

# Luxury and power

## Persia to Greece


4 May – 13 August 2023  
Guide for teachers

The British  
Museum



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 BullionVault

Gilt silver rhyton with winged griffin,  
Turkey, 5th century BC.

## Using this resource

This resource is designed to support a visit to the exhibition *Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece*. It is cross-curricular and offer opportunities to use exhibition objects and information across different curriculum subjects.

This resource is accompanied by a downloadable image bank of objects displayed in the exhibition.

The images can be used to introduce students to some of the objects they will see in the exhibition. The images are grouped under curricular areas which link to the follow-up activity suggestions in this guide. They can also be used as starting points for teacher-designed activities which support the themes of the exhibition and particular topics and skills being studied in the classroom.

## Curriculum links

The exhibition can be used to support the following Key Stages 2 and 3 (upper primary/lower secondary school) curriculum areas:

### **History/The world around us/Social studies:**

Ancient Persia (present day Iran), ancient Greece, historical evidence, understanding the past.

### **Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts:**

Human artistic expression, artistic techniques and materials.

### **PSHE/ PD&MU/Health and wellbeing:**

Identity, group identity, diversity, cultural interaction.

The exhibition can be used to support the following Key Stages 4 and 5 (upper secondary school) curriculum areas:

### **Ancient History:**

The ancient world, objects as evidence, archaeology, ancient societies, cultural exchange.

### **Classical Civilisations:**

Ancient Greek world, Ancient Greek city states, ancient Persia, Greco-Persian Wars, the Hellenistic age.

## Introduction to the exhibition

When Greek soldiers captured the royal command tent of the Persian king during the Greco-Persian Wars (499–449 BC), they were confronted by luxury on an unimaginable scale. To many ancient Greek writers, the victories of the small Greek forces against the mighty Persians were a triumph of discipline and restraint over an empire weakened by decadence and excess. Featuring objects from Afghanistan to Greece, the exhibition moves beyond the ancient Greek spin to explore a more complex story about luxury as a political tool in the Middle East and southeast Europe from 550–30 BC. It explores how the royal Achaemenid court of Persia used precious objects as markers of authority, defining a style of luxury that resonated across the empire from Egypt to India. It considers how eastern luxuries were received in early democratic Athens, self-styled as Persia's arch-enemy, and how they were adapted to make them socially and politically acceptable. Finally, it explores how Alexander the Great swept aside the Persian empire to usher in a new Hellenistic age in which eastern and western styles of luxury were fused as part of an increasingly interconnected world.

# Making the most of the exhibition

## In advance

Decide on a focus for the visit and follow-up activities. Go through this with the students.

Use the image bank to familiarise students with some of the exhibition content.

Go through any exhibition activities with the students and accompanying adults beforehand.

## On the day

Encourage adults to allow students to linger at objects which interest them and to discuss what they see and share ideas as they go round. Remind students to behave calmly and politely. Photography is allowed in the exhibition and students may also take photographs of relevant objects in the Museum's permanent galleries.

## Afterwards

Use the information (written, drawn, photographed and/or discussed) gathered by the students in the exhibition and the Museum galleries as a starting point for follow-up activities back at school.

# The 'big' questions

Have a big question for students to keep in mind during their visit to the exhibition such as:

- Which did I think, and why, was the most interesting object in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about ancient Persia and the ancient Greek world that I did not know before?
- What sources of evidence does the exhibition include and how useful did I find them for learning about ancient Persia and the ancient Greek world?
- What else would I put in the exhibition to make it engaging/informative?

# Young learner labels

Watch out for the *Amazing animals and brilliant beasts!* young learner labels in the exhibition.

The Persians and Greeks created art, objects and designs in the shapes of animals and mythical beasts, just like we do today. There are two labels in each section to help the students discover some amazing creatures

# Exhibition themes

The exhibition is divided into themed sections.

## Introduction

In the 500s BC, the mighty empire of Achaemenid Iran (Persia) extended its power into Europe and clashed with an alliance of independent Greek cities. After two Persian invasions were defeated, some Greek writers suggested that Persia had been weakened by luxurious living, in contrast to Greek ideals of discipline and restraint. Ancient objects reveal a different story. The Achaemenid king used luxury to project power, defining a distinct 'court style' from Bulgaria to Pakistan. These styles influenced the Greek world, including Athens, where ostentatious displays of private wealth were shunned as anti-democratic. When Alexander the Great later invaded the Persian empire, Greek culture and Achaemenid luxury fused to create a new Hellenistic era.

## Achaemenid Iran: feasting like kings

At its greatest extent around 500 BC, the Persian empire was the largest in the world. Ruled by the Achaemenid dynasty, it was centred in modern-day Iran and stretched from Libya to Pakistan. The Achaemenid court used luxury to help establish authority over its vast territory. Provinces called 'satrapies' delivered tribute to the King, and the King, in turn, commanded loyalty by dispensing extravagant gifts. Governors (or 'satraps') collected tribute and granted largesse on a local level. Most accounts of the Persian empire were by Greek writers, who often condemned the luxury of the Achaemenid court as decadent and corrupt.

### **Athens and the luxury problem**

Rich Athenians had long used luxuries from the east as a marker of prestige. However, as the city became a democracy, displays of personal wealth were curbed to reduce social conflict. Luxury was also tainted by its association with the Achaemenid courts of the east. After the Greek-Persian wars, some Greek writers saw luxurious living as a cause of Persia's moral corruption, weakness and eventual military defeat. As Athens grew richer and more powerful, luxury goods became more widely available. To defuse their risk to the social order, Athenian citizens used luxury goods to enhance the prestige of the city rather than boosting the status of individuals. Alternatively, eastern practices and objects could be adapted or redefined to be compatible with Greek social norms.

### **Alexander's world: feasting like Persians**

As conqueror of the Achaemenid empire, Alexander III of Macedon ('the Great') became ruler of hundreds of different cultural groups across southeast Europe and west Asia. Like the Achaemenid kings before him, he used astonishing displays of luxury to project authority and to win the loyalty of local elites. Alexander's empire broke into separate kingdoms upon his death in 323 BC, ruled by his generals and their successors. These Greek-speaking dynasties followed Alexander's embrace of luxury, blending Greek styles with a wide variety of local traditions to create a distinctive Hellenistic culture (after 'Hellenising', or 'making Greek').

### **Conclusion**

The Hellenistic kingdoms were gradually overtaken by Rome in the Mediterranean and by the Parthian empire across the Middle East. The last Hellenistic ruler, Cleopatra VII of Egypt, was defeated by Rome in 31 BC and died the following year, marking a new historical epoch. Persian and Greek ideas of luxury continued to resonate. In Rome, exotic goods associated with the east bestowed status and prestige. While some Romans revelled in the show of wealth, others regarded it as excessive and decadent. This uneasy combination of desire and distrust survives in our perception of luxury today.

## **Key Stages 2 and 3 curricular opportunities**

### **History/The world around us/Social studies**

The exhibition considers the relationship between the Persian empire and the ancient Greek world between about 550 and 31 BC. It considers the series of military encounters between the two societies and the role of objects in shaping perceptions at the time and the impact this had on the material culture of each society.

Use the exhibition to find out about the Persian objects seen as signs of social and political luxury by the ancient Greeks and the impact this had on Greek objects. Find out how material culture was used as an expression of power and how it was used during and after military wars.

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Follow up activities**

- Create a timeline using objects from the exhibition. You could create a single time following the chronology of both ancient Greece and Persia or groups of students could create separate timelines for each culture. The timelines might chart military encounters or the nature of a particular type of object such as tableware.
- Look for objects which could be part of the ancient gift giving process. What objects might be given as a gift, what gives a gift its value (its form, material, level of decoration, rarity), who exchanged gifts, what did gift giving mean to the giver and the receiver?

- Research ancient Athenian 'democracy'. Create a chart comparing ancient Athenian democracy to the process of democracy in the United Kingdom today. For example, what issues are put forward for public decision, how do people find out about these issues, who can vote, how does voting take place, what happens after the vote?

### **Art and design/The arts/Expressive arts**

Both the ancient Greek world and the Persian empire produced luxury goods which represented a high-quality version of items such as clothing, jewellery and tableware used across these societies.

Use the exhibition to explore the different materials and techniques used to create ancient objects.

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Follow up activities**

- Discuss different artistic techniques and materials. Take one type of object such as a rhyton (drinking cup) and create a poster presentation showing the different shapes, sizes and materials used to create this type of object in ancient Greece and Persia. Use an example as a starting point for creating your own object, for example design a silver bowl or hand make a clay animal-head rhyton. The object could draw directly from ancient examples or could be a modern interpretation of the form.
- Create an embossed artwork using aluminum foil or craft foil. Use a blunt tool such as a pencil or biro to draw a design onto the foil. When finished, turn the foil over to reveal the embossed image. Remind students that the embossed image will be the reverse of the image drawn with the tool. This is important if the design includes text, numerals or symbols which need a specific orientation. Students could practice these elements of their design on tracing paper to explore image reversal.
- Research the use of symbols and patterns in ancient Greek and Persia art. Create a mini-dictionary of symbols/patterns with an explanation of what it means and where it might be used. Compare this with modern examples of symbols such as logos on manufactured goods or religious symbols used in the art and architecture of modern world faiths.

### **PSHE/ PD&MU/Health and wellbeing**

Identity was a key concept used to define communities in the ancient world and build up a sense of self and other, particularly in times of conflict or conquest. Identity was also important as societies developed and ways of organizing a particular aspect of society changed such as the emergence of 'democracy, as a political process in ancient Athens.

Use the exhibition to consider how both the ancient Greeks and the Persians saw themselves and how elements of this identity could be appropriated and built into the identity of another society.

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 9, 10, 11 and 12 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Follow up activities**

- Review objects from the exhibition which showed how the Persians and the Greeks were influenced by each other. Discuss whether there were objects which used a Persian material and a Greek style or vis-a-versa. Discuss why you think each culture was influenced by the other.

- Consider examples of cultural interaction in the modern world. Research examples where traditions and techniques from different cultures combine to create a unique product or where a cultural product from one society is borrowed by another culture and made their own.
- Discuss how cultural identity and its associated symbols/objects can be used to shape ideas and create a group identity. For example, how might sports clubs build a supporter base or how a hobby/interest group might seek to build a brand for its members. Discuss the advantages and possible problems with this process of creating a discrete group identity. Look for example of everyday objects which demonstrate identity such as coins, bank notes and stamps.

## Key Stages 4 and 5 curricular opportunities

### GCSE Ancient History

This exhibition can be used to support the following components of the OCR GCSE Ancient History curriculum: **Athens in the Age of Pericles, Alexander the Great and the reality of the Persian Empire.**

### Spotlight objects

See slides 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource

### Suggested activities

- Discuss how the Athenians and Persians used built structures to express their power.
- How can art and architecture help us understand how the Athenians viewed themselves? Find evidence to support your ideas.
- Find and compare examples of material culture which express ideas of kingship / leadership in Greece and Persia. What are the similarities and differences?
- Explore how dress and personal adornment were used by the Greeks and Persians to denote status.
- What messages were being conveyed through material culture such as pottery? Why use objects like drinking vessels?
- What can you find out about the reality of life in Persia from objects in this exhibition? How is this different from portrayals of the Persians by the Greeks?
- Find examples of aspects of Persian culture which were assimilated into Greek culture by Alexander the Great. Why did he choose to do this? How did ideas about the Persians change during the reign of Alexander?

### GCSE Classical Civilisation

This exhibition can be used to support the following components of the OCR GCSE Classical Civilisation curriculum: **Women in the Ancient World and War and warfare.**

### Spotlight objects

See slides 3, 8, 9 and 12 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource

### **Suggested activities**

- Explore material culture which carries images of Greek women. What do these objects suggest about how women were viewed and the characteristics that an 'ideal' Greek woman should possess? How were images of 'other' or 'barbarian' women used in contrast to represent women who should be feared.
- Discuss how the Greek - Persian wars were significant in the rise of Athens, the construction of the Acropolis in the 400s BC and the architecture and sculptural imagery of the Parthenon.
- Find evidence which can help us understand more about the Greek and Persian armies and their fighting techniques.

### **A level Ancient History**

This exhibition can be used to support the following components of the OCR A level Ancient History curriculum: **The Politics and Culture of Athens** and **The Rise of Macedon**.

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Suggested activities**

- Consider the changing relationships of the Greek states and the significance of the Greek - Persian wars in the rise of Athens and the construction of the 5th BC Acropolis and the architecture and sculptural imagery of the Parthenon.
- Consider the role of the Greek - Persian wars in crystallising images of 'foreign' people and othering them. Which aspects of 'barbarian' and Greek character are stressed in Greek visual depictions?
- Find examples in material culture of portrayals of Greeks, Macedonians and Persians. Consider the context in which the objects were created, who were they made by and who was the audience? Assess the objects and evaluate their usefulness and limitations as source material in helping us form an accurate understanding of the people and cultures they depict.
- Explore the role of luxury in the structure of the Persian court compared to Greek structures of power and why luxury was a potential challenge for the Athenians.
- Discuss and find examples of how the Macedonian kings used material culture to show legitimacy in power.

### **A level Classical Civilisation**

This exhibition can be used to support the following components of the OCR A level Classical Civilisation curriculum: **Invention of the Barbarian, Love and Relationships, Greek and Persian art and architecture**, and **Democracy and the Athenians**.

### **Invention of the Barbarian**

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Suggested activities**

- Consider how far a unified Greek 'identity' existed before the Persian invasions in the 400s BC and what effect the invasions had on the idea of a 'Greek' identity. Discuss how far the Athenians used material

culture to give themselves a distinct identity and differentiate themselves from those they saw as the 'barbarian other'.

- What does visual material culture created at the time suggest about how the Athenians felt about themselves in relation to the Persians in the 400s BC? Discuss how sculptures such as the Parthenon frieze and metopes, and objects like pottery drinking vessels, were used to invent the barbarian 'other'? Why did the Athenians want to create this image of the Persians? Find further examples in the exhibition.
- Discuss how Persian material culture, particularly the luxury of the Achaemenid court, challenged or supported the idea of the Persians being 'barbarians' to the Greeks.

## **Love and relationships**

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 3 and 9 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Suggested activities**

- Explore visual material with images of women created by Persians and Greeks from the 400 C to AD 100 BC showing women from their own culture and each other's cultures. What do these objects suggest about how women were viewed in each society and the characteristics and behaviours which were desired or unacceptable of 'model' women. Find additional evidence in written sources to support your ideas.
- How did the Athenians use material culture to develop the idea of the 'feminized' Persian? What does this tell us about thinking around the ideal qualities of men (and women)? What evidence can you find to suggest how Persian men viewed themselves and how they saw the Greeks?

## **Greek and Persian art and architecture**

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 9 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Suggested activities**

- Discuss how the Greeks and the Persians used architecture to project an image of their power. Compare the images and stories depicted in the sculpture and relief carved friezes of buildings such as the Parthenon, Nereid Monument and Persepolis. How do these visual sources compare with written source material? Consider the benefits and limitations of using either a single written or architectural / object source.
- Compare examples of Persian, Greek and Egyptian sculptures of people. What similarities and differences can you find? For example, look at pose, anatomy, design of the face and hair, clothing, symbolic objects.
- Consider the use of different materials by Greek and Persian artists and crafts people and the limitations and advantages of using these materials. Find objects in the exhibition which shows how Greek and Persian artists and crafts people influenced each other's work.

## **Democracy and the Athenians**

### **Spotlight objects**

See slides 11 and 12 in the PowerPoint image bank that accompanies this resource.

### **Suggested activities**

- Discuss how the culture of luxury from Persia appeared to challenge Athenian ideas of democracy and how the Athenian elite adapted to make luxuries from Persia seem socially and politically acceptable.

## **Image bank object information**

### **Slide 1**

Oxus Treasure: model of a chariot

500-330 BC

Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

Object number: British Museum 1897,1231.7

### **Slide 2**

(Left) Oxus Treasure: gold plaque showing a figure

500-330 BC

Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

Object number: British Museum 1897,1231.48

(Right) Pottery alabastron (container)

480 BC

Athens, Greece

Object number: British Museum 1875,0309.24

### **Slide 3**

(Left) Red-figured pottery hydria (water jar)

Puglia, Italy

400-380 BC

Object number: British Museum 1824,0501.20

(Right) Pottery mug in the shape of a Persian head

Made in Athens, Greece. Found in Italy.

410-400 BC

Object number: British Museum 1849,0620.12

### **Slide 4**

Attic pottery red figure oinochoe (wine jug) decorated on both sides with Persian soldiers

470 BC

Made in Athens, Greece. Found in Italy.

Object number: British Museum 1912,0709.1

### **Slide 5**

(Left) Gilt silver rhyton (drinking cup) with a winged griffin

Achaemenid, 500-400 BC

Altintepe, Turkey

Object number: British Museum 1897,1231.178

(Right) Pottery rhyton (drinking cup) in the shape of a ram

480-470 BC

Made in Athens, Greece. Found in Italy.

Object number: British Museum 1873,0820.272

### **Slide 6**

(Top) Nereid frieze: King Arbinas in Persian style

390-380 BC

Xanthos, Turkey

Object number: British Museum 1848,1020.62

(Bottom) Nereid frieze: King Arbinas at a banquet

390-380 BC

Xanthos, Turkey

Object number: British Museum 1848,1020.97

### **Slide 7**

(Left) Gold earrings with goat-head terminal

300-200 BC

Corfu, Greece

Object number: British Museum 1866,0504.77-78

(Right) Gold earrings inset with amazonite with suspended gold rhyton

300-50 BC

Hellenistic, findspot unknown

Object number: British Museum 1920,0513.5-6

### **Slide 8**

(Left) Greek bronze helmet

510-490 BC

Olympia, Greece

Object number: British Museum 1824,0407.32

(Top right) Persian iron spear head

600-500 BC

Armenia

Object number: British Museum 1898,0616.4

(Bottom right) Lead sling shot marked with the word Greek ΔΕΧΑΙ (catch)

400-30 BC

Athens, Greece

Object number: British Museum 1851,0507.11

### **Slide 9**

Parthenon Sculptures: Panathenaic festival procession (East frieze Block VIII)

438-432 BC

Athens, Greece

Object number: British Museum 1816,0610.24

### **Slide 10**

(Top) Silver coin of Ptolemy I Soter

Minted in Alexandria, Egypt

306 BC

Object number: British Museum 1987,0649.508

(Bottom) Silver coin of Antiochus I (Seleukid)  
281-261 BC  
Minted in Ai Khanum, Afghanistan  
Object number: British Museum 1888,1208.38

**Slide 11**

(Left) Silver ingot  
490 BC  
Made in Greece, found in Italy  
Object number: British Museum 1921,1014.205

(Right) Silver bowl with rosettes and figures of the Egyptian god Bes  
500-330 BC  
Iranian Achaemenid  
Object number: British Museum 1971,0515.1

**Slide 12**

Stela inscribed with an Athenian decree  
425-424 BC  
Athens, Greece  
Object number: British Museum 1816,0610.167