough, the conservation team has been carefully monitoring the condition of objects so they are ready for display on our return; the exhibitions team has been preparing to resume our special exhibition programme while the senior staff have been planning the complex logistics of reopening. Everyone is focused on that much-anticipated moment when light will flood the galleries and our visitors will return.

This edition of the magazine allows us to hear some different voices and find new facets of the collection to explore. Pamela Cross of the Friends Advisory Council reminds us that objects are woven with their own story as she describes how richly coloured and intricate Toba Batak textiles have been passed down and used in family rites of passage. Andrew Robinson, also a member of Council, uncovers the fascinating and still evolving history of writing: ‘the greatest invention in history since it made history possible’. At a time when the longevity of communities is on our minds, Greg Woolf writes about the ‘urban resilience’ of cities such as Thebes, Corinth and Carthage and how they are ‘the great survivors’ of the ancient world. And if this summer you are wondering how to take revenge on the person who pinches your towel while you are swimming, Stuart Vyse, writing on the lost art of the curse, reveals how bathers got their own back at the public baths during the Greco-Roman period.

It was a great privilege for me at the start of lockdown to spend an afternoon in video conversation with our Director Hartwig Fischer about his extraordinary career and future ambitions for the Museum. A shortened version of our talk appears here. The work of the Director and many others has continued apace. Michael Lewis explains, for example, that the Portable Antiquities Scheme, co-ordinated by the British Museum in partnership with Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, has continued its painstaking work of recording new discoveries, with 5000 new records created during lockdown. My personal favourite? The copper alloy mount showing the fearsome white boar of Richard III found in Colyton, Devon.

We hope you will enjoy these pages as they shed new light on the collection. The loyalty of our Members who have continued to support the work we do through this difficult time is cause for celebration and gratitude. We look forward to the time when we will be able to gather together once again and share the unique experience of engaging with the collections in our wonderful building.

Clarissa Farr
Chair, British Museum Friends Advisory Council

With thanks to our contributors

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Black Lives Matter

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis is shocking. The subsequent protests, the explosion of pain, indignation and rage in America and across the world, have brought home how deep the experience of racism is for so many in our societies. The British Museum stands in solidarity with the British Black community, with the African American community, with Black communities throughout the world. We stand with everyone who is denied equal rights and protection from violence and discrimination in the fullest sense of these terms. These are challenges that we as a society must address, injustices that must be overcome.

The events must sharpen our awareness of how much more we, as a major public cultural institution, need to do in the fight against inequality and discrimination. We need to embrace the fact that diversity of background, thought, ability and skills is essential for the success of our Museum, and for the heritage sector as a whole.

Respect, inclusion and diversity are at the heart of our values. We continue to put our best efforts into making them a reality, knowing that a lot remains to be done by us.

We will work to diversify our own staff, listening to conversations such as those at last year’s National Programme conference held at the Museum, which explored equality and diversity in UK museums. We will broaden the diversity of voices present in the interpretation of objects in the collection, we will explore new forms of curation and further improve accessibility of the Museum and its many offers.

We will continue to research, acknowledge and address the colonial history of Britain and its impact on our institution in exhibitions like the recent Collecting Histories and Reimagining Captain Cook: Pacific perspectives (supported by Stephen and Julie Fitzgerald), but also in specifically dedicated projects. And although it will take time to realise, the Museum’s developing masterplan project – the Rosetta Project – provides a unique generational opportunity to reconsider, rethink and rebalance the display of the collection, introducing greater diversity of collections on display, expanding museum narratives and collaborating on a global scale.

In the midst of this debate, the extraordinary breadth and depth of the collection continues to challenge us to discover our common human past in all its richness and ambiguity, and thus to inform and contribute to the current debate. Shortly before lockdown, the Museum started a series of public discussions on the ‘Era of Reclamation’, led by former Deputy Chair of the Museum’s Trustees, Bonnie Greer. As Bonnie remarks in a blog she published to accompany the series: ‘Here, inside the British Museum, a theatre of human connection, reclamation can find the seeds that can begin the process of an even deeper, more profound engagement. We need now to see and know that we are the same species, with the same stories. And that we have always been in search of what we ultimately are seeking to reclaim: ourselves.’ Bonnie has also written a blog reflecting on current events which can be read on the Museum’s website.

Working with partners across the world and listening to both friends and critics, we will continue to strive for the right ways to allow the Museum to better reflect our societies and our complex, contentious and blended histories, and become more than ever that ‘theatre of human connection’.

Hartwig Fischer
Director, The British Museum

British Museum Magazine Autumn 2020
Game for a laugh

The famous Lewis Chessmen always raise a smile, says Lachlan Goudie

As a Scottish artist I have long been fascinated by the art and artefacts associated with my homeland. But while writing my new book *The Story of Scottish Art* I learned one important truth – that the very identity of ‘Scottish’ art is multi-layered and complex.

The Lewis Chessmen form part of one of the most iconic collections of artefacts ever discovered in Scotland. The 93 chess pieces have excited fascination and an inordinate amount of public affection since they emerged on a beach on the Island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides in 1831. It’s likely, however, that these startling objects were not crafted in Scotland at all but in Trondheim, Norway. They were carved using walrus tusks sourced in Greenland, during the 12th century – a period when the Hebridean islands formed part of the Kingdom of Norway.

These chess pieces represent the fluid exchange of materials, ideas and creative inspiration between communities, which drives the course of art history. Art doesn’t belong to any one tribe, country or culture. It is the product of collaboration across time and borders. The techniques and aesthetics of Scandinavian craftsmanship are folded into the history of Scottish decorative art. This exchange dates as far back as the Bronze Age, when trade routes across the North Sea allowed new techniques and ideas to spread between social groups from as far afield as Germany and Scandinavia.

The individual chess pieces themselves are talismanic in other ways too – charged with a kind of power and presence which feels unexpected for such modestly sized items. The design and decoration of each piece has a startling graphic impact, something which is enhanced by the levels of detail that are revealed on close examination.

As the game demands, there are knights, bishops, kings and queens, but what I find most striking is not the medieval craftsmanship which is on show here – it’s the humour. Often when we discuss history, we envisage our po-faced ancestors trudging through a life of conflict, manual labour and poor sewage. What the Lewis Chessmen reveal is that our ancient brothers and sisters loved a good laugh too. I am unable to contemplate these artefacts without cracking a smile; there’s the king with his wild stare, the bishops’ faces bursting with bug-eyed horror, the pawns depicted as shield-munching berserkers. Across nine centuries, in spite of the relentless progress of technology and time, I find myself still getting the joke. We all do, which is why the Lewis Chessmen remain some of the best-loved exhibits in the British Museum.
Exhibitions

The following exhibitions are due to open this autumn, but at the time of going to press it was not possible to give precise dates. Please check britishmuseum.org for updates.

The Citi exhibition
Arctic: culture and climate
The Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery, Room 30
Supported by AKO Foundation

The Arctic has been occupied for a very long time, and the cultures are remarkably old. Today, four million people live there, spread across eight countries. This immersive exhibition reveals the creativity and resourcefulness of Indigenous Peoples. Developed in collaboration with Arctic communities, it celebrates the ingenuity and resilience of Arctic Peoples throughout history, demonstrating how they have harnessed the weather and climate to thrive. What happens in the Arctic will affect us all, and this exhibition is a timely reminder of what the world can learn from those who live there.

Bronze Age olive oil
In November 2019, the British Museum conducted its second season of archaeological excavations at a 4500-year-old olive oil ‘factory’ in Jordan. Known as Khirbet Um al-Ghozlan (the ‘Ruins of the Mother of the Gazelles’), this unusual site is yielding intriguing discoveries associated with Bronze Age oil production, including stone-cut oil presses, storage jars, thin prunings saws and crushed olive stones. Olive oil gives the archaeological history of Jordan a highly distinctive flavour. Wild olive trees were domesticated in Jordan by 5000 BC. The emergence of the region’s first cities around 3500 BC was partly based on a lucrative oil trade with Egypt. Around 2500 BC, however, these early cities were abandoned and the oil trade collapsed. Khirbet Um al-Ghozlan dates to this so-called ‘Dark Age’. Excavations at this site examine how olive oil production was reconfigured for local demand. Ultimately, this research investigates how a resilient olive oil industry underpinned a spectacular urban recovery in the second millennium BC that culminated in the emergence of the Canaanites.

James Fraser
Curator, Middle East
Caroline Cartwright
Senior Research Scientist

Keeping the collections safe

While the doors of the Museum have been closed, plenty of safeguarding work has been going on behind the scenes, much of it through remote working.

Before we left the building in March, we took various measures to make sure the collection was as safe as possible while we were away. All light-sensitive objects on display at risk of fading were covered and gallery lights turned off, and certain objects were wrapped to protect them from potentially damaging dust. We carefully removed organic objects such as wood and ivory pieces from the galleries, to avoid any risk of them cracking if there were extreme changes in temperature and humidity. Some showcases which contain organic material are specially sealed and contain equipment (humidifiers or dehumidifiers) which keep the internal environment stable. When we found that the seal on the Lewis Chessmen case was not completely tight, for example, we instructed the engineers who were on site to wrap the case in plastic. Seventeen environmental monitors placed around the Museum have been providing members of the Collection Care team with live data so they can check on the condition of objects remotely. Pest monitors distributed throughout the Museum and our stores have also enabled us to keep a close eye out for insect damage. Most of the 156 members of the Collection Care department were placed on furlough, but of those fifteen who have remained working some were allowed access to the building to observe the collection in person. We are looking forward to the time when we can all return, and make sure the objects are in the best possible state for exhibitions and loans.

Sandra Smith
Head of Collection Care

Events online

While the Museum has been in lockdown we have been producing a number of videos specially for Members. We have already covered a variety of topics including conservation during the closure; the British Museum’s excavations in Iraq; and the Aztec world. These digital events, which give Members a chance to ask the speakers questions, have proved very popular and we plan to organise more of them in future.

Thomas Knowles
Membership Events Manager

To find recorded events, please visit britishmuseum.org/membership/members-events

Bronze Age oil press.

Rivaling Rome: Parthian coins and culture
Room 69a
Presenting coins and other objects, including belts and figures, this exhibition offers a balanced view of the Parthians, an Iranian people who came to power in 248 BC. The Parthian Empire became a major rival to Rome east of the river Euphrates.

The Asahi Shimbun
Displays
Raphael in 2020: emerging artists respond
Room 3
Supported by the Asahi Shimbun

On the 500th anniversary of Raphael’s death, emerging artists respond to one of his spectacular drawings of a torso.

French Impressions: prints from Manet to Cézanne
Room 90
Supported by Ronald E. Bornstein

Prints were all the rage among the avant-garde public in the Impressionist era. On display are ground-breaking etchings and lithographs by artists including Manet, Degas, Pissarro and Cassatt.

Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity
Room 90
Supported by the Tavalozza Foundation

The Museum’s entire collection of Piranesi drawings is on display, featuring the glories of Roman architecture alongside fantasy creations.

Olive oil gives the archaeological history of Jordan a highly distinctive flavour.

Support by the Tavalozza Foundation.

Exhibiting Sarah Carrier: excavating a broken but complete store jar. Photo by Adam Carr.

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Exhibiting Sarah Carrier: excavating a broken but complete store jar. Photo by Adam Carr.
The British Museum makes acquisitions to extend knowledge of different cultures and places. These works have recently joined the collection.

**A Hampshire hoard**

More than 350 coin hoards from the English Civil War (1642–9) have been recovered in modern times, a unique concentration in English history. Until now, however, the British Museum did not hold a complete hoard to represent this period of extraordinary chaos and tumult, an absence that has long seemed an anomaly. An opportunity to remedy this came with the discovery of the Mapledurwell hoard in Hampshire in August 2018. It was found by a metal detectorist who behaved in exemplary fashion and the hoard was able to be lifted within the surrounding earth and systematically excavated by BM conservators. It consists of 345 silver coins in three denominations, half-crown, shilling and sixpence (effectively the £20, £10 and £5 notes of the age) of English monarchs from Edward VI to Charles I, with remnants of the stoneware jug in which they were hidden. The value of the hoard was £13. 4s. 6d., easily a year’s pay for a labourer at the time and several month’s wages for a soldier in the Civil War. The latest coins present were issued in 1641–3, so it is one of the many hoards concealed right at the start of the war by an owner who never returned.

**Barrie Cook**
Curator: Medieval and Early Modern Coins

**Mesopotamian pyxis**

This small lidded container was excavated in the 19th century by Hormuzd Rassam at the ancient site of Sippar, modern Tell Abu Habba, in southern Iraq. Coloured with yellow and blue glazes, it is also decorated with a low relief rosette on the knobbed lid, which was originally secured with a pair of rods passed through projecting loops on the interior. Most of the finds from these excavations were presented to the British Museum, but in this case the pyxis remained in private hands until it appeared for sale in 1991. We were unsuccessful in acquiring it then but are delighted to report now that it has been very generously purchased on our behalf and presented to us by Julia Schottlander. It will go on display in the Later Mesopotamia Gallery (Room 55).

**Philip Attwood**
Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Coins and Medals

**Honouring Malala**

Medals honouring individuals for their achievements have been made for centuries, but it must be admitted that only rarely have young women received such treatment. It is this that makes a recently acquired medal by Dutch sculptor Jet Schepp particularly noteworthy. Issued by the Vereniging voor Penningkunst (Art Medal Association), the medal pays tribute to the Pakistani human rights activist Malala Yousafzai. The design on the back is based on an inspirational phrase from Malala’s address to the United Nations Youth Assembly, given in 2013 on her sixteenth birthday: ‘One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world.’ Appearing as pictograms, the four elements referred to by Malala and the cursive script together embrace the globe. This is not the first time that Schepp has seen fit to commemorate a young woman. Her statue of diarist Anne Frank can be seen on Amsterdam’s Merwedeplein.

**St John Simpson**
Curator: Middle East
Forty years ago, Captain Collingwood Ingram (1880–1981) was about to celebrate his hundredth birthday. This in itself was a great achievement, especially as his early years were beset by poor health. However, he enjoyed a full and varied life, receiving high recognition as an ornithologist and horticulturalist, affirming his innate love for the natural world.

Recent publications have ensured that Ingram’s life work is appreciated widely for future generations, especially his mission to restore the traditional flowering cherry tree to Japan. This access to new cultures would have a significant influence on his future. In 1907 he revisited Japan, this time with his young wife Florence. During a three-month stay he ventured far off the tourist trails. Family life was interrupted by war. Collingwood became a technician for the Royal Flying Corps, but managed birdwatching during his time in France. In 1919 the family moved to The Grange at Benenden, a late 19th-century Tudor-Gothic style house. The neglected garden was graced by two fine Japanese cherry trees, their blossom a reminder of his earlier travels. Inspired, he began to collect many traditional varieties, but on returning to Japan, he soon realised that similar efforts were needed in their country of origin. His future as ‘Cherry’ Collingwood became assured, as was his lifelong interest in Japanese decorative arts. His future as ‘Cherry’ Ingram was assured, as was his lifelong interest in Japanese decorative arts. His future as ‘Cherry’ Ingram was assured, as was his lifelong interest in Japanese decorative arts.

In 1970, Collingwood expressed an interest in leaving his Japanese collection to the British Museum. Lawrence Smith (later Keeper of Oriental and Japanese Antiquities, 1997–2003) to The Grange. Victor was a specialist in Japanese metalwork. Collingwood Ingram made us most welcome and soon we all climbed several flights of stairs to his attic hideaway. Numerous objects were brought to us, each with a story to tell, especially the inro, many decorated with birds, fish, insects and ornamental trees. I was impressed with their quality and condition. After lunch, we were introduced to the famous gardens. Then, with objects packed, we returned to the Museum. This visit made a lasting impression on me. I often recall ‘Cherry’ Ingram talking with measured passion about his acquisitions and his iconic garden. Later, as Museum Archivist, I realised even more how vital such information was to curators and historians.

Retirement has taken me to the Powell-Cotton Museum at Quex Park in Kent. Here, my ongoing research is revealing interesting connections between the Powell-Cotton and Ingram families in London and Kent. Percy Powell-Cotton (1866–1940), explorer, collector and naturalist, visited Japan a decade before Ingram and was equally drawn to its culture. Collingwood and Percy were painstaking at documenting their experiences. Both enjoyed a close association with the British Museum, ultimately as benefactors – a perfect way to support the Museum and share life stories with the wider world.
Digital discoveries

As Museum objects languished behind closed doors, the newly revamped Collection online offered exciting ways to explore them on the website. Michael Tame gives details

The Museum has been investing in its digital platforms for many years, including the launch of the brand-new website in November 2019. When the Covid-19 crisis hit in February 2020, and the Museum shut its doors a few weeks later, we were well placed to offer our visitors a virtual experience instead. It quickly became clear that this was something that people craved in their lockdown lives, as the number of online visits soared.

Perhaps fuelled by hunger for certainty in uncertain times, or a sense of permanence when everything else was falling apart, it was clear that the harder the lockdown, the more the desire for culture, art and beauty grew. Italians in particular visited in their hundreds of thousands and for several weeks outnumbered all other countries.

On the new website, the most popular objects in the Museum were also the most looked at online. The Rosetta Stone, the Lewis Chessmen and the wonders of Sutton Hoo were all favourites. The new virtual galleries were also popular, and when it was clear that the Museum was perhaps going to be closed for months, the front page of the website was revamped to highlight the new story pages and school resources as well as the relaunch of Collection online among other new content and initiatives.

When it was launched in 2007, the Museum’s Collection online was at the time one of the best in the world, but it became in dire need of an overhaul. Throughout 2019 teams from two companies worked on totally rebuilding the Collection online databases and search engine, and when the Museum was closed the decision was taken to accelerate the launch even though there was still some work to be done.

Users can now search 4.5 million different objects and an associated 1.9 million images, including objects the Museum has acquired during the last 20 months that were not previously visible on the site. The new search function is much more intuitive and suggests people, places and terms associated with the objects as soon as you start to type. The layout of the screens enables users to see the image and the associated data side by side, and each of the different terms triggers new searches, which is both a blessing and a curse as you might be tempted to spend hours going from object to object, marvelling at their beauty and craftsmanship. As our Director, Hartwig Fischer, says: ‘We hope that these important objects can provide inspiration, reflection or even just quiet moments of distraction during this difficult time.’

The other great new feature is the ability to ‘deep zoom’ into images where they are large enough, using the latest IIIF imaging functionality. The incredible detail shown is actually greater in some cases than can be seen within the Museum itself. On the Samurai armour, restored in 2018, it is even possible to pick out individual threads and stitches in the cloth. Finally, it all works on a mobile or tablet just as well as on a laptop or desktop computer.

The response to the relaunch of Collection online has been overwhelmingly positive, and has also gained extensive coverage in the media. As a Spanish browser said on Twitter, ‘This is so amazing! We’re lucky to be able to enjoy this from home.’

What’s next? The new website and Collection online is just the start, a platform to build on. Curators will very quickly be able to put together virtual object groups from across the museum and display them – perhaps kitchen utensils from across the centuries, old master drawings and modern reinterpretations, and hoards of hoards. We have only just started 3D scanning, and there are many collaborations with researchers and colleagues around the world which will be enabled through this technology; the possibilities are endless.

But above all, people from both nearby and around the world who, for whatever reason, are unable to visit in person can see the wonders of the Museum we all know and love.
A global vision

Hartwig Fischer had a video conference with our Chair, Clarissa Farr, at the beginning of lockdown, about the Museum’s future and its global responsibilities.

Hartwig Fischer was born in Hamburg and studied art history, history and archaeology in Munich, Bonn, Rome and Paris. He began his museum career at the Kunstmuseum Basel, becoming Director of the Museum Folkwang in Essen in 2006 and Director of the Dresden State Art Collections in 2012. He took up his appointment as Director of the British Museum in April 2016.

CF: Hartwig, we’re having our video talk during the lockdown due to Covid-19. Does the collection have lessons for us on how to manage challenges of this kind that have occurred in the past?

HF: The last thing I did before I had to leave the Museum was to go through the galleries. A ray of light falling through one of the windows led me to an ancient Egyptian bronze cat. I wrote about it for one of the windows led me to an ancient Egyptian bronze cat. I wrote about it for the British Museum blog. It is an object that had protective and healing powers. You find thousands of objects that relate to menaces: threats to health, fertility, community and spiritual wellbeing. Objects such as the Flood Tablet, for example, talk about people who had to deal with a challenge beyond their control, something which, at least for some time, simply overwhelmed them.

This virus is just such a moment, when we realise that we do not control the world, we do not control nature or, as Freud put it, we’re not master in our own house. The collection is a vast repository of human experience that can help us navigate trying times and prepare for change.

CF: Time has flown since your arrival as Director in April 2016. What surprised you about the British Museum when you first arrived?

HF: What intrigued me first of all was the quality, intelligence and passion of the people working here — the colleagues across all departments and the Trustees. The passion of the Members, their dedication to this institution, their critical eye, the way in which they have selected this institution as a place to create experiences that are relevant for their lives, and to share them. And the way visitors come to the Museum from all over the world expecting to have an important experience; you see that in their eyes when they come through the door.

And then the second thing was the unfathomable, immense collection. The British Museum covers two million years of human history like no other museum. In each object you have layers and layers of experience, not only human experience, but also the experience of nature, because most of the objects in the British Museum are made of material which comes from nature — stone, wood, leather. So it also speaks to the relation of human beings to their environment.

CF: What do you think is the enduring interest of museums? Why do people go to them?

HF: I think they play a vital role in allowing us to tap into the experience of others, to listen, to learn, to be inspired and better equipped for the future.

CF: Can you pinpoint the time when that inspiration started for you?

HF: It was very early on. One of my uncles is an artist, so as a child I had access to his studio where there was this exciting perfume of oil paint and the miracle of seeing images slowly come into being on the canvass. Also, there was that sense of beauty in everyday life at home: a beautiful arrangement on a table, beautiful flowers in the garden, the beauty of human beings. When I was about thirteen or fourteen I felt that there was something special about art, painting, poetry, music — that they promised to tell me something about myself, that I could define myself through them. There was a gallery in the suburb where I grew up, I would walk past it on the way to school. I managed to coordinate an exhibition for my uncle in that gallery, and made the acquaintance of other artists. And so it went on. I became friends with collectors in Hamburg and through these friends I came to know curators and museum directors.

CF: Was there any one individual or any particular moment that was a turning point? Did you have mentors, people whose example was very important?

HF: Absolutely. I have been very lucky to meet many inspiring people. I became friends with Gerhard Schack, a collector of Japanese art whose collection is now in one of Hamburg’s major museums. While he was organising an exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden I travelled there with him and saw for the first time how a museum works, what organising exhibitions means, how much scholarly knowledge, work, finesse and
experience go into a successful display, a beautiful catalogue. The director of the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Katharina Schmidt, whom I had the good fortune of working with later on during my first years as a professional [at Kunstmuseum Basel in Switzerland]; first made me understand what the constellation of works and our dialogue with them mean in a museum space.

**CF:** Here at the BM, how do you manage your vast responsibilities?

**HF:** In my position you direct a team of great professionals – from Security, to Facilities Management, Visitor Services, Photography, Conservation, Legal, Curatorial, Communication, Finance, Development, Scientific Research, HR, Education and so on. You set major goals after analysing the needs and defining the ambitions. And you do that by taking in as much as you can of their expertise in order to make access to the collection as easy and rewarding as possible to people from different walks of life. And then you test and debate, sharing and providing access means? Just providing factual information or embedding objects in a narrative to unlock their meaning? Whose voice, and whose narrative should it be? Ideally more than one, and from different backgrounds. And not only in Bloomsbury. We know that sharing and providing access means today that things have to be available digitally from wherever you are. We’ve just relaunched Collection online in a much improved and enhanced version. We do a lot digitally and at the same time we all believe that there is something unique in the encounter with the object itself. People come from the Americas, from Oceania, Australia, Asia and Africa to study objects of their cultures, and of other cultures at the British Museum. And a number of curators spend a good deal of time at the Museum exchanging with these groups, hosting them, sharing their knowledge and learning from them. There are many ways to share. Take for example the work we presently do with colleagues in Iraq. The British Museum back in 2015 started to think about how it could best help heritage specialists, archaeologists and museum curators there to deal with the destruction of cultural heritage perpetrated by Daesh. The Middle East department has a renowned collection and outstanding specialists. We invite colleagues from Iraq to London to acquaint themselves with new methods and technologies in rescue archaeology, documenting and securing heritage sites. After three months they return to their institutions and then join BM colleagues in two different excavation sites in Iraq to put into practice what they have learned in London. All this is funded by the British government, for which we are extremely grateful. The way it combines knowledge exchange, skill sharing, practical training and archaeological fieldwork, is unique.

**CF:** Can you talk a bit about your work with communities and institutions around the world?

**HF:** The British Museum has a core mission: to preserve and share the collections. That was stipulated by our founding fathers. But what particular shape should sharing take? What does access mean? Just providing factual information or embedding objects in a narrative to unlock their meaning? Whose voice, and whose narrative should it be? Ideally more than one, and from different backgrounds. And not only in Bloomsbury. We know that sharing and providing access means today that things have to be available digitally from wherever you are. We’ve just relaunched Collection online in a much improved and enhanced version. We do a lot digitally and at the same time we all believe that there is something unique in the encounter with the object itself. People come from the Americas, from Oceania, Australia, Asia and Africa to study objects of their cultures, and of other cultures at the British Museum. And a number of curators spend a good deal of time at the Museum exchanging with these groups, hosting them, sharing their knowledge and learning from them. There are many ways to share. Take for example the work we presently do with colleagues in Iraq. The British Museum back in 2015 started to think about how it could best help heritage specialists, archaeologists and museum curators there to deal with the destruction of cultural heritage perpetrated by Daesh. The Middle East department has a renowned collection and outstanding specialists. We invite colleagues from Iraq to London to acquaint themselves with new methods and technologies in rescue archaeology, documenting and securing heritage sites. After three months they return to their institutions and then join BM colleagues in two different excavation sites in Iraq to put into practice what they have learned in London. All this is funded by the British government, for which we are extremely grateful. The way it combines knowledge exchange, skill sharing, practical training and archaeological fieldwork, is unique.

**HF:** I’d like to ask you about temporary exhibitions. Obviously we’re in very challenging times at the moment, but looking back over your time can you give an example of an exhibition that stood out for you?

**HF:** You must never ask that of a museum person – I could do so much injustice! Let’s simply take the last one, the Troy exhibition, as it brought together a lot of the strengths that are the hallmark of British Museum exhibitions. It was based on the BM collection, excellent scholarship, a fascinating concept and cutting-edge design. And it explored the subject through narration, which came into play on two different levels. One is that the exhibition told you a story: the myth of Troy, which is in the Iliad and the Odyssey of course and the Aeneid that followed later. How did the Greeks, Romans and Etruscans relate to this epic poem? And of course they related deeply to it. It allowed them to express ideas of virtue, of living together, of the vicissitudes of
life and the deep ambivalence of human existence. But then it also spoke about the history of discovery. How was the myth handed down through the centuries, forgotten, then rediscovered and reinterpreted by artists and scholars? And how was the ancient city of Troy rediscovered in the late 19th century? The double narrative of the epic poem and of the history of rediscovery formed two red threads taking you through the space and the fascinating constellations of objects. It enticed visitors to engage with the objects, to look at details, to pause and reflect.

CF: As you said, the exhibition was very popular, and people of all ages went to see it. What are your thoughts on younger audiences? How can we engage with the Museum and to want to engage in dialogue over contested aspects of our institution.

CF: You give a fascinating glimpse of that global, globally accessible and fully comprehensive museum of the world, but can you point to an object that has particular meaning for you?

CF: Do you feel that the collection is too aimed at the moment? Do you feel that there’s a need to break down divisions that are perhaps unhelpful?

HF: Yes, I do. When you explore the collection in the galleries today, moving from Egypt through Assyria and then on to Greece, the fact that those three areas were closely interlinked over millennia – that is the entire eastern Mediterranean all the way into the Middle East – is not something that you really grasp. So what I would like to achieve with colleagues at the British Museum and with our partners from outside the Museum (because it’s something we need to do with others from other parts of the world) is a new narrative of our shared complicated history that everybody feels represented in. I want us to show how complex and inspiring these sometimes very painful processes of exchange are, with many crises in between – wars, epidemics, natural disasters. I would want visitors to see how people throughout the history of humankind have faced challenges, tensions and conflict and in the end have prevailed, transformed themselves, or faltered. We have to keep developing both the physical and the digital presence of the collection, without blurring the fact that these are different forms of existence. Covid-19 has forced the Museum for some time into a purely digital existence. We have all learned a lot about how to share the collection and the knowledge it engenders more widely during these last months, and also about the need to engage in dialogue over contested aspects of our institution.

CF: You touch upon so much, it is a symbol of relationship, tenderness, desire, exchange.

CF: I’ll look at it again with new interest and enlightenment when I next visit.

HF: Please do! We can’t wait to finally open the doors again and welcome you and all our Members and friends back to the Museum after these difficult months. We will all discover afresh how much inspiration and learning this unique institution holds in store for us.

To read more from Hartwig Fischer, please turn to page 8.
Behind the mask

At a time when so many of us are adopting face coverings, Clive Gamble takes us on a virtual tour of some of his favourite masks in the Museum

We love masks, or we did. They allow us to be something else; by turns fantastical, laughable, loveable and downright dangerous. Anyone who wears a mask is a performer; sometimes the mask is a testament to humanity’s love where journeys between people and worlds, real and imagined, are enacted.

The British Museum’s collection of masks is a testament to humanity’s love affair with these arresting objects. Often fantastical, laughable, loveable and can be religious or secular, forces for good or evil, or indicate power and are made from every material imaginable, come in all shapes and sizes. Masks take us on a virtual tour of some of his favourite masks in the Museum.

Breathtaking masks from Africa were described by the artist Peter Liversidge in the Winter 2019 issue of this magazine. The Americas are equally mask-rich, as shown by an elaborate mask within-a-mask made by a master Nuu-chah-nulth craftsman on Vancouver Island. When closed, the mask is an animal head. Opened, it dramatically reveals a face surrounded by a fan of thirteen plumes.

The diversity of masks presents a challenge when it comes to their classification and interpretation, but above all they deal with the myriad identities that people fashion for themselves. Masks take the form of animals, humans or a mixture of the two, the fabulous therianthropes. Masks can be religious or secular, forces for good or evil, or indicate power and, as is evident in the mask-like helmet from Sutton Hoo in Room 41, or when breaking the law, with my favourite – a latex face of Richard Nixon which, in the movies, is the bank robber’s mask of choice. Masks transform identities. The weak become powerful, the young look old, and your next-door neighbour, masked-up, is transformed into an animal spirit.

If masks have a common purpose, it is to hide and change the power of the face. That may be for reasons of protection as in a metal helmet or a strip of fabric to guard against air pollution. Masks might entertain as in Japanese gigauku theatre that traces its origins to Buddhist ceremonies. Indeed, there is a common history between masks, entertainment and sacred ritual.

I wonder, however, why cultures across the world feel this need to hide their faces behind such diverse disguises. Why conceal the quintessential expression of our personal identity? Anthropologists have written extensively about masks working as signs and symbols within a complex semiotic scheme unique to a culture. Masks have been likened to myths, where the imagined takes material form. Anthropologists conclude from their investigations that masks can only be understood in their cultural context. That is possible for the Nuu-chah-nulth mask because of oral accounts as well as ceremonies today using comparable wolf and lightning serpent masks. In the same way we can draw on the written history of gigauku theatre, and attend a performance, to understand that mask.

But what about masks in deep history where there are no written accounts and no oral testimonies? Archaeologists understand objects by paying attention to their context of discovery. Two gold masks from a second-century AD cemetery in Nineveh were placed over the faces of the dead. They were firmly tied in place, as shown by the tiny perforations in each corner.

These masks, possibly male and female, were the last faces these two people presented to the world before their graves were closed. They undoubtedly marked the height of local status and, as John Curtis notes, point to a burial tradition shared between the Eastern Roman Empire and its neighbours in Iraq. Local and international identities were hammered out in these face masks. However, the archaeological context is often lacking, as in the case with one of the icons of the British Museum’s collection. The mask in the Turquoise Mosaic series tells us more about the history of collecting than Aztec history. Known also as the ‘spotty mask’ because it is covered in what seem to be boils, all we know is that it was made in Mexico sometime between 1400 and 1521. Its pierced, elliptical eyes fix us with a penetrating, mother-of-pearl stare. It is desperate to tell us more, but the threads were severed, like the strings which attached it to the wearer’s head, when it came to Europe, undocumented, in the 16th century.

What the spotty mask achieves, like all full masks, is to conceal the eyes, mouth, ears and nose, and consequently four of our five senses: sight, taste, hearing and smell. Muffled speech is still possible, as I discovered when I acted once in Oedipus Rex, a masked...
Two gold foil masks from the site of the former Late Assyrian citadel at Nineveh, Iraq, 2nd century AD. On display in Room 52.

performance with an abiding memory of the smell of papier mâché. Masks focus the attention of the onlooker on the hands and the subtleties of touch and gesture. Take the mask off and you return to the full sensory world.

The oldest full mask in the British Museum, and still the oldest in the world, comes from the waterlogged site of Star Carr in Yorkshire. Excavations in the 1950s uncovered red deer skulls with antlers attached and two holes bored in the forehead. The stags were killed in autumn and large parts of the antlers cut away to lighten the load. The tally for these remarkable objects now stands at 24, the latest excavated by Nicky Milner and her team in 2015. They are the surviving parts of shaman’s masks that made journeys between spirit worlds possible. These masks are 11,000 years old. The Ice Age was over, and elsewhere in the Old World the first steps towards farming were taking place. This fundamental change was accompanied by a trend to put humans and things into containers such as bags and boxes, pots and baskets. This interest in compartments existed before but not on the scale seen after 11,000 years ago, when human containers such as small mud-brick houses increased exponentially and, like so many little boxes, multiplied from small villages into towns and cities. People now lived, as we do today, within artificial worlds built from materials as varied as those used to make masks, cocooned inside layers of cultural stuff. For archaeologists, the history of these containers is like opening the layers of the Nuu-chah-nulth mask to find a fixed face and then the living person behind the mask.

The domestication of crops and animals changed the world of the people who hunted stags at Star Carr. But our sensory experience also changed because culture was now increasingly categorised and fitted into physical compartments. Could it be that the Star Carr mask signifies the start of the trend to encapsulate our lives, envelop our senses and contain our emotions, movements and thoughts that created a new variety of humanity and a different history? For all the artistic diversity among the masks in the Museum’s collection, they make a simple historical statement about a world that changed forever.

Are we still in love with masks? Currently we cover our faces to protect against a pandemic. Fabric face masks first appeared during the Manchurian pneumonic epidemic of 1910–11 when the role of airborne infection was first established. I expect that these contemporary global objects will be added to the Museum’s collection to tell a universal history contained in things. Although flimsy and seldom beautiful, they are masks like those from Star Carr because they aim to contain a force that changes human lives.

The masked shaman at Star Carr was also a healer as well as a traveller between worlds. Separated by many millennia, both this bone mask and the contemporary cloth mask address forces that cannot be seen but remind us to be careful what we touch.
Seventeenth-century Londoners had to endure a course through hellish adversity. A political power struggle, civil war, astringency, pestilence, fire, more disease, international trade wars and a massive rebuilding of infrastructure, all made for challenging times. The Civil War, which lasted from August 1642 to September 1651, had decided a nationally divisive issue – the struggle between the power of an anointed king and an elected Parliament – which had torn apart families, communities and society. As we know, Parliament triumphed and King Charles I was beheaded in 1649. A Protectorate followed before the monarchy was restored in 1660, when Charles II was invited to reign. The latter catastrophe was followed by the Great Plague of London’s contagion (1665). The latter catastrophe was unexpectedly cathartic, cleansing much adversity. A political power struggle, civil war, astringency, pestilence, fire, more disease, international trade wars and a massive rebuilding of infrastructure, all made for challenging times. The Great Plague, in June 1665, he went on his only trip abroad, to France, basing himself in and around Paris. He stayed there until March 1666, meeting renowned architect François Mansard and visiting key ‘modern’ architectural sites. He was even granted an audience with the aged Gian Lorenzo Bernini, image-maker to the Papacy in Rome, who was visiting Louis XIV with his designs for the new East Front of the Louvre. Wren was educating himself at night. Wren’s colleague and close friend, Robert Hooke (1635-1703), was similarly a great polymath in an age of brilliant, curious minds. Both men were founded members of the Royal Society, of which Hooke was Secretary and Curator of Experiments, and Wren was its third President from 1680 to 1682. In 1665, Hooke published his spectacular Micrographia, or some physiological descriptions of minute bodies made by magnifying glasses. Its dazzling illustrations of microscopic creatures are on a large scale. On a page measuring 3 x 33 cm, he shows a flea, *Xenopsylla cheopis*, ‘this little busie creature’ which sucks ‘out the blood of an animal, leaving the skin inflamed’. Fleas and plague went together, because bubonic plague was an infection (*Yersinia pestis*) among wild rodents, transmitted to humans by the bites of fleas or from infected animals. After incubation of only four to six days, the victim would endure a sudden onset of high fever, malaise and muscular pains with tender, greatly enlarged lymph nodes, or buboes, in the armpits and groin, as the infecting organisms spread. Sepsis and pneumonia could ensue, together with the coughing up of bloody, frothy sputum which would spread droplets of infection to others. Purpuric spots would emerge on the skin and decide the diagnosis. It was thought in the 17th century that the infection came from South East Asia. Almost all major cities suffered high incidence of plague, which often came in waves of infection. Venice, Amsterdam and urban Spain were especially prone. In 17th-century Spain, plague killed over 1.25 million people. In Venice, it killed 16,000 in 1630. Amsterdam suffered several waves in 1623, 1635 (when one in five of the
population died), the mid-1650s and again in 1668 (when Rembrandt’s only son, Titus, succumbed to it). Often, bodies could not be buried quickly enough and had to go from panteons into plague pits or mass graves, with the accompanying stench. The Ancient Greeks had associated ‘miasma’ (bad air) with infection, a perception which had survived into the 17th century. Pomanders, usually decorative metallic containers filled with sweet-smelling herbs and spices, were a necessary accessory to help cope with the smell. London, with its great density of population (estimated at 460,000 in 1664), officially lost some 68,596 lives, but the unofficial figure was nearer 100,000. (It is interesting to compare the total number of deaths from Covid-19 in London, which at the beginning of July stood at just over 6000). The Great Plague of 1665–6 (one of several waves in London), seems to have started in the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields, south-west of the site of the British Museum. In Rose-water’. Across the country, the accompanying stench. The Ancient Greeks had associated ‘miasma’ (bad air) with infection, a perception which had survived into the 17th century. Pomanders, usually decorative metallic containers filled with sweet-smelling herbs and spices, were a necessary accessory to help cope with the smell. London, with its great density of population (estimated at 460,000 in 1664), officially lost some 68,596 lives, but the unofficial figure was nearer 100,000. (It is interesting to compare the total number of deaths from Covid-19 in London, which at the beginning of July stood at just over 6000). The Great Plague of 1665–6 (one of several waves in London), seems to have started in the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields, south-west of the site of the British Museum. In Rose-water’. Across the country, physicien treated to go with their wealthy patients whereas apothecaries remained to treat plague victims. Treatment’ were available but most were ineffective in every way. They included blood-letting, heating to induce greater sweating and various potions. The latter included ‘white arsenic’, ‘white Dittany and English Saffron’, ‘Camphire and Euphorbium’, mixed with ‘Gum Arabic dissolved in Rose-water’ (Ulisse Aldrovandi). Across the country,linen drenched in vinegar was used as an antiseptic cloth. Vinegar was often among the contents of the handy little metallic boxes, in what we would know as vinaigrettes, held to repel the danger of infection and to prevent swooning at the stench.

The unexpected cleaning agent of the Great Plague was the Great Fire of London (2–6 September 1666), famously starting at Thomas Farynor’s bakery in Pudding Lane. It destroyed or gutted most of the City of London on the north bank of the Thames but miraculously claimed only six lives. As John Evelyn recorded, ‘The Conflagration was so universal and the people so astonished... that they hardly stir’d to quench it’. He viewed the fire from the south bank and saw how the flames engulfed old St Paul’s Cathedral, noting ‘the ruin resembling the picture of Troy: London was but is a new Plan of Troy’. The rebuilding was supported by the City Council, the Palace of Westminster and the King’s Works, a post he was to hold for nearly 45 years. Replacing 52 City churches, a cathedral and commercial buildings was to preoccupy him for the next three decades. The rebuilding was funded by the Coal Tax levied on sea coal coming into London. Wren must have been physically tough, as he had survived close encounters with the highly contagious smallpox within his own family. Hooke recorded in late August 1675 that Wren’s (first) wife, Faith, had been ‘five days sick of smallpox’. She died on Sunday 3 September, barely six months of giving birth to their second son, also named Christopher. Smallpox was endemic in London. In 1736, Sir Han Sloane, Royal Physician and Secretan of the Royal Society, presented his ‘Account of inoculation as prevention against smallpox’ (published in 1755), and inoculated the ‘royal family’s children against it. Widely considered to be one of the most lethal of human pathogens smallpox was eradicated only in 1980 in spite of its spread having been controlled by vaccination developed by Edward Jenner in 1798. Wren’s royal patron, Queen Mary II, succumbed to variola hemorrhagica, a lethal form of smallpox, at the age of only 32 in 1694. She died at Hampton Court, one of the palaces enhanced by Wren for joint monarchs William III and Mary II.

The challenges met and overcome by 17th-century Londoners, living in an era of great curiosity, pragmatism and creativity, laid the foundations for the city becoming ‘the capital of the world’. Monarchs William III and Mary II, with their palaces enhanced by Wren, a great and practical architect, for joint residence. She died at Hampton Court, one of the palaces enhanced by Wren for joint monarchs William III and Mary II. The challenges met and overcome by 17th-century Londoners, living in an era of great curiosity, pragmatism and creativity, laid the foundations for the city becoming ‘the capital of the world’.

Sloane’s collection at its core, expressed the insatiable curiosity of the age.
Warp and weft

Pamela Cross traces the family story behind a group of textiles from North Sumatra

I have been obsessed by textiles from childhood, fascinated by traditional techniques, especially for textiles used as clothing and as a marker of identity, wanting to know the how, who and why.

As an adult I have built a collection of textiles mainly from ethnic minorities with distinct cultural identities in South East Asia and South West China. A group of Toba Batak textiles have a special place because of the Tobing family story associated with them, illustrating the role textiles play in their culture.

The Batak consist of six ethnic groups – descendants of the first Austronesians migrating perhaps 6000 years ago from South West China to the region around Lake Toba, in the mountainous Bukit Barisan range of North Sumatra. They had mutually unintelligible languages, dialects, different religious concepts, political systems, art, architecture and textiles. They wove cotton cloths on back-tension looms. Often a larger cloth was wrapped around the waist and a narrower cloth was worn on the shoulder. The Tobing family were of the Toba Batak culture from villages in the Silindung valley, south of Lake Toba.

Ernestina br. Hutagahing (1893–1985) wove four of the textiles in the first decade of the 20th century before she married Theodorik Lumban Tobing (1891–1972). His grandfather was Raja Amandari Tobing who, legend has it, in 1864 saved the life of the German Christian missionary Ludwig Nommensen, and gave land for the first Christian church in the region. Three later cloths were woven before 1942 by Tianur br. Hutabarat (1923–1994), the wife of Ernestina’s eldest son Tahi. Both women wove these shoulder cloths in a period of their lives before marriage. Ernestina’s weavings incorporate stripes and fine but simple traditional Batak ikat, with some supplementary weft patterning including beads threaded onto weft threads. Tianur’s ikat textiles, thought to be the earliest style of Toba Batak textiles, and three ragi hotang, important ceremonial men’s shoulder cloths.

The Tobing family came to be owned by Vera Tobing, the granddaughter of Ernestina and daughter of Tianur. Vera did not weave herself but, in the 1980s, established ‘Vera’s Ulos’, a weaving business for which female relations gave her family textiles as inspiration. As in many cultures in South East Asia there is a strong Batak tradition of using textiles in rites of passage both for wearing and gift exchange from the bride’s family, often woven by weaving professionals rather than family members. Such cloths in the group include a sugalp – the primary cloth of the Toba Batak – given by the parents of the bride, Tianur, to the groom’s parents, Ernestina and Theodorik, to unite the two families. There is another sugalp given by Tianur’s parents to her as a protective soul gift at the traditional ceremony when she was in the seventh month of her first pregnancy, carrying Vera. Other cloths include a sibolang and a namarpisoran, two of the three traditional blue surisuri cloths, as was then fashionable, focus more on supplementary weft patterning.

I had originally planned to purchase one or two cloths and assist Vera with the sale of the rest, but as I became aware of their quality and the story of the family behind them emerged with photo documentation, I felt strongly that they should be kept together, and ideally go to a museum. Over three years I managed to buy them all and I am pleased to say they have been accepted as part of a promised bequest to the British Museum.

To find out more about the Tobing textiles visit www.tribaltexiles.info/articles/Batak/Vera_Tobing_collection.htm.
Stuart Vyse explains how people in the ancient world laid hexes on those they wished to harm.

You’ve probably had the urge. There may be a co-worker who’s making things difficult for you, a friend who has betrayed you, or a relative who’s always picking fights. Just once you’d like to have the power to cause them some discomfort. Perhaps you indulge in fantasies of freak car accidents, sudden financial downturns or prison time. Alternatively, when a player on an opposing team was about to make a game-winning kick, you imagined him tripping and falling on his face. We’ve all had these thoughts. Admittedly these urges are not our finest moments, but most of us have had the occasional malevolent daydream.

Unlike today, the ancient world provided a ready outlet for these urges. Throughout the Mediterranean region from at least the 4th century BC to approximately the 8th century AD, a person who had been harmed in some way or who hoped to gain advantage in a sporting competition or legal proceeding could employ a binding curse. Although some curses or spells went so far as to call for the death of a reviled person, most simply sought to bind the target person in some way and alter their behaviour. When a figurine was employed in the casting of these spells, the targets were commonly depicted with hands and feet bound behind them.

From the beginning of human civilisation there have been a variety of people who offered services we would now consider magical or superstitious. Soothsayers, prophets and diviners used a range of methods to tell the future. Others used spells to treat disease. Some of these practices were accepted or even administered by the local elites. For example, Egyptian priests often kept books of spells and performed a number of magical functions. In China, during the Shang Dynasty (c.1560–1050 BC), members of the ruling family practised divination, asking questions of the ancestors in the afterworld by heating bone or turtle shells and interpreting the meanings of the resulting cracks. But through much of human history there have been many freewheeling mystics, magicians and shamans, and generally they have been viewed with disdain by the local elites. For example, Plato in The Republic refers to ‘beggar-priests’ who take advantage of wealthy patrons.

Binding curses did not require an expert. Anyone could execute a curse, as long as they had the necessary materials and knew how to conduct the spell. Most curses were quite specific, describing exactly what was to happen to whom, and these details were often written out. Customers who were illiterate relied on the help of literate magicians who typically supplied the materials needed and helped compose the incantation. As a result, the majority of curses were accomplished with the help of a local magician.

Some binding curses involved the use of a figurine, not unlike the dolls and puppets associated with voodoo and witchcraft. An Egyptian wax figurine dating from the Roman period (c. AD 100–200) provides several hints about how these objects were used. Human hair has been attached to the navel of the figure consistent with the contagion principle of sympathetic magic—the belief that if things were once in contact, they have a lasting connection. In addition, doll-like objects such as this were fashioned to resemble the intended target, consistent with the magical law of similarity: objects that look alike share an association. On the reverse side of the doll, a spell (unintelligible) has been written out on papyrus and inserted in the figure’s back.
but rather than injure the target, these needles are thought to be part of the incantation process, during which the user would insert a needle while speaking each section of a spell. As was quite common for magical dolls of this type, the woman is sculpted with her hands and feet tied behind her – a literal expression of the binding curse. This figurine was found in a clay pot, along with a flattened piece of lead – a curse tablet. The Greek inscription invokes the aid of several gods in an effort to gain control over the target woman. Figures like these and curse tablets were typically buried in or near the grave of someone who died young or the unexpectedly deceased to execute the curse. The spirits of the dead involved recruiting spirits of the dead suddenly. The binding curse process typically placed at the bottom of the well due to its proximity to the underworld and the gods who would carry out the hexes. Although all this magical stuff sounds a bit silly to us, when they were in use binding spells were widely believed to be effective. Like today’s superstitions, they undoubtedly benefited the user by providing an illusion of control. If your jewellery was stolen at the baths, buying a tablet and having it inscribed with a ve...
What is ‘black goo’?

**Kate Fulcher and John Taylor** throw light on an ancient Egyptian funerary ritual

Several coffins and mummy cases in the British Museum bear evidence of a mysterious ritual that took place during the funeral of the deceased. After these individuals died, they were mummified, wrapped in fine linen and sewn into a plaster and linen mummy case. This case was beautifully painted in bright colours and in some cases gilded with gold leaf over the face. At the time of the funeral, they were lowered into the coffin, and carried to the tomb. Then a warm black liquid, perhaps best described as ‘goo’, was poured over the mummy case, sometimes covering it completely, effectively cementing the case into the coffin. The lid was then placed on the coffin, and the deceased was left to journey forth to the underworld.

There are many texts that deal with spiritual preparations for death in ancient Egypt, but very few deal with the practical aspects. Knowledge about the burial practices appears to have been restricted, so one of the best ways to learn more about this ritual is to chemically analyse the black substance to find out what it was made from. We can do this in our science labs underneath the Museum, and hope that if we find out what it was made from, we can learn more about why the Egyptians used it. We have analysed more than 100 samples of black goo from twelve coffins and mummy cases, all dating to the 22nd Dynasty (c.900–730 BC). To do this, we take tiny samples, no more than a few milligrams, and conduct chemical analysis using Gas Chromatography/Mass Spectrometry, commonly referred to as GC/MS. This technique separates the individual molecules in the sample as they pass through a column. The components in the mixture emerge from the column, pass into a mass spectrometer where they are ionised, producing many ions for each molecule. The abundance of the ions is plotted according to its mass-to-charge ratio and the mass spectrum produced can be compared and identified through comparison with libraries of known molecules, the use of authentic standards and alongside published and unpublished data.

We have discovered that the black substance is made of a combination of plant oil, animal fat, tree resin, beeswax and bitumen. The exact ingredients vary from one coffin to the next, but it was always made from some of these ingredients. It is possible there were other ingredients as well, which we can no longer detect because they were volatile and had evaporated, or have degraded to undetectable levels over the 3000 years since the goo was applied.

Some of the ingredients were probably sourced from within Egypt. Plant oil, animal fats, and beeswax were all readily available. Other products we have identified only occur naturally outside Egypt, indicating that special products were imported: The two tree resins we often find in black goo come from the pistacia tree and the conifer tree. Resin is a liquid that some trees produce in response to injury, which hardens to a brittle solid.

Pistacia trees grow around the Mediterranean, from Greece to the Levant. Amphorae that contained resin from pistacia trees have been found at Amarna, the Egyptian royal residence from 1347 to 1332 BC, and in the Uluburun shipwreck (off the coast of west Turkey) from approximately the same date. Analysis of the ceramics shows that these pots were most likely made in the region around Haifa in modern Israel, which is probably also where the resin was collected. Pistacia resin was also used as incense in ancient Egypt, and as a golden varnish on painted coffins.

Conifer resin may come from a variety of trees, including pine, cedar, fir and juniper, but it is difficult to distinguish between these resins after thousands of years of degradation. The farthest south that these types of tree grow is Lebanon, which indicates that this resin was also imported into Egypt from somewhere further north. Conifer resin has also been found in jars relating to other ritual or funerary purposes.

Mummy case and coffin of Djedkhonsiu-ef-ankh, priest in the temple of Amun at Karnak. His painted and gilded mummy case was covered in a black liquid before the coffin was sealed.

Scientist Kate Fulcher analysing black goo samples in the laboratories at the British Museum.

Mummy case with gilded face (cleaned in the 1970s) containing the mummified body of a young girl called Tjayasetimu.
funerary uses, again suggesting it was a material imported for special uses.

Bitumen is an umbrella term for crude petroleum products. There are many sources known to have been used in ancient times, some liquid and some solid. Bitumen is made from living things (like plants, animals and single-celled organisms) that have died and been compressed over millions of years in geological deposits. Because these living things vary due to the local environment, bitumen also varies from place to place.

By examining the chemical signals or ‘biomarkers’ associated with these organisms, we can determine the geographical source of the bitumen. In this case, we found that the biomarkers are consistent with a Dead Sea origin. This makes sense, as ancient Greek texts refer to solid blocks of bitumen floating to the surface of the Dead Sea and people rowing out to these to hack pieces off and sell on to Egypt.

We can’t say for certain but – significantly – previous analyses of mumification balm (used on the bodies themselves) have shown it to be made of the same ingredients as the black substance that we have been studying from the outside of coffins and mummy cases. This means it was being used at different times in the burial process – during the preparation of the dead body, and then again during the funeral when it was poured over the top of the mummy case or coffin.

When someone died, they were said to become a form of the god Osiris, who is associated with death and rebirth. Osiris was called ‘the black one’ in various funerary texts and is often depicted with black skin and in the guise of a mummified body. Black is also the colour associated with the fertile Nile mud deposited by the annual flood – the source of Egypt’s agricultural wealth.

Since this fresh and fertile soil provided the ideal environment in which seeds for crops could germinate and grow, it was viewed as inherently magical and regenerative. Clay and wooden seed beds in the shape of Osiris, filled with black soil from the Nile and sown with germinating seeds, were sometimes included in the funerary equipment in New Kingdom burials. Thus we have interlinking concepts of black, Osiris and regeneration, and it could be reasoned that the practice of coating coffins in black goo links the coffins to regeneration associated with Osiris.

In addition to mummy cases, black substances were also painted on funerary statues of deities. There are several examples of this in the British Museum from the tombs of New Kingdom kings dating to around 1300 BC. Many statues from the tomb of Tutankhamun were also covered in black goo, although these examples have not been analysed. So it appears that the goo was a ritually important anointing fluid used for a range of purposes, all relating to the burial of the deceased and their transformation into Osiris.

But not everyone received the goo treatment. Evidence suggests that it was likely to have been reserved for social elites. Some of the earliest examples are from royal burials – Tutankhamun’s innermost gold coffin was cemented into the middle coffin with ‘bucketfuls’ of black goo (since cleaned off). The black substance was also available to non-royals, but the family had to be able to afford the treatment. Even within social elites not everyone used this ritual, and it seems to have been a matter of personal choice. Examples of the use of black anointing fluids are more common in the Third Intermediate Period (c.1086–664 BC), which may be related to changes in funerary practices, or because more coffins are preserved from this time.

There is more to be discovered. Most of the research so far has been into later examples; we hope that looking at examples from earlier periods will tell us how the ingredients changed over time. We also hope to make some of the black goo to enable us to think more about how it was stored, transported and poured, what it smelt like and how hot it had to be. This will help us to reimagine what a funeral might have been like in ancient Egypt.

This project is a collaboration with Margaret Serpico and is supported by the Wellcome Trust.
When Alexander came to the throne of the kingdom of Macedon in 336 BC at the age of 20, many of the peoples subdued by his father Philip took the opportunity to revolt. Among them were the inhabitants of the ancient city of Thebes in central Greece. Wishing to make an example of them Alexander seized the city. Six thousand Thebans died in the battle, another 30,000 were sold into slavery. The city was levelled down to its foundations. Alexander went on to invade the Persian Empire the next year, and before his death in 323 BC his armies had campaigned as far as Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush. But the destruction of Thebes left a bad taste. His biographer Plutarch wrote that in later years whenever things went wrong for Alexander, he blamed it on the anger of Dionysus, the god born in Thebes, and that no Theban survivor who came to Alexander with a request ever went away empty-handed. In fact, the destruction of Thebes was soon reversed. The citadel was rebuilt in 316 BC by Cassander, one of the generals who had inherited part of Alexander’s empire. Thebes was never again a great political power – few Greek cities were under the rule of first Macedonian and then Roman emperors – but it became a comfortable provincial town, with famous games dedicated to Hercules, and was visited by the emperor Hadrian among others.

It is no real mystery why Thebes was reborn. The city had a deep history. It was not just the birthplace of Dionysus, but also the city of Oedipus and the Sphinx; the story of Seven Against Thebes, celebrated by the dramatist Aeschylus, was one of the few rivals to the Tale of Troy. Classical Thebes was a major military power. Its generals led the campaigns that finally defeated Sparta. Other ancient cities were also revived after destruction. Corinth and Carthage were both levelled by Roman armies in the same year, 146 BC, their populations scattered, their monuments demolished, their treasures plundered. Almost exactly a century later both were refounded, this time as Roman colonies.
but still with temples to the same old gods, and a strong sense of their own roots in ancient history and myth. And they all survive today, Corinth and Thebes with their ancient names, while the ruins of Punic, Roman and Vandals Carthage lie under the great medieval and modern city of Tunis.

These are just the most famous cases of urban resilience. Most ancient cities were founded more than 2500 years ago during the early Iron Age, and a few, including Thebes and Athens, were already 1000 years old by then. Even today their historic centres display traces of their long histories. The district of Plaka in Athens preserves traces of Ottoman, Byzantine and classical Athens, beneath the acropolis which has been the seat of mosques, churches, temples to the Greek gods and the palace of Bronze Age kings. Walking in the centres of Rome, Lucca, Istanbul or Seville, it is easy to find oneself following an ancient street grid. It is a sign that most cities underwent gradual rebuilding and renewal, rather than catastrophic remodelling. Several factors explain the resilience of ancient Mediterranean cities. Most obvious is a sense of the past. Thebes and Carthage were entwined with myths and history, their absence was felt like an unhealed wound. For the same reason natural disasters such as tsunamis and earthquakes were answered with relief efforts. When twelve famous cities of Asia were struck by a violent earthquake in AD 17, the emperor Tiberius made them a gift of two million sestertii and remitted five years of tax revenue to help reconstruction. More mundane geographical factors also applied. Once a network of roads and ports had been established, if a key city was removed it was almost always replaced. Corinth was at the southern end of the isthmus that linked the Morea or the Peloponnesse to the rest of Greece, and its ports on the Saronic and Corinthian gulf connected the eastern and western Mediterranean. The fortress above the city, the Acrocorinth, was known as one of the ‘fetters of Greece’, a key strategic position. The site of Corinth could not remain empty for long. Then there was the logic of resources. The city of Sybaris in southern Italy grew (infamously) rich from the agricultural plains of which it controlled part. When it was destroyed by its neighbour, Croton, it opened up a very attractive niche for new settlers, in this case the city of Thurii founded in part by Athens. Fertile agricultural land was scarce in most parts of the ancient Mediterranean. Dry summers and thin soils meant that there were only so many good places to build a city. There were occasional attempts to build in bad places too, but these projects failed early on, their populations moving to more successful locations. If a city was thriving in the middle of the last millennium BC, it was generally still thriving a millennium later. Importantly, most ancient cities were small. Compared to the cities of Bronze Age Egypt or Mesopotamia or the Indus Valley, most Mediterranean cities were tiny. Even in the prosperous conditions created by Roman rule, probably three in four had populations of fewer than 5000 people, no more, in other words, than Neolithic villages created by the first farmers thousands of years before. A small number of large cities existed, mostly the capitals of empires or else major centres of trade. But most were microcities, tiny islands of urbanism scattered across rural landscapes where eighty per cent of the population lived. Small cities were healthier and more self-sufficient. More mundane geographical factors also applied. Once a network of roads and ports had been established, if a key city was removed it was almost always replaced. Corinth was at the southern end of the isthmus that linked the Morea or the Peloponnesse to the rest of Greece, and its ports on the Saronic and Corinthian gulf connected the eastern and western Mediterranean. 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Plagues ravaged port cities and the densely populated imperial capitals, where populations were already weakened by malnutrition and endemic disease. Small cities were healthier and more self-sufficient. At the end of antiquity most of the larger cities shrank in size, but they certainly did not vanish. Some became capitals for new kingdoms created by German kings and Arab caliphs. Gothic kings repaired the Coliseum in Italy. Alexandria and Damascus flourished under their new rulers. The ecological logic of small-scale urbanism was not altered by political or religious transformation. Mediterranean cities were the great survivors of the ancient world.
When and how did people first begin to write down ideas? Andrew Robinson investigates

The origins of writing

Writing is generally agreed to be among the greatest inventions in human history, perhaps the greatest invention, since it made history possible – as well as today’s digital world. When H.G. Wells published A Short History of The World in 1928, he conceived of writing as having far greater significance to civilisation as follows: ‘The command of the priest or king and his seal could go far beyond his sight and voice and could survive his death’, citing the artistically carved sealstones of early Mesopotamia impressed in clay. As if to confirm the truth of this observation, in November 1922, just after Wells’s book was published, the tomb of an unknown pharaoh who ruled more than three millennia ago was discovered in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings. The pharaoh’s name was immediately identified as Tutankhamun from its frequent appearance in roqueistic hieroglyphic inscriptions on objects in the tomb.

So where, when and how did writing come into existence? Wells hazarded the following explanation, again persuasive, if inevitably far more speculative: ‘At first writing was merely an abbreviated method of pictorial record. Even before Neolithic times men were beginning to write.’ Thus, in certain Palaeolithic cave paintings of Europe, the artists created full human figures but also abbreviated human figures with just a vertical mark and one or two transverse strokes. ‘From this to a conventional condensed picture writing was an easy transition’, Wells claimed, which occurred in both ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt in the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts, the first of which soon abandoned its pictorial quality, whereas the second frequently retained it. Furthermore, in both of these neighbouring cultures, the representation of ideas, words and syllables that could not be directly pictured was made possible through the use of ‘rebus’ (Latin for ‘by things’). For example, according to Wells the two syllables /so to speak/ of the familiar Scottish name ‘Campbell’ might be represented in rebus writing by a picture of a camp with tents beside a picture of a bell. These two developments then led to the alphabet: ‘All the true alphabets of the later world derived from a mixture of the Sumerian cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyphic [priest writing].’ Later in China there was to develop a conventionalised picture writing, but in China it never got to the alphabetical stage.

A century after Wells’s suggestive outline, how much of it is still accepted? And how much further advanced is our understanding of the origin of writing?

The answer is, broadly speaking, most of it. Writing began with pictures, then came pictography, then rebus, then from c. 3300 BC Sumerian cuneiform and soon afterwards Egyptian hieroglyphic. Finally, in the mid-second millennium in Palestine, came the first ‘Proto-Canaanite’ alphabet, influenced by the hieroglyphic signs. These stages are still widely seen by modern scholars as being essential to the development of writing, as it evolved from proto-writing, capable of limited communication like the earliest proto-cuneiform tablets and also modern airport symbols, to full writing, that is, ‘a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought’ – to quote an influential definition by Sinologist John DeFrancis in his book Visible Speech: The Divine Omniscience of Writing Systems.

However, Wells’s notion of the monogeness of writing in Mesopotamia (the ‘cradle of civilization’) closely followed by Egypt, which was favoured by most scholars until the later 20th century, has been progressively abandoned. ‘Origin’ has tended towards ‘origins’. Generally speaking, the archaeological discoveries of the past century – and the decipherments of ancient scripts such as Linear B of Crete/Greece and the Mayan glyphs of Mesoamerica – have complicated, rather than simplified, our understanding of early writing. Let us look at just three scripts: in China, South Asia and Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

China’s Neolithic pottery marks dating from 5000–4000 BC – notably those from the Banpo culture of the Yellow River valley found in 1935 – have stimulated speculation about their connection with today’s Chinese characters. The characters’ earliest clearly recognisable versions occur on the so-called ‘oracle bones’ of the Shang culture dating from c.1200 BC, accidentally discovered by Chinese scholars in Beijing in 1899. They record royal divinations in sophisticated detail. Certain Neolithic marks resemble Shang characters, but the marks generally occur in isolation, not in sequence like the characters, and the apparent resemblances may be simply coincidental, rather than definitive. Moreover, the gap in time between the Neolithic marks and the Shang...
culture – more than three millennia – seems implausibly long for the developmental stages of a sophisticated writing system: it is the same time span in which cuneiform and hieroglyphs both originated and operated as mature writing systems. At present, the most that can be said for Neolithic origins is that certain habits of drawing, patterning and combining elements in Neolithic pottery marks might have endured for many centuries before they provided some sort of basis for the first invention of writing signs’, wrote former British Museum curator Oliver Moore in his BM guide, Reading the Past: Chinese.

Current scholars therefore hold differing opinions about the origin of Shang writing and Chinese characters. Some favour a gradual development of full writing from 5000 BC – so far undetected by archaeologists – from the proto-writing of the Neolithic marks, viewing Chinese writing as wholly indigenous. But most continue to support a much later emergence of writing in the Shang culture c. 1200 BC, without being able to account for how this occurred. Might such an apparently rapid emergence be explained by the import of the basic idea of writing from Mesopotamia via some forerunner of the Silk Roads that operated between Europe and China from the end of the 1st millennium BC until modern times? Conceivably so – yet there is no clear evidence for such a long-distance link.

In South Asia, an entirely unsuspected civilisation in the Indus River valley (modern Pakistan and north-west India) dating from about 2500–1900 BC, was discovered by British and Indian archaeologists in the early 1920s. It used an exquisite script inscribed mainly on steatite sealstones, some of which are displayed in the British Museum. Unfortunately, the Indus signs have resisted an agreed decipherment for almost a century, notwithstanding dozens of highly imaginative proposals. They – along with enigmatic emblems of objects, yogic figures and animals, including ‘unicorns’, inscribed next to many of the signs – resemble those of no other contemporaneous ancient script. Probably Indus sealstones and signs were markers of personal identification like the clay cylinder seals of Mesopotamia. A stone boss on the back of scellstones with a hole drilled in it suggests that they were carried on strings around the neck of the owner.

Intriguingly, a small number of Indus seals (20 in all) have been discovered at excavations in Mesopotamia. There is also an Akkadian cuneiform cylinder seal dating from c.2100 BC (the time of Sargon) that may show a Mesopotamian ruler in negotiation with Indus merchants, according to its inscription, which refers to Meluhha – the apparent Akkadian name for the Indus region. Without doubt, the Indus civilisation traded extensively with Mesopotamia by sea during the third millennium BC. Such discoveries suggest that Mesopotamia could have played a role in the origin of the Indus script (as mooted above in the Shang culture). Yet there is no proof, and the balance of the evidence – including the utterly different appearances of cuneiform and Indus signs – favours an independent Indus origin of the script.

Our third mystery relates to Rapa Nui in the Pacific Ocean, one of the most remote inhabited islands on the planet, famous for its giant figures in stone, the moai. In the 19th century, and possibly long before, Rapa Nui also had a script, although the script does not appear on the moai. Engraved only on wooden tablets – maybe with the tooth of a shark, a flake of obsidian or a sharpened bird bone – some 25 examples of this undeciphered script are scattered around the world’s museums, including the British Museum. None of the tablets is formally dated. The script is known as Rongorongo – the same name ‘chants or recitations’ in the Rapa Nui language, referring to its former use by the islanders. Many of its fascinating glyphs are highly hieroglyphic, including a ‘bird-man’.

Is Rongorongo proto-writing or full writing? No one knows, despite more than a century of debate and claimed decipherments, as with the Indus script. Intriguingly, some of the Rongorongo glyphs closely resemble 40–50 far-distant ancient Indus signs, leading to far-fetched claims of Indus influence across oceans and millennia. Did the islanders invent Rongorongo unprompted, or did they borrow it from another place, perhaps Polynesia or Mesoamerica (home of the less ancient Maya glyphs), via trans-Pacific contacts? Or did it emerge following the first visit of European sailors on Spanish ships to Rapa Nui in 1770, after the islanders saw the sailors’ ‘alphabetical’ writing? If the independent invention of Rongorongo on isolated Rapa Nui were ever to be proved, this would enormously strengthen the argument that writing had several origins – as opposed to a single origin in Mesopotamia/Egypt.

Andrew Robinson is the author of six books on writing, scripts and decipherment. He is currently researching the origins of writing.
**Recording our past**

It is remarkable to think that many of the most important archaeological finds discovered in Britain are made not by archaeologists, but by members of the public – most by metal-detectorists. Even more incredible is the fact that to date 1.5 million public finds have been recorded by the British Museum’s Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in England, together with our colleagues in Wales at Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales.

There is no doubt that these finds have transformed our understanding of the history and archaeology of both nations, and that of Britain more generally. Some of these items are spectacular – finds of a lifetime in fact. Who can doubt the significance of the Staffordshire Hoard for bringing new light upon the ‘dark ages’ of Anglo-Saxon England, or the Ringlemere Cup (now in the British Museum) in providing new insights into ritual ceremony in the early Bronze Age. Other objects might appear less impressive – they can be bent, broken or fragmentary, and can even be relatively common – but they also offer clues about our past. As a group, they represent the whole of human existence in Britain – from the Palaeolithic, through the use of the first metals in the Bronze Age to pretty much modern times.

Importantly, finds recorded with the PAS also reflect what people were using across what is now England and Wales, from Carlisle to Dover and St Davids to Wrexham, enabling archaeologists and other researchers to understand differences between geographical areas and the transmission of ideas and culture from across Britain and beyond. A crucial point here is that while professional archaeological excavations also happen across Britain these are mostly in response to development control work, whereas public searches are much more random, therefore (counter-intuitively) giving a better impression of the nations’ archaeology.

The PAS was established in 1997 to complement changes in Treasure legislation. Since at least the 13th century (maybe well before that), finders of gold and silver were required to report these finds under the common law of Treasure Trove. This law was essentially a way of ensuring that ounceless precious metals came into royal possession, but over the centuries, as people became more aware that ancient objects had a historical value besides a bullion one, the law was revised to enable museums to acquire important finds. Among several key changes, the Treasure Act 1996 gave a clearer definition of what constitutes Treasure, also providing a process to match. The main aim was to ensure that museums across the land could acquire the most important archaeological finds for public benefit, and that finders and landowners could be satisfactorily rewarded for their discoveries.

While archaeologists broadly welcomed the new Act, concerns were expressed that it focused too much on precious metal finds (a criticism that remains), rather than those of base metal and other materials, which of course can also be archaeologically important. So pilot schemes were established for the voluntary recording of finds made by the public, including those found by metal-detector users. The Portable Antiquities Scheme proved to be a great success, not only ensuring that large numbers of finds were recorded, but also breaking down barriers between archaeologists and the metal-detecting community. In 2003, the PAS was extended across the whole of England and Wales, thanks to money from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and it is now funded (in England) through the British Museum’s grant-in-aid from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), with local partner contributions.

The front line of the Scheme in England is its network of 40 Finds Liaison Officers (FLOs), archaeologists trained to identify and record finds. They are all locally based, within museums and other heritage organisations, but directed by a central unit at the British Museum. The PAS is an essential part of the Museum’s reach across the UK through its national programme, but it is the partnership nature of the Scheme that is key to its success. The PAS not only benefits from the expertise of colleagues at the British Museum, especially in the curatorial departments and conservation, but also from the support given to it by those working in archaeology and museums across the country, particularly in those that host and manage the FLO posts.

All the finds recorded by the FLOs are logged onto the PAS database where they can be viewed by anyone, and the data is being added to every day. These records include an image of the find, description, weight, dimensions and the all-important locational information or find-spot; without a ‘good’ find-spot a find has little archaeological value. The finds can be of any material and from any period, but the vast majority are metal, and most date to the Roman and medieval periods. Obviously more post-medieval (post-1540) objects are found, but the FLOs focus on those that are considered most archaeologically important, generally handmade rather than industrially produced items unless they have a particular or local significance. Although finders can be selective in what they show for recording, our general message is that we wish to see anything they discover. It is an important part of the FLOs’ work...
Among the finds recorded during this period, a legionary eagle between two standards. This coin was found at Brabourne, near Buckingham. These objects once adorned reliquaries, processional crosses and similar, and perhaps found their way into the ground at the time of the late 6th to 7th century. It was minted by the moneyer Eadric at Llangathen, Carmarthenshire, known as the ‘bust facing/small cross’ type, based on its obverse/reverse designs. It was minted by the moneyer Eadric at Hereford in 1062–5, and was from the same die as a coin found within a hoard from the Abergele area, which was a previously unrecorded variety.

A copper-alloy early to middle Anglo-Saxon die stamp for making ‘presbische flieh’ (thin gold plates for decorating jewellery and similar) dating to the late 6th to 7th century. It was found at Whittington, Staffordshire and is decorated with an interlace design thought to be derived from an animal ornament style.

A silver penny of Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-66) found at Llangathen, Carmarthenshire, known as the ‘bust facing/small cross’ type, based on its obverse/reverse designs. It was minted by the moneyer Eadric at Hereford in 1062–5, and was from the same die as a coin found within a hoard from the Abergele area, which was a previously unrecorded variety.

A figure of a saint, manufactured in Limoges, France, in the late 12th or 13th century, which was found near Buckingham. These objects once adorned reliquaries, processional crosses and similar, and perhaps found their way into the ground at the time of the mid-16th-century Reformation.

A lead-alloy seal matrix of David, Bishop of St Andrews, found at Dursley, Gloucestershire. It shows a standing bishop, surrounded by the legend 

DAVVT DE ORA. SCIV. ANDREE. EPISCOPVS. (David, God’s Messenger, Bishop of St Andrews). It is thought the eclecistic in question is David de Bernham, who was the bishop of St Andrews between 1239 and 1253. However, it would be unusual for a bishop’s matrix to be made in lead, so perhaps this is a contemporary forgery.

A copper-alloy mount showing the white boar of Richard III, from Colyton, Devon. It is not known what the mount was from, though it is probably a belt or horse harness, but it is nicely made, as well as being gilded, silvered and enamelled. The white boar was the personal badge of Richard III (r. 1483–5) and was in use by his household from at least the 1470s. During lockdown the Scheme’s digital outreach became more important than ever, with increased output on the PAS County Pages blog platform, with volunteers, FLOs and guest authors sharing content on a range of topics, such as Roman coins, medieval ampullae and ancient metalworking. In addition to the usual social media output, the PAS started a weekly ‘Finders’ Showcase’ on Instagram, and created some National Curriculum-specific database searches for those who are home-schooling, which were shared through Twitter. The Scheme also trialled its first-ever virtual training session (on finds conservation) and several more are now planned. As part of the extension to the PAS Explorers project, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the PAS also worked with the Young Archaeologists Club (YAC) to produce a resource and activity pack to help YAC branch leaders teach children about the PAS and finds.

Since the relaxing of lockdown rules from 13 May, it has been possible for finders to go out searching again as long as they maintain social distance. This presents a challenge for the PAS, especially as its FLOs are used to meeting finders face to face, handling their discoveries and taking them in for recording. There remains a legal obligation for people to report Treasure finds, and stop if they find any archaeological sites or objects such as coins, vessels or metalwork that have been found by archaeologists. The PAS database can be accessed at https://finds.org.uk/database. The PAS explores project, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the PAS also worked with the Young Archaeologists Club (YAC) to produce a resource and activity pack to help YAC branch leaders teach children about the PAS and finds.

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Finding the fakes

St John Simpson looks at how British Museum expertise has recently helped to identify fake antiquities destined for unsuspecting collectors.

On 1 July 2019 two metal trunks were opened at Heathrow Airport after catching the attention of an eagle-eyed Border Force officer. They were consigned from Bahrain to a private UK address. The trunks were filled with what looked like objects from ancient Mesopotamia dating to between about 2000 BC and 500 BC. There were as many as 190 cuneiform tablets, figurines and cylinder seals, all packaged in bubble-wrap. Photographs were taken and sent to the British Museum, rapidly followed by the objects for closer expert identification. As readers of this magazine are aware, this is an important part of our job at the Museum, and we need to be swift in our response so that cases can be investigated carefully by law enforcement.

Every case is different and it is always exciting to open up trunks like these and call in the most appropriate curator for detailed assessment. In this instance the tablets represented a virtually complete range of types known from Mesopotamia: school texts, administrative documents, royal inscriptions, mathematical texts and others resembling official documents from temples and public buildings. It was as if the whole genre of ancient Mesopotamian writing was on display: an entire collection ready for a single buyer. But there was one glaring problem: none was ancient. Some contained real signs but the rest were a jumble of signs, some invented, others upside-down, a complete mish-mash which made no sense when read. The clay used was the same, which would be impossible for such a wide range of inscriptions from different sites and periods. If real, these tablets would simply have been sun-dried clay but these had all been fired deliberately and consistently, and to a relatively high temperature, proving that they were the product of a modern workshop with a kiln. The clay itself was also of the wrong variety. Moreover, the sizes and thicknesses did not match those of the originals – a common error of forgers who often work from photographs in books.

The cylinder seals were also made of fired clay rather than stone, and the figurines looked like ‘teasers’ for a prospective buyer interested in a vast range of ancient Mesopotamian writing. It immediately confirmed our suspicions and made us realize that there are even more trunks of fakes out there.

This is evidence of a side of the antiquities trade which is rarely discussed – there are more fakes in circulation than genuine articles. It is easier and cheaper to make copies than it is to hire dozens of workers to look for originals. Fakes are conveniently complete, whereas almost everything from antiquity has been broken, either deliberately in episodes of destruction or accidentally in the case of everyday items. There are also the simple economic laws of supply and demand. The large-scale looting of sites in Iraq which took place in the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of government, law and order after the American-led invasion in 2003, ended long ago, and today there is an efficient and armed archaeological police service which patrols sites and guards museums and archaeological projects.

Someone had therefore chosen to find another solution to fuelling the market, and that is through making crude copies and passing them off as originals. The whereabouts of the workshop is uncertain but it is within the Middle East. Faking tablets has been known for over 200 years and they began to appear even before cuneiform had been deciphered. However, this is the first time that we have seen fakes of this particular type – this is a new production line aimed at private individuals with little or no knowledge of the originals. They didn’t get far and were stopped from reaching their intended destination. The fakes will instead now be used for teaching and training purposes.

Looting causes terrible destruction to archaeological sites like this one in southern Iraq, where the illegal diggers were looking for cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals (photograph: St John Simpson).
Antiquity is dominated for most Westerners by the civilisations of Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria, followed by those of the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. Other cultures are often relegated to single associations, for example, Bactrians with their two-humped camels, Lydians with their extraordinarily wealthy King Croesus or Samaritans with Jesus Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan. ‘We call an uncultured lout a Philistine, but were the Philistines philistines, and come to that, were the Vandals vandals?’, asks Philip Matyszak, historian of ancient Rome.

His stimulating encyclopaedia of 40 ‘forgotten peoples’ from the Middle East, the Mediterranean area and parts of Europe begins with the Akkadians c.2334 BC and ends with the Hephthalites (‘White Huns’) in the 5th century AD. It brings most to life through a diverse mixture of archaeology, biography, legend and literature supplemented by a wealth of illustrations, showing works made by both them and modern artists. These include a Vandal-era mosaic in the British Museum discovered near Carthage in Tunisia, where the Vandals settled after emigrating from Europe in AD 429. It displays a horseman in front of a Roman-style villa. Whether he is a ‘barbarian’ or a Roman is impossible to tell, because the Vandals – despite their undoubted sack of imperial Rome in 455 – were in many ways highly Romanised. They spoke Latin, wore silk, built grand townhouses and churches and enjoyed chariot races, while administering their territories much like the Romans. According to current historians, far from being bent on destroying Roman culture, the Vandals respected it.

Andrew Robinson
British Museum Friends Advisory Council

Forgotten Peoples of the Ancient World, by Philip Matyszak, Thames & Hudson, £24.95.

Joyful images for difficult times

During the dark years of the Second World War Matisse was working in his studio on the Côte d’Azur, creating a series of very personal books – visual responses to the poetry of Ronsard, Charles d’Orléans, Montherlant and Baudelaire. He had started to illustrate books in the 1930s when he was 61, but in difficult times of war, ill-health and marital breakdown, this intimate medium became particularly important to him – an all-consuming passion that was to last until his final decade.

Matisse had achieved considerable fame as a painter, but making books gave him the opportunity to experiment with special print techniques such as etching, lithograph, stencil and linocut. Louise Rogers Lalaurie focuses on eight of his major artists’ books. They are arranged in chronological order, so that the reader can trace a pictorial evolution from the earliest projects – simple line drawings illustrating the poems of Mallarmé – to a closer integration of word and image and the final colourful explosion of Jazz, for which Matisse wrote the text himself. A number of the illustrations reproduced here are familiar as they had an afterlife as independent prints, but Lalaurie places them back in their original context, exploring their relationship with the texts and the way they fit together in sequence. She also reveals how they contributed to Matisse’s work on a larger scale, as he moved away from painting in his later years towards paper cut-outs and massive decorative projects such as the Rosary Chapel in Vence.

Caroline Bugler
Editor, British Museum Magazine

Matisse: The Books, by Louise Rogers Lalaurie, Thames & Hudson, £60.
**New titles**

**From the British Museum**

*Arctic: culture and climate*
edited by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers, Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum, £35 hardback
ISBN 978 0 5004 8066 3

Drawing on a wealth of objects, artworks and voices, *Arctic: culture and climate* sheds light on the history of the Circumpolar North and its Peoples and, through the lens of climate change and weather, demonstrates how cultural traditions have survived and continue to thrive.

*Tantra: enlightenment to revolution*
by Imma Ramos,
Thames & Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum, £35 hardback
ISBN 978 0 5004 8062 5

Tantra is a radical philosophy that transformed the religious, cultural and political landscape of India and beyond. Presenting sculpture, painting, prints and ritual objects from all over the world, this book offers new insights into Tantra, which continues to capture our imaginations.

*Edmund de Waal: library of exile*
by Edmund de Waal, Hartwig Fischer and Elif Shafak,
British Museum Press, £10 hardback
ISBN 978 0 7141 2347 9

Published to mark the display of *library of exile* at the British Museum, this beautifully produced new book reflects on the themes raised by de Waal’s thought-provoking installation, featuring a contribution by Booker Prize-nominated Elif Shafak and stunning new photography by Hélène Binet.

*Model of a Summer Camp*
by Tatiana Argounova-Low, Alison K. Brown and Sushma Jansari,
British Museum Press, £6 paperback
ISBN 978 0 7141 2488 9

The Model of a Summer Camp is an intriguing object from far north-eastern Russia, depicting a *yhyakh* celebration – a festival of huge cultural importance to the region. This concise book takes a detailed look at the object and its journey from Siberia to the British Museum.

*The British Museum: 101 Stickers! Ancient Greece*
by Sophie Beer,
Nosy Crow in collaboration with the British Museum, £5.99 paperback
ISBN 978 1 78800 639 2

Children can use stickers to add statues to the Acropolis, fill the busy marketplace with people and pots, and populate the ancient Olympic games with athletes. They can also curate their own museum exhibition with real-life photographic object stickers from the British Museum’s collection.

*Find Tom in Time: Ming Dynasty China*
illustrated by Fatti Burke,
Nosy Crow in collaboration with the British Museum, £12.99 hardback
ISBN 978 1 78800 657 6

This fun puzzle book, packed with child-friendly facts about Ming Dynasty China, invites young readers to find Tom, Digby the cat and over 100 objects in detailed puzzle spreads, ranging from the Emperor entertaining guests in the Forbidden City to a Kunqu actor who has lost their headdress.
One of the most intriguing couples in the British Museum are Aurelius Hermia and Aurelia Philematium (‘Little Kiss’), who lived together – man and wife – in central Rome, near where the main railway station now is, in the 1st century BC. We still know of them thanks to their wonderfully loquacious tombstone, easy to overlook on the wall of the Roman galleries, surrounded by some of the most stunning ancient Roman art to have survived. This pair takes us into the world of the ordinary people of the city: Hermia was a butcher, and both he and Philematium had started life as slaves, had later been freed, and had done well enough to afford this decent memorial to themselves.

Here we can glimpse their lives and something of their ideas, priorities and prejudices. At the centre stands the couple, looking very Roman indeed, whatever their origin. On either side are two mini-life stories, his on the left, hers on the right (probably both actually written by him as she was the first to die). You can read the words in Latin with the English translation on the Museum’s website. But two things have always struck me about it. First, it is one of those very rare insights we get into the life of Roman slaves from the slaves’ point of view, and into the relationships of care and protection that might grow up among them. Philematium’s side of the stone explains that she and Hermia had been fellow slaves of the same master, and had been freed together. He, she says, had always looked out for her, and even when she was just a child, aged seven, he had taken her on his lap (chastely, we assume!): he meant even more than a parent to her.

Second, loving couple as they are, they also shed a vivid light onto the stereotypes that Roman women were expected to live up to. My guess is that Philematium worked her fingers to the bone to make that butcher’s shop a success. But she is written up with all the Roman clichés of female modesty, chastity, obedience and submission. Her side of the text ends by summing up her life in these words: ‘He flourished in the eyes of others due to my constant and close support.’

Give them a wave when you next pass. And spare a particular thought for ‘Little Kiss’.

Mary Beard
Professor of Classics, The University of Cambridge, and British Museum Trustee

Inscribed funerary
relief of Aurelius
Hermia and Aurelia
Philematium, c.80 BC.