

Large print exhibition text



# **Luxury and power**

## **Persia to Greece**

Please do not remove from the exhibition

This guide provides all the exhibition text in large print.

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

**Exhibition introduction, banner to right:**

# **Luxury and power Persia to Greece**

Between 490 and 479 BC, the Persian empire tried, and failed, to conquer mainland Greece. Many Greeks explained their victory as a triumph of plain living over a 'barbarian' enemy weakened by luxury.

Ancient objects reveal a different story. The Persian court used luxury as an expression of prestige and power, with a distinctive style that was imitated and adapted across cultural borders, even influencing democratic Athens and, later, the world of Alexander the Great.

Supported by

**American Friends of the British Museum**

**BullionVault**

With additional support from

**Julie Fitzgerald and Stephen Fitzgerald AO**

**Steven Larcombe and Sonya Leydecker**

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

**Young learner label, to left:**

### **Amazing animals and brilliant beasts**

The Persians and Greeks created art, objects and designs in the shapes of animals and mythical beasts, just like we do today. Your challenge is to find them and use your imagination to immerse yourself in the animal action!

There are two labels in each section to help you discover some amazing creatures.

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

## **Large case, centre of the room**

### **Group label:**

#### **Merging styles in a connected world**

These heads were both found in Cyprus, one of the territories where Greek and Persian influences blended alongside Phoenician and other local cultures. The stone head has a Persian-style beard and ringlets but it also wears a Greek-style wreath.

The bronze head is probably the Greek god Apollo, but could also be the deity Reshef, who was worshipped in Cyprus with the same imagery.

#### **Head of a bearded male worshipper**

Limestone, Sanctuary of Apollo, Pyla, Cyprus

490–480 BC

British Museum 1873,0320.8

#### **Head of a young male worshipper or deity**

(‘the Chatsworth Apollo’)

Bronze, Sanctuary of Apollo–Reshef, Tamassos, Cyprus

460–450 BC

Ex-Duke of Devonshire Collection, donated by HM Treasury

British Museum 1958,0418.1

**Continue to next section**

**Section introduction, banner to left of section entrance:**

# **Achaemenid Persia Feasting like kings**

At its greatest extent, around 500 BC, the Persian empire was the largest in the world. Ruled by the Achaemenid kings, 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. The king, in turn, commanded loyalty by dispensing extravagant gifts. Governors (or 'satraps') collected tribute and granted largesse on a local level.

Most surviving accounts of the Persian empire were by Greek writers. Many of them condemned the luxury of the Achaemenid court as decadent and corrupt.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Map caption:**

The Persian empire in the 5th century BC

### **Quote, on wall to right:**

Treasure there was in plenty – tents full of gold and silver furniture... When Pausanias saw it, with its embroidered hangings... he could hardly believe his eyes.

Greek capture of the Persian commander's tent, 479 BC  
Herodotos (about 484–430 BC), Greek historian

### **Theme introduction:**

## **King and court**

Power in the Persian empire was expressed through astonishing displays of wealth. The king lived a life of supreme luxury, enacted in opulent ceremonies such as banquets, hunting expeditions and public audiences.

The court moved seasonally between the capital cities of Persepolis (Parsa), Babylon, Susa and Ecbatana. The king travelled with a vast camp, including a royal tent equivalent to a palace throne hall.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Case, to right**

#### **Image caption:**

In this frieze from the Apadana (royal audience hall) at Persepolis, Darius I embodies luxury and power. His feet never touch the ground and incense burners sweeten the air he breathes.

© National Museum of Iran

#### **Object label:**

#### **Darius I as pharaoh**

The Achaemenid kings adopted local titles and traditions to maintain their authority across a culturally diverse empire. This included Egypt, which they ruled from 525 to 404 BC. On this wooden door, Darius I (about 550–486 BC) is portrayed (right) as an Egyptian pharaoh, making offerings to the deities Anubis (centre) and Isis (left). The door was part of a box for storing statuettes. It was covered in gold and inlaid with coloured glass.

Wood with glass inlay, Egypt

522–486 BC

British Museum EA37496



**Object label:**

**Seal showing Darius I hunting**

A cylinder seal was rolled into wet clay to make a distinctive impression. This imprint was fixed to documents to verify their official status, extending royal commands across the empire. Here Darius I is depicted in a chariot, hunting lions. Above him hovers the god Ahuramazda, bestowing divine favour upon the king. A cuneiform inscription states 'I [am] Darius, the king' in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian.

Chalcedony

Probably found at Thebes (modern Luxor), Egypt

522–486 BC

British Museum 1835,0630.1

**Next case, to right**

**Image caption:**

Friezes at the Apadana at Persepolis show delegations from each province bringing tribute to the king. These figures were probably from Lydia in western Turkey.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Group label:**

#### **Tribute**

The objects here match gifts being carried in a tribute ceremony depicted on a relief at Persepolis: a gold armlet, a silver drinking-bowl and a jar that poured wine through its handle. The armlet was inlaid with precious stones or glass, now lost.

Luxury goods flowed into the court as tribute, including textiles, precious metal vessels, jewellery and exotic animals. Governors, officials and foreign envoys also brought gifts when they requested a royal audience.

#### **Armlet with leaping lion–griffin tips**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.116

#### **Bowl**

Silver, found at Altintepe, Turkey

500–400 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.183

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Spouted amphora**

Gilded silver, found in Kukova tumuli from Duvanli necropolis, Plovdiv region, Bulgaria

About 480 BC

National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 6137

### **Group label:**

#### **Gifts from the king**

The wealth accumulated through taxes and tribute enabled the king to reward supporters and officials with generous gifts. Inscriptions on both these objects state their royal origin. 'Artaxerxes, the Great King ... in his palace this silver bowl was made' is written around the bowl's rim.

A jar – probably for storing perfumed oil – bears the name 'Xerxes the Great King'. Its discovery in the Mausoleum of Halikarnassos, a tomb built in western Turkey more than a hundred years after Xerxes' death in 466 BC, shows how carefully it was treasured and preserved.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Bowl with a cuneiform inscription in Old Persian of Artaxerxes I**

Silver, probably found at Hamadan, Iran

465–424/3 BC

Purchased with contributions from Art Fund (as NACF),

British Museum Friends (as British Museum Society)

and Friends of the Ancient Near East

British Museum 1994,0127.1

### **Alabastron inscribed 'Xerxes, Great King' in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs**

Alabaster, Egypt, found at Halikarnassos, Turkey

485–465 BC

British Museum 1857,1220.1

## **Art Fund**

### **Label for image of Persepolis:**

#### **The Apadana at Persepolis**

Founded by Darius I in around 515 BC, Persepolis (Parsa) was a political and spiritual centre of the Persian empire. The Apadana, a monumental audience hall, was designed to reflect the power of the king. Stone reliefs depict all the nations of the empire in procession, symbolically reinforcing the divinely approved imperial order.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Although the stone architecture is now bare, traces of pigment show that it was once vibrantly coloured.

Reconstructed view of the north side  
Persepolis3D.com © K. Afhami and W. Gamble

### **Next case, to right**

#### **Image caption:**

The image carved into the pendant depicts a woman in Persian dress holding a songbird and a pomegranate flower.

#### **Group label:**

#### **Women at the court**

Royal women held considerable influence at court. They could receive delegations and accept gifts from them. This seal depicts a queen or consort being given a songbird by a serving girl. Like images of the king, she sits on a throne with her feet above the ground while incense purifies the air. The pendant shows a seated woman accepting a songbird with a flower.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Cylinder seal with female audience scene**

Chalcedony, Iraq

550–330 BC

Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales,  
AO 22359

### **Pear-shaped pendant or seal stone engraved with figures in Persian dress**

Banded stone, Turkey, probably found in Cyprus

500–330 BC

British Museum 1909,0615.2

### **Image caption:**

Engraved on the underside of the **pyxis** lid, a Persian noblewoman talks to a man in riding costume.

### **Group Label:**

#### **Discovering images of Persian women**

Although monumental reliefs at Persepolis portray an exclusively masculine world, rare images of women survive on personal objects such as cosmetic containers and jewellery. Scientific analysis at the British Museum helped to identify a scene of a Persian couple scratched lightly on the hidden underside of this silver box lid.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Two kohl (eyeliner) bottles take the form of stylised women: one clasps a drum, while the other crosses her arms. Some gold decorative adornments, which would be woven onto clothing, depict high-status women wearing crowns.

### **Silver pyxis (box) with Persian figures engraved on the underside of the lid**

Silver, found at Altintepe, Turkey

500–400 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.179

### **Kohl bottles**

Copper alloy, found in Iran

500–300 BC

British Museum 1958,1110.4; 1959,0716.2

### **Plaque in the form of a royal woman**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.38

### **Plaque showing a woman with a flower**

Gold, Iran

500–330 BC

British Museum 1972,0524.1

**Centre of the room, facing the section entrance**

**Theme introduction:**

## **The royal banquet**

Royal banquets were sumptuous events, with rituals of eating and drinking that required delicacy and grace. Exotic foods were served from across the empire. When the king was travelling, local rulers and nobility were invited to lavish feasts.

The king tended to eat alone, with the most honoured guests served close by. When dinner ended, a select few were summoned to drink with the king and perhaps discuss matters of state.

**Centre of the room, case to left**

**Group Label:**

### **Drinking as a fine art**

Drinking at a Persian royal feast was a test of courtly behaviour, requiring dexterity and skill.

Although this griffin vessel resembles a drinking horn, it is a rhyton, used to pour wine.



## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Served into the funnel at the top, the wine flowed out from a narrow spout between the griffin's forelegs. While reclined on a couch, the drinker held the rhyton high in one hand and released a stream of wine that flowed theatrically into a drinking bowl balanced on the fingertips of the other.

### **Rhyton with a winged griffin**

Silver and gold, found at Altıntepe, Turkey

500–400 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.178

### **Lobed bowl with rosettes and depiction of the Egyptian god Bes**

Silver, Achaemenid, findspot unknown

500–330 BC

British Museum 1971,0515.1

### **Quote:**

In the palace of the Persian monarch... a bill of fare for the king's lunch and dinner was engraved on a column of brass ...

Male sheep, four hundred.

Oxen, a hundred.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Fat geese, four hundred.

Three hundred turtles.

Small birds of different kinds, six hundred.

Lambs, three hundred.

Goslings, a hundred.

Thirty head of deer.

Of new milk, ten marises (93 litres).

Of garlic, a talent's weight (26 kg).

Of strong onions, half a talent's weight (13 kg).

Of cumin, an artaba (43 litres).

Of rich apple juice, the fourth of an artaba (11 litres).

Of millet seed, three talents' weight (78 kg).

Of anise flowers, three minae (1.7 kg).

Of coriander seed, the third of an artaba (14 litres).

Of parsnips, ten artabae (435 litres).

Of sweet wine, five marises (47 litres).

Of salted turnips, five marises (47 litres).

Of pickled capers, five marises (47 litres).

Of salt, ten artabae (435 litres).

Of Ethiopian cumin, six capetises (14 litres).

Of wine, five hundred marises (4,660 litres) ...

Polyaenus, Greek writer, about AD 163

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Young learner label:**

#### **A feast for the senses**

Persian royal tables were covered in gold and silver dishes. What animals can you find in this display?

### **Centre of the room, next case, to left**

#### **Object label:**

#### **Feasting on gold and silver**

Tableware at a Persian feast was made from precious metals, so that ordinary functional items became luxury objects. Distinctive Persian touches included the rosette pattern on the drinking bowl, the fluted (ribbed) body of the jug and silver beaker, and animal heads decorating the jug and ladle handles. Silver ladles like these were reportedly used by royal cup-bearers to sample small mouthfuls of wine to prove it was not poisoned.

#### **Beaker with lotus-blossom design**

Silver, found in Turkey

500–300 BC

British Museum 1958,1110.1

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Ladle with calf-head terminals**

Silver, probably found in Syria

500–300 BC

British Museum 1923,0609.2

### **Jug**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–300 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.17

### **Bowl with rosette and petal design**

Silver, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.19

### **Quote:**

Those pitiless Persian hosts!

They compelled us to drink sweet wine, wine  
without water, from gold and glass cups!

**The Acharnians**, 425 BC

Aristophanes (about 446–386 BC), Greek playwright

## **Group Label:**

### **Pouring wine in style**

Rhytons were prestigious objects in a society where feasting was a form of public display. They were often made in silver, such as this beautifully crafted example with a gazelle-shaped spout.

Local rulers used Persian-style rhytons as status symbols. The rider figure may represent a satrap or nobleman from Armenia, a Persian satrapy from 521 to 321 BC. He is dressed in Persian style with an eagle on his headdress, rosettes on his tunic, and bulls and wild goats on his saddle cloth.

### **Rhyton with a gazelle-shaped spout**

Silver and gold, possibly found at Erzurum, Turkey  
550–330 BC

Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités  
Orientales, AO 3093

### **Rhyton depicting a horse and rider**

Silver, Erebuni Fortress, Armenia  
500–300 BC

Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Museum,  
Yerevan, Armenia, inv. no. 20

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Object label:**

#### **Bowl with gold decorations**

This deep silver bowl is decorated with images cut from sheet gold. Two rows of royal figures are dressed in Persian garb. They wear crowns on their heads, bow-cases on their backs and hold a twisted ring and flower in each hand.

Silver with gold appliqués, probably made in Turkey  
500–300 BC  
British Museum 1966,0218.1

### **Image caption:**

A tomb painting from ancient Lycia (south-west Turkey) shows a local dignitary or satrap reclining at a feast with a drinking bowl balanced on his fingers.

Karaburun Fresco (reconstruction)  
About 480–470 BC  
Stolen in 2011 from a tomb near Elmali, Turkey  
ID 163679230 © Hs Bortecin | Dreamstime.com

## **Back wall**

### **Theme introduction:**

## **Between Iran and Greece**

Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) was a crossroads of Persian, Greek and local cultures. When Cyrus II ‘the Great’ (about 600–530 BC) invaded the region in 546 BC, he captured wealthy kingdoms such as Lydia and Lycia, and the Greek settlements on the Ionian coast.

Although he appointed Persian satraps as governors, some local dynasts were permitted to rule on the king’s behalf. One of these was King Arbinas of Lycia, for whom the Nereid Monument was built (displayed in Room 17 on the ground floor).

### **Image caption:**

Built for King Arbinas in Lycia (south-west Turkey), the Nereid Monument resembles a Greek temple but incorporates mixed Greek, Lycian and Persian elements.

Nereid Monument, 390–380 BC, British Museum (Room 17)

## **Object label:**

### **Drinking like a Persian**

As a king in Lycia, Arbinas combined the roles of local ruler and Persian monarch. In this frieze from the Nereid Monument, he wears Greek clothing but also has a Persian beard. He drinks like a Persian, holding a rhyton in one hand and a drinking bowl in the other. His prominent position, reclined while others stand, goes against the spirit of a Greek drinking party, where all participants are equal.

Marble, Xanthos, Turkey

390–380 BC

British Museum 1848,1020.97

## **Young learner label:**

### **Hidden hound**

The sculptor has found a place for a dog to stay out of trouble. Where is it, and what is happening around it?



**Case, to right**

**Object label:**

**Lycian drinking cup**

This silver cup is Greek in style and shape. It is decorated with a Greek myth, in which the Trojan prince Paris judged a beauty contest between the goddesses Aphrodite, Athena and Hera. The figures, however, are identified in Lycian writing, with Athena given the name of Lycian deity Maliya. Paris' eastern clothing reflects Greek conventions representing Trojans, but this may have had added significance in Persian-ruled Lycia.

Silver, gold and glass, Lycia, found at Tell el-Maskhuta, Egypt  
410–390 BC

British Museum 1962,1212.1

**Image caption:**

King Xerxes I is shaded by a parasol held by courtiers or enslaved men. This symbol of Achaemenid kingship is adopted by Arbinas on the Nereid Monument.

Relief of Xerxes I, Persepolis, Iran, 486–465 BC

© Antonio Ciufo / Alamy Stock Photo

## **Object label:**

### **Imitating the Persian king**

On this frieze from the Nereid Monument, Arbinas receives the surrender of a city. The carving is Greek in style, but Arbinas sits on a throne like a Persian monarch. Like images of the Achaemenid king, his feet are raised above the ground while a parasol protects him from the sun. His clothing is also eastern, including a Persian-style cap.

Marble, Xanthos, Turkey

390–380 BC

British Museum 1848,1020.62

## **Theme introduction:**

### **Looking good, smelling sweet**

Persian courtiers were known for their dazzling appearance. Colourful robes, gold jewellery, perfumes and carefully curled hair and beards conveyed wealth and prestige. This court style was adopted by satraps and officials across the empire.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Jewellery and dress were sometimes worn as signs of royal favour. According to the Greek writer Xenophon (about 428–354 BC), the king rewarded courtiers with customary gifts: ‘a horse with a gold bit, a necklace of gold, a gold bracelet, a gold scimitar and a Persian coat.’

**Case, to right**

**Object label:**

### **Golden chariot**

Used for transport, warfare or hunting, the chariot was associated with authority and prestige.

The figure seated in this model was a high-ranking official, perhaps a satrap, with a fur-edged robe and a torc around his neck.

Like many items here, the chariot was discovered as part of the Oxus treasure, a hoard of gold and silver found in Tajikistan in the 1870s.

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan  
500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks  
British Museum 1897,1231.7

## **Object label:**

### **Robes and riding boots**

Fur-lined riding coats worn by courtiers showed their elite status. A robe that belonged to Cyrus II, founder of the Persian empire, was placed onto each monarch's shoulders at the climax of their investiture. The king, in turn, presented robes and coats to satraps, military officers and courtiers in ceremonies held publicly at court. When approaching the king, courtiers were required to hang their coat sleeves loosely over their hands, preventing them from holding weapons. The hooded man's more practical garments include long boots and trousers, chiefly to prevent chafing on horseback.

### **Statue of a bearded man in Persian dress**

Silver and gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–300 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.1

### **Plaque left as an offering by a temple worshipper**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–300 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.48

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Statuettes of robed courtiers**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.2, 1897,1231.2.a

### **Video screen, to right**

### **Digital media label:**

### **Making a royal costume**

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, Professor of Ancient History at Cardiff University, recreated the Achaemenid court robe specifically for this exhibition. He explains the historical research behind his reconstruction.

Duration: about 90 seconds

This film has audio

## **Costume display, to right**

### **Object label:**

#### **The Achaemenid court robe**

In Achaemenid art the king was depicted wearing a voluminous 'court robe', which represented royal authority across the empire. Consisting of a huge rectangle of cloth, carefully draped and belted across the middle, this ceremonial costume was not easy to wear or move around in. Expensive dyes, rich embroidery and gold appliqués (decorations sewn onto the fabric) all signalled the king's great wealth.

Recreated costume

Lamb's wool and metallic embroidery  
with gold-painted resin appliqués

Designed by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, 2022;  
sewn by Rebecca Southall

## **Tall case, to right**

### **Group label:**

### **Ornamental weaponry**

Gold weapons were among the traditional gifts given by the king. The sheath is decorated with scenes from an aristocratic lion hunt.

#### **1 Sword sheath cover**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan  
500–400 BC

#### **2 Decorative bow-case fitting**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan  
500–330 BC  
Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks  
British Museum 1897,1231.22; 1897,1231.39

### **Group Label:**

### **Jewellery**

Persian jewellery was known for its colourful decoration. Recesses were carefully crafted to hold inlaid glass, enamel or precious stones such as lapis lazuli or carnelian. Animals were common subjects. The roaring lions on these gold arm rings have manes represented by inlaid stones.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Workshops across the empire combined Persian techniques with local themes. This crescent-shaped pectoral from Armenia features typically local (Urartian) motifs inlaid in Achaemenid style. A pair of hair ornaments from Cyprus blends a Greek spiral shape with Persian griffins.

### **3 Hair ornaments with griffin heads**

Gold-plated bronze and enamel, found in a tomb at Amathus, Cyprus

425–400 BC

Excavation funded by bequest of Emma Towner Turner

British Museum 1894,1101.452–453

### **4 Necklace with pendant**

Gold and pearl, Iran

500–330 BC

Donated by the British Institute of Persian Studies

British Museum 1969,0211.18

### **5 Pectoral with stylised birds**

Gold, found at Armavir Hill, Armenia

550–400 BC

History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan, 2287/32

### **6 Spiral armlets**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.117, 1897,1231.118, 1897,1231.125



## **Group Label:**

### **Griffins and lions**

These gold ornaments were stitched to robes or headgear, and were a form of portable wealth designed to be seen and admired, making colourful fabrics even more spectacular. They also helped courtiers, satraps or local rulers demonstrate their allegiance to imperial power. Lion and griffin imagery was closely associated with the Achaemenid court. The animals featured prominently on monuments and palace architecture, and on smaller portable luxury items including textiles, bracelets and other jewellery.

#### **7 Headdress ornament depicting a lion–griffin**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.23

#### **8 Roundel with two lions**

Gold, found in Iran

550–330 BC

British Museum 1956,0719.9

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **9 Ornament with seated lion–griffin**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

550–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.29

### **10 Fitting depicting striding lion**

Gold, found in Iran

550–330 BC

British Museum 1956,0719.6

**Continue to other side of entrance to corridor**

**Label for materials case:**

### **Frankincense**

Frankincense trees grow in arid parts of Yemen, Oman and Somalia. Cutting into the bark releases an aromatic gum that is burned as incense and was used in antiquity for medicines and perfumed oils.

According to the Greek historian Herodotos, Arabia presented 1,000 talents (about 26 tonnes) of frankincense each year to the Persian king.

This was distributed across the empire as a luxurious commodity.

**Image caption:**

Harvesting a frankincense tree

© Tor Eigeland/AramcoWorld

**Case, to right**

**Group label:**

**Burning incense**

Shovels like these were used to scoop incense resin into large silver burners often depicted in images of the Persian court. Their scent created a heady atmosphere and purified the air. Incense was used in religious ceremonies and as a disinfectant. According to the biblical book of Esther, women in the royal harem were perfumed with incense for six months as part of an intensive beauty treatment. The pottery burner displayed here was probably used in a household to burn smaller amounts of this very expensive commodity.

**Incense burner**

Pottery, found at Ur, Iraq

700–300 BC

British Museum 1928,1009.472

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

### **Incense shovel**

Silver, found at Altintepe, Turkey

500–400 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.185

### **Object label:**

#### **Perfume flask shaped like a fish**

This gold flask shaped like a fish contained perfumed oil. A ring on its side was probably for a chain that may have been used to hang it from the owner's belt or to attach a stopper. Aromatic oils were used to style a nobleman's beard and ringlets, keeping them shiny and fragrant.

The fish has been identified as a barbel, a freshwater species endemic to the Oxus river and Caspian Sea.

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1897,1231.16

**Object label:**

**Bottle for eye make-up**

Depictions of Persian men and women often emphasise dark lines painted around their eyes. This substance was kohl, a cosmetic made by grinding minerals such as stibnite and stored in glass or bronze containers. First used in Egypt, kohl was believed to protect the eyes against infection as well as being a beauty treatment.

Glass, probably made in the Caucasus  
Found in north-west Iran  
350–300 BC  
British Museum 1969,0616.1

**Video screen, to right**

**Digital media label:**

**Making purple dye**

Ancient Carthage (modern Tunisia) was one of the centres for manufacturing purple dye from the glands of murex sea snails. In this film, craftworker Mohammed Ghassen Nouria demonstrates the recently rediscovered process.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

Duration: about 1 minute

This film is silent

### **Label for materials case:**

#### **Purple dye**

The colour purple is rare in nature. One instance is found in mucus excreted by murex sea snails. Phoenician artisans in Lebanon and North Africa refined, fermented and reduced this substance into a soluble dye. The laborious process was kept secret. Purple pigment was more expensive than gold, making the dyed fabrics a symbol of power in Achaemenid Persia, but also Greece, Rome and other ancient cultures.

#### **Image caption:**

Removing dye gland from a murex snail, courtesy of Mohammed Ghassen Nour for Argaman

**Case, to right**

**Object label:**

**Imitating dyes**

Very few people could afford to wear genuine purple, but there was a lower-cost alternative. This Babylonian cuneiform tablet provides instructions to manufacture a similar colour using easily available vegetable dyes. The cheaper version may have allowed those outside the court to enjoy a small taste of imitative luxury.

Clay, Iraq

600–500 BC

British Museum 1882,0918.2757

**Group Label:**

**Artificial colouring**

These cylinder seals were made from different types of chalcedony, a translucent semi-precious stone. The first seal shows the colours that naturally occur in the stone. The other two have been artificially stained to produce a rich, marbled effect.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

The winged lion–griffin on one seal was a central emblem of Persian power. The other two show a king fighting wild beasts – a recurring image that symbolises military conquest and the preservation of order.

### **Cylinder seal**

Banded chalcedony, Iraq

500–330 BC

British Museum 1983,0101.311

### **Dyed cylinder seal**

Banded chalcedony and dye, Nimrud, Iraq

525–475 BC

British Museum N.1069

### **Dyed cylinder seal**

Banded chalcedony and dye, Hamadan, Iran

500–330 BC

British Museum 1853,0622.5

## **Centre of the room, nearest case**

### **Group Label:**

### **Emulating luxury**

The finely crafted objects displayed above, hammered from gold or silver sheet, belonged to the Achaemenid elite.



## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

With luxury tied so closely to social status, people who could not afford precious metals acquired cheaper equivalents, like those shown for comparison below. Lower-cost versions still carried a level of prestige. They allowed their owners to demonstrate their sophisticated taste or mimic elite behaviours and rituals.

### **Bull-shaped drinking horn**

Silver and gold, probably from Kahramanmaraş, Turkey

500–400 BC

British Museum 1923,1013.1

### **Bowl with flared rim**

Silver, acquired in Beirut, Lebanon

600–330 BC

British Museum 1925,1019.1

### **Embossed bowl**

Gold, found at Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan

500–330 BC

British Museum 1897,1231.18

### **Wine strainer**

Silver, acquired in Beirut, Lebanon

550 BC

British Museum 1925,1019.2

**Object label:**

**Ceramic rhyton from Armenia**

Like lions and griffins, bulls were associated with royal power. This pottery rhyton from Armenia features similar imagery to the silver and gold vessel displayed above it. While the metal drinking horn may have belonged to a high-ranking nobleman, this vessel was probably used by local elites at the edge of the Persian world, blending traditional Armenian (Urartian) rhyton forms with Achaemenid court style.

Pottery, Armavir, Armenia

600–400 BC

History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan 2889/20

**Group Label:**

**Luxury in a soldiers' camp**

Two thousand kilometres north-west of Persepolis, a Persian military garrison was stationed at Deve Hüyük in Syria. Soldiers were buried with their personal possessions, including bronze drinking vessels that resemble the gold and silver ones used by the Achaemenid court.

## Achaemenid Persia – Feasting like kings

The cemetery was excavated by T E Lawrence and Leonard Woolley in 1913, and the objects they found suggest that elite drinking styles were replicated on a humbler, less extravagant scale.

### **Lobed bowl**

Bronze, excavated at Deve Hüyük, Syria

500–330 BC

British Museum 1913,1108.33

### **Bowl with flared rim**

Bronze, excavated at Deve Hüyük, Syria

500–350 BC

British Museum 1913,1108.112

### **Wine strainer**

Bronze, Nimrud, Iraq

550–330 BC

British Museum 118462

**Continue through the corridor**

## The Greek-Persian Wars

### **The Greek-Persian wars**

**Objects in corridor space, labels left to right:**

#### **Bottle depicting a Black African man in eastern dress**

Wearing a Greek-style linen cuirass above a Persian-style trouser suit, this figure may represent an African soldier in the Persian army.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
About 480 BC  
British Museum 1875,0309.24

#### **Greek helmet, Persian arrow head and spear head**

**Greek helmet**  
Bronze, found at Olympia, Greece  
510–490 BC  
Bequeathed by Richard Payne Knight  
British Museum 1824,0407.32

**Persian arrow head**  
Bronze, found at Marathon, Greece  
About 490 BC  
British Museum 1935,0823.35

# The Greek-Persian Wars

## **Persian spear head**

Iron, Armenia

600–500 BC

Donated by Sir Charles Hercules Read

British Museum 1898,0616.4

**Section introduction, banner to left**

# **Luxury in Athens ‘Nothing in excess’**

Rich Athenians had long sought luxury for social prestige. However, as Athens developed democratic government, displays of personal wealth were curbed to contain social conflict. The emphasis on restraint echoed a famous inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: ‘Nothing in excess’.

Athens grew increasingly powerful after the Greek-Persian Wars. Luxury goods, including exotica from the east, became more widely available. Luxury flaunted to elevate personal status was considered a threat to the social order, possibly even betraying Persian sympathies. Yet luxury was acceptable when it enhanced the prestige of the city. Alternatively, Athenians found ways to adapt or redefine eastern luxuries, making them compatible with Greek culture.

Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

**Map caption:**

The Aegean Greek world in the 5th century BC

**Case, on the other side of banner**

**Group label:**

**Luxury before democracy**

Until about 500 BC, Athens was dominated by aristocratic clans. They competed for status through sports, acts of public sponsorship, or displays of wealth that included expensive clothing, perfumes and banquets.

Exotic luxuries were a sign of prestige. On this cup, Zeus’ ivory throne with lion-claw feet suggests the imagined seat of an eastern ruler. ‘Hail and drink me!’, an inscription commands.

The jug depicts a hunter whose embroidered, purple clothes reflect his high status. Hunting was an elite pursuit, demonstrating freedom from manual labour.

**Drinking cup showing the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Found at Vulci, Italy

555–550 BC

British Museum 1867,0508.962

### **Jug with hunting scene**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

Found at Rhodes, Greece

550–530 BC

British Museum 1867,0506.38

## **Back wall**

### **Theme introduction:**

## **Democracy and empire**

Competitive displays of wealth by Athens’ leading families contributed to tensions and violence. Responding to the growing social conflict, Kleisthenes (about 570–508 BC) introduced reforms in 508 BC. New laws shared political responsibility equally across all adult male citizens, but excluded women, foreign-born residents and enslaved people. This system was later termed a democracy, from **demos** (people) and **kratos** (power).



## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Democratic Athens dominated the defensive league of Greek cities against Persia. As the league became an Athenian empire, Athens grew wealthy from the tribute paid by subject cities and from its silver mines.

### Object label:

#### **Perikles and Athens’ golden age**

Perikles (about 495–429 BC) led Athens to new heights of prosperity. In 430 BC, he made a speech praising the Athenian political system, including democracy and the rule of law, for making elite lifestyles available to all citizens:

**‘The greatness of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbour ... the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of our own.’**

Marble, Roman copy of a Greek bronze statue  
of about 440–420 BC

Found at Tivoli, Italy

AD 100–200

British Museum 1805,0703.91

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Object label:**

#### **Democracy and slavery**

**‘I have been handed over to a thoroughly wicked man’**, a boy called Lesis wrote in 400–300 BC. **‘I am perishing from being whipped’**. Up to 100,000 enslaved people lived in Athens, many from Anatolia, Thrace or other parts of the Persian empire, influencing Greek understanding of foreign cultures. Carved on part of a funerary monument, probably that of a slaveowner, this boy has curled hair, a Greek convention for portraying Black African people.

Marble, Athens, Greece

About 325 BC

Donated by Algernon Percy, 4th Duke of Northumberland  
British Museum 1852,0303.1

### **Object label:**

#### **Receiving tribute**

Athens’ allies in the league against Persia were required to pay an annual tribute.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Stone slabs on the Acropolis recorded the portion of these payments (1/60th) that was due as a sacred gift to Athena, the city’s patron goddess. This inscription records a decree detailing arrangements to ensure that the tribute was paid as assessed.

Marble, Athens, Greece  
About 425 BC  
British Museum 1816,0610.167

For a full translation at  
Attic Inscriptions Online  
scan the QR code



### **Label for materials case:**

#### **Silver**

Athens was located close to lucrative silver deposits at Laurion. A rich strike in 483 BC was used to expand the navy, putting state welfare before personal gain. The fleet proved vital to the Greek victory over Persia at the battle of Salamis.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Silver was exported as ingots, and also used for local coins, stamped with the head of the goddess Athena and her symbol, the owl.

### **Fragments of silver ingots**

About 490 BC

Made in Greece, found in Italy

British Museum 1921,1014.185,188,192,196,204–6,211

### **Tetradrachms**

Minted in Athens

Bequeathed by Edward Gilbertson,

British Museum 1995.0915.1–2

British Museum 1937,1106.4–6

### **Image caption:**

Pouring molten silver

© Md. Mehedi Hasan/ZUMA Wire/Alamy Live News

### **Object label:**

#### **Persian treasure in honour of Athena**

Persian forces sacked and destroyed the temples of the Acropolis in 479 BC. Under Perikles' direction, a new version of the Parthenon was built from marble and lavishly decorated using wealth that Athens received as tribute from its allies.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

This frieze depicts part of the Panathenaic procession, which took place during an annual religious festival to honour Athena. Five maidens carry an incense burner, bowls and jugs from the Parthenon treasury.

These eastern-style artefacts may have been captured from the Persian army, kept for ritual use, and paraded each year as trophies.

Marble, block from the East frieze of the Parthenon  
Athens, Greece  
438–432 BC  
British Museum 1816,0610.24

### **Label for materials case:**

#### **Marble**

High-quality ‘Pentelic’ marble was quarried at Mount Pentelikon, ten miles from Athens. It was used to rebuild the city’s religious and civic buildings, including the Parthenon, after the Persian invasion. Containing traces of oxidised iron, the marble shines with a soft golden hue at sunrise and sunset. Other major marble sources in Greece are on the islands of Paros and Naxos.

Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

**Image caption:**

Marble quarry on Naxos

© Marc Chang Sing Pang, Flickr mchangsp

**Label for image of the Parthenon:**

**The Parthenon at Athens**

Like other Greek temples, the Parthenon's architectural elements and sculptural decoration were painted with contrasting colours. This artist's impression shows how the building might have appeared. Scientific analysis has identified natural pigments including copper carbonite and copper silicate for blue, conichalcite for green, red lead, cinnabar and iron oxide for red, and gold leaf. Beeswax served as a binder for pigments.

Reconstructed view of the Parthenon  
akg-images, reconstruction by Peter Connolly

**Object label:**

**Counting the city’s wealth**

The Parthenon was a temple and a treasury. The valuables stored there included booty from the Greek–Persian Wars, such as King Xerxes’ throne captured at the Battle of Salamis. Each year the contents were counted and recorded. This inscription documents gold and silver objects, valuing them as bullion by weights in talents and drachmai. The accumulated donations from individuals represented a vast collective offering to the goddess Athena.

Marble, Athens, Greece  
426–412 BC  
British Museum 1816,0610.282

**Quote:**

A golden dish from which lustrations are made,  
unweighed;  
121 silver dishes, weight 2 talents,  
432 drachmai [52 kg]  
3 silver drinking-horns, weight 528 drachmai  
[2.27 kg]

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

5 silver cups, weight 167 drachmai [718 g]

silver lamp, weight 38 drachmai [163 g]

7 silver dishes, weight 700 drachmai [3 kg]

gold crown, weight 33 drachmai, 3 obols [145 g] ...

For a full translation at  
Attic Inscriptions Online  
scan the QR code



**Small case, to right**

**Group label:**

### **The golden goddess**

These small objects evoke the colossal statue of Athena Parthenos (Athena the Virgin) that once stood in the Parthenon. Almost 12 metres tall and made of ivory, gold and wood, the statue embodied the city's prosperity. Like the gemstone shown here, the Parthenon statue held a figure of Nike (Victory), symbolising the triumph over the Persians.

**Intaglio (gemstone from a finger-ring)**

**with image of Athena Parthenos**

Sardonyx



## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Statuette of Athena**

Bronze

Roman, findspots unknown, AD 1–200

British Museum 1925,1017.3; 1873,0820.45

### **Image caption:**

Reconstruction of the statue of  
Athena Parthenos, Nashville Centennial Park, USA

FAL / Photograph by Dean Dixon, Sculpture by Alan LeQuire

### **Large case, to the right (around corner)**

#### **Object label:**

#### **Depicting the ‘barbarian’**

The pots in this case show how Athenian attitudes towards Persia evolved from around 510 to 380 BC. Before the Greek–Persian Wars, Persians and Scythians (such as this archer from southern Russia) were often depicted as noble warriors. Exotic dress, like his hairy, pyjama-like clothes and pointed cap, exerted particular fascination. Athenians wore loose tunics, and saw trousers and sleeves as a peculiarity of foreign people.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

Found at Vulci, Italy

about 510 BC

British Museum 1846,0512.2

### **Object label:**

#### **Defeated and on a donkey**

Athenian depictions of Persians became increasingly derisive over the course of the Greek–Persian Wars. This jug depicts two Persian soldiers in defeat. One rides side-saddle on a donkey while holding a battle-axe, the other follows with axe and whip. The figures are frustrated by the donkey’s refusal to budge. Its ears are lowered in defiance, and its tail is raised as if about to defecate.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

Found at Cerveteri (Caere), Italy

About 470 BC

British Museum 1912,0709.1

**Object label:**

**The face of humiliation**

This mug is moulded as a Persian head, identified by its hat and beard. Imagine it used at a drinking party, each swig bringing the terrified Persian face-to-face with his vanquisher – the ordinary Greek citizen. Adding further insult, the Persian is placed beneath a feminine scene.

The neck of the mug shows an Athenian woman whose possibly enslaved maid is wearing Persian clothes.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

Found in Italy

410–400 BC

British Museum 1849,0620.12

**Object label:**

**Midas as a Persian king**

Midas, king of Phrygia (in central Anatolia), is portrayed with a Persian-style beard and throne.

These details characterise him as an eastern monarch whose love of wealth leads to moral decay. Before him is a captured satyr (a wild nature spirit).

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

The satyr grants Midas the power to turn anything he touches into gold, leaving him unable to eat or drink. Midas’ donkey ears emphasise his foolishness.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
Found at Chiusi, Italy  
About 440 BC  
British Museum 1851,0416.9

### **Object label:**

#### **A procession with camel and music**

A figure in Persian dress, wearing a richly patterned suit with trousers, rides a camel, escorted by musicians and dancers. Painted onto a flask for oil several decades after peace was reached with Persia, the scene reflects changing Athenian attitudes towards eastern luxury and revelry. It may depict the Achaemenid court as it moved seasonally between capitals, a fascinating practice to the Greeks.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
Found in Basilicata, Italy  
About 410–400 BC  
British Museum 1882,0704.1

**Image caption:**

The painting of an eastern procession wraps all the way around the oil flask.

**Object label:**

**The Persian dance**

This flask for perfumed oil is shaped as a winged figure wearing trousers and holding a tambourine. The figure performs the Persian **oklasma** dance, which was part of the cult of Dionysos in Athens from the late 5th century BC. Made a century after the Greek–Persian Wars, the dancer suggests that the Persian world was no longer threatening, and could be comfortably absorbed into Athenian culture.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
About 350 BC  
British Museum 1907,0519.3

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Object label:**

#### **Griffins guarding treasure**

Persians mostly disappeared from Athenian imagery by around 350 BC, about a century after the peace treaty. Traces of them survived in the form of mythical eastern peoples such as Amazons or the gold-loving Arimaspians.

This flask depicts griffins guarding treasure from the Arimaspians. The coloured dots were probably inspired by griffins in Achaemenid jewellery inlaid with precious stones, examples of which were captured as booty.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
About 380 BC  
British Museum 1894,1204.2

### **Centre of the room, nearest case**

#### **Object label:**

#### **Drinking as equals**

As the centrepiece at a symposion, this vessel held wine mixed with water. Symposia were all-male drinking parties that were central to Greek culture.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Everyone was equal, reclining on couches arranged without any hierarchy, and the master of ceremonies was elected by the other drinkers. As Athens became wealthier, more citizens took part in what had been an elite practice.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
Probably found at Nola, Italy  
About 450–440 BC  
British Museum 1867,0508.1135

### **Object label:**

#### **Drinking as gods**

Many of the precious-metal drinking vessels captured from the Persians were kept in Athens' sacred treasuries. These trophies were not used by ordinary citizens but appear in Greek art as the property of heroes and gods. The relief shows a family worshipping a hero who has assumed divine status after his death. His Persian-style rhyton and bowl show that he is no longer in the mortal realm. This wine cup shows a drinking party, or symposion, at which the gods impossibly balance large Persian-style bowls on their fingertips.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Relief with a hero holding a rhyton**

Marble, probably made in Athens, Greece

About 330–300 BC

Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, ANMichaelis.145

### **Drinking cup depicting a symposion of the gods**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece

Found at Vulci, Italy

About 430 BC

British Museum 1847,0909.6

### **Quote:**

Three bowls of wine only do I mix for the sensible:  
one is dedicated to health...,  
the second to love and pleasure,  
the third to sleep – when this is drunk up, wise  
guests go home.

The fourth krater is ours no longer but belongs  
to hybris (outrage),  
the fifth to arguments,  
the sixth to drunken revel,  
the seventh to black eyes,  
the eighth is the bailiff's,  
the ninth belongs to bitter anger,  
and the tenth to madness that makes people  
throw things.



## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Eubulus (active about 380-355 BC), Greek playwright,  
quoted by Athenaeus, Greek writer (active AD 200)

### **Centre of the room, case on opposite side**

#### **Group Label:**

#### **Party animals**

Between 500 and 400 BC, Athens saw an influx of silver and gold Persian-style rhytons. These vessels may have inspired the production of clay mugs in the shape of animal heads. Potters explored the possibilities of these mugs in inventive ways. The large opening of a boar-head mug mimics the animal's broad neck. The bird has an ingenious double form. Placed upright, it suggests the outline of a perching bird of prey, but when held for drinking, it becomes a beaked head. The handle of the lion-head mug shows its snarling mouth to best advantage.

#### **Boar-head drinking mug**

Pottery, made in Greece, found at Capua, Italy

About 460–450 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.273

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Bird-head drinking mug**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found at Capua, Italy

About 490–470 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.274

### **Lion-head drinking mug**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found at Capua, Italy

About 500–470 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.276

## **Object label:**

### **Ram drinking mug**

Rams, associated with heroes and military prowess, were among the first animals featured in these new vessels. A drinking party scene around the neck emphasises the mug’s use in communal drinking. The mug was expertly made in two vertical halves then decorated for natural effect.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found at Capua, Italy

About 480–470 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.272

## **Object label:**

### **Drinking cup with donkey head**

Influenced by Persian and other Anatolian drinking vessels, Athenian potters experimented with animal designs, adapting them to Greek customs. While Persian-style rhytons convey power and prestige, this donkey-head drinking cup is humorous. When drained at a symposion it covered the drinker's face, turning him into an ass. Donkeys were rare in Persian art, but in Greece were closely associated with Dionysos, god of wine.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
520–500 BC  
British Museum 1876,0328.5

## **Young learner label:**

### **What a joke!**

This clay cup is expertly made to look like a donkey. Just imagine holding it up to your face so that you become the donkey!

**Object label:**

**Sphinx rhyton**

Some Athenian potters briefly experimented with making true rhytons in clay. This rare example has a short spout between the sphinx's feet.

With a handle and flat base, it was used differently to a Persian rhyton, and was probably reserved for ritual use such as at funerals. Rhytons failed to capture the Athenian imagination in the same way as animal-shaped drinking cups.

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found at Capua, Italy  
470–450 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.265

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

### **Case on opposite wall**

#### **Object label:**

#### **A dangerous appetite for fish**

Preferring expensive species of fish was a sign of luxury and elitism in democratic Athens. The Athenian playwright Aristophanes (about 446–386 BC) ridiculed this attitude in his comedy *The Wasps* (422 BC), playing on the assumption that an opulent lifestyle betrayed anti-democratic prejudices: If you are buying gurnards and don't want [smaller, cheaper] anchovies, the huckster next door exclaims, “That is a man whose kitchen savours of tyranny!”

Pottery, made in Campania, Italy  
360–330 BC  
British Museum 1867,0508.1224

#### **Group Label:**

#### **Democratic peacocks**

Eastern-style luxuries were attractive and prestigious for wealthy Athenians, but they had to be managed carefully to sidestep accusations of anti-democratic politics and possible Persian sympathies.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Peacocks arrived in Greece from Persia between 500 and 400 BC. Expensive to keep and with no practical purpose, they were the epitome of luxury. To avoid political trouble, one aristocrat publicly exhibited his birds one day each month. Luxury was more acceptable if it was presented as benefiting the community.

### **Metal attachment showing girl offering fruit to a peacock**

Bronze, probably from Zaverda (Palairos), Greece

300–275 BC

Bequeathed by James Woodhouse

British Museum 1868,0110.372

### **Gemstone engraved with a peacock on two serpents**

Sard (translucent chalcedony)

Made in Greece

450–400 BC

British Museum 1867,0507.20

## **Feminising luxury**

Athenians derided Persian men for their eyeliner and jewellery. No Athenian citizen would adorn himself with these trappings of luxury, but they were permissible for women.

## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

As women had no formal political status in democratic Athens, they could indulge in luxurious display without risk to the social order. The parasol, symbol of the Persian king’s authority, became a feminine accessory across the wider Greek world. Both of these objects depict women beneath parasols, one with a ball-and-string, the other selecting jewellery.

### **Footbath**

Pottery, made in Puglia, Italy

About 330–310 BC

British Museum 1772,0320.393

### **Water Jar**

Pottery, made in Puglia, Italy

About 400–380 BC

Bequeathed by Richard Payne Knight

British Museum 1824,0501.20

## **Young learner label:**

### **Lucky in love?**

The bird is being offered to the lady as a love token. Maybe it’s singing. Can you whistle a beautiful love song?

## **Next case, to right**

### **Object label:**

#### **Persian gold in Greek clay**

These bowls were made by the innovative Athenian potter Sotades. Their horizontal ribbing, highlighted by coloured bands, recalls the shape and perhaps the gilded decoration of Persian silverware. Although Sotades produced bowls like this in small numbers, they suggest that Athenian craftspeople and consumers were fascinated by the styles associated with Persian luxury goods.

Pottery, made and found at Athens, Greece  
Shallow bowl signed by Sotades as potter  
About 460–450 BC  
British Museum 1894,0719.2-3

### **Group Label:**

#### **Emulating luxury**

Athenian potters used clay to imitate expensive metal goods, with a black gloss finish that evokes the shine of silver and bronze. A bronze and a clay jug are placed side by side to show their almost identical shapes.



## Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

Another jug has discs on the handle to mimic rivets, necessary for metal attachments but serving no purpose in clay. Its incised decoration echoes hammered silver. Grooves on the slender jug and **pyxis** (box) resemble the metallic fluting of Persian silverware.

### **Black glaze pyxis (box) with lid**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found on Rhodes, Greece  
425–400 BC

### **Black glaze jug with imitation rivets**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found at Nola, Italy  
420–400 BC

Bequeathed by Sir William Temple

### **Black glaze jug**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece, found on Rhodes, Greece  
About 430 BC

### **Bronze jug**

Bronze, probably from Galaxidi, Greece  
About 450–400 BC

### **Black glaze jug**

Pottery, made in Athens, Greece  
About 450–400 BC

British Museum 1864,1007.1668; 1864,1007.1658;  
1856,1226.130; 1878,1012.16; 1836,0224.308

Luxury in Athens – ‘Nothing in excess’

**Video screen, to right**

**Digital media label:**

**Making black glaze pottery**

This film shows the techniques used to produce ancient black glaze ceramics. It was shot at ATTIC BLACK, the workshop of THETIS Authentics Ltd in Athens.

Duration: about 90 seconds

This film is silent

**Continue through corridor**

## Alexander's invasion of Persia

### **Alexander's invasion of Persia**

**Objects in corridor space, labels left to right:**

#### **Elephant-head lamp with figure of a soldier on the lid**

Alexander's forces first encountered Persian war elephants at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC. Afterwards, elephants were regularly incorporated into Hellenistic warfare.

**Bronze, found at Memphis, Egypt**

300–100 BC

British Museum 1922,0712.11

#### **Slingshot bullets and short sword**

**Slingshot bullets inscribed ΔEXAI ('catch') and ΖΩΙΛΟΥ ('of Zoilos')**

Lead, found at Athens, Greece; findspot unknown

400–30 BC

British Museum 1851,0507.11; 1865,0720.110

#### **Short sword (xiphos)**

Iron, found at Ialysos, Rhodes, Greece

500–200 BC

British Museum 1868,1025.98

**Section introduction, banner to left**

# **Alexander's world**

## **Feasting like Persians**

As conqueror of the Achaemenid empire, Alexander III of Macedon ('Alexander the Great') became ruler of many cultural groups across southeast Europe, the Middle East and central Asia. Like the Achaemenid kings before him, he used astonishing displays of luxury to project authority across this diverse world and to win the loyalty of local elites.

Alexander died in 323 BC and his empire broke into separate kingdoms ruled by his generals and their successors. These Greek-speaking dynasties followed Alexander's embrace of luxury, blending Greek styles with local traditions to create distinctive Hellenistic cultures (after 'Hellenising', or 'making Greek').

**Map caption:**

The Hellenistic World – Approximate extent of Alexander's empire in 323 BC

**Theme introduction, on other side of banner**

**Alexander – the last Achaemenid king?**

Although some Greek writers described Persia as weakened by luxury, Alexander (356–322 BC) defeated a highly organised, centralised empire. He adopted the existing system of provinces and initially retained some Persian governors. Embracing luxury as a sign of power, Alexander modelled his rulership on the Achaemenid kings.

He held court in the captured royal tent of his defeated Persian enemy Darius III (about 380–330 BC) and encouraged his subjects to lower themselves before him. This Persian gesture of deference was repugnant to his Greek-speaking troops.

## **Continue along back wall**

### **Object label:**

#### **Alexander the God**

Carefully managing his image, Alexander permitted only a few sculptors and painters to represent him. After visiting the oracle at Siwa Oasis in Egypt, he claimed divine status as the son of Zeus–Amon, a fusion of Greek and Egyptian deities. His idealised portrait was used for centuries by rulers seeking to identify themselves with Alexander's prowess and legitimise their rule.

Marble, Alexandria, Egypt  
300–150 BC  
British Museum 1872,0515.1

### **Case, to right**

#### **Group label:**

#### **Death in Babylon**

Alexander led his army as far as the North West Frontier of the Indian subcontinent, defeating King Porus at the Hydaspes River in modern Pakistan.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

This medallion shows Alexander on horseback, attacking a war elephant. Soon afterwards, his exhausted soldiers mutinied and forced him to turn back. Alexander died in Babylon on 11 June 323 BC. He was 32 years old. The date is confirmed by this fragment of an astronomical diary. 'The king died', it states. 'It was cloudy'.

### **Inscribed cuneiform tablet mentioning the death of Alexander**

Clay, Babylon, Iraq

323 BC

British Museum 1881,0706.403

### **Medallion with a representation of Alexander and King Porus**

Silver, findspot unknown

326–323 BC

British Museum 1887,0609.1

## **Object label:**

### **A Macedonian wreath in Turkey**

Delicately crafted from sheet gold, this circlet of oak leaves includes 15 acorns, two hidden cicadas and a bee.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

It is probably from the tomb of a local aristocrat in western Turkey, perhaps emulating a symbol of Macedonian kingship. It recalls spectacular examples from the royal tombs of Alexander the Great's father and son: Philip II (382–336 BC) and Alexander IV (323/322–309 BC).

Gold, probably from the Dardanelles region, Turkey  
About 350–300 BC  
British Museum 1908,0414.1

### **Object label:**

#### **Commemorating Alexander**

This tetradrachm ('four drachma') coin was minted after Alexander's death by Ptolemy I, one of his generals. Ptolemy (about 367–282 BC) used the cult of Alexander to bolster his own legitimacy as ruler of Egypt. The ram's horns illustrate Alexander's divine status as son of Zeus–Amon, while the elephant cap reflects his military triumphs.

Silver, minted in Alexandria, Egypt  
About 306 BC  
British Museum 1987,0649.508



## **Group Label:**

### **The Hellenistic kingdoms**

On his deathbed, Alexander reportedly left his empire 'To the strongest'. With no clear successor, his inner circle competed for power. The resulting conflict saw the emergence of the Hellenistic kingdoms, each ruled by one of Alexander's generals and their descendants. The dynasties are represented by these coins. The Kingdom of Macedon was ruled by the Antigonids, Egypt by the Ptolemies, and Mesopotamia and Persia by the Seleukids. Slightly later, the Attalid dynasty governed western Anatolia.

#### **Tetradrachm of Demetrios I (Antigonid)**

Silver, minted in Amphipolis, Greece

291–290 BC

British Museum 1914,1103.3

#### **Tetradrachm of Ptolemy I (Ptolemaic)**

Silver, minted in Alexandria, Egypt

294–282 BC

British Museum 1863,0728.1

#### **Tetradrachm of Antiochos I (Seleukid)**

Silver, minted in Ai Khanum, Afghanistan

281–261 BC

British Museum 1888,1208.38

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Tetradrachm of Eumenes I with the head of Philetairos (Attalid)**

Silver, minted in Pergamon, Turkey

263–241 BC

British Museum G.4697

### **Costume display, against back wall**

#### **Object label:**

#### **Persian riding costume**

Persian officials wore a costume that included cap, coat, tunic and trousers with enclosed feet. These garments were ideal for horse-riding. The crotch was stitched in folds for comfort and flexibility in the saddle.

Alexander liked to mix Persian and Macedonian dress. He adopted the tunic, cap and sash but not trousers, which Greeks had long regarded as the defining characteristic of the 'foreigner'.

Recreated costume

Lamb's wool, faux fur and metallic appliqués

Designed by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, 2022;

sewn by Rebecca Southall

## **Label with image of Ai Khanum:**

### **The Theatre at Ai Khanum**

The Hellenistic city of Ai Khanum was founded in Afghanistan around 290 BC by an early Seleukid king. Buildings such as a theatre (shown here) and gymnasium are typically Greek, but the city's general architectural character reflects local Central Asian traditions. This digital reconstruction is based on archaeological remains uncovered between 1965 and 1978. The site was devastated by looting in the 1990s.

3D reconstruction by Osamu Ishizawa and Guy Lecuyot, 2003  
© NHK-TAISEI, image O. Ishizawa G. Lecuyot

**Theme introduction:**

## **Shifting styles across Europe and Asia**

Carried east by Alexander's armies and the Hellenistic kingdoms, Greek customs were taken up by local elites and adapted into local cultures. New cities were built throughout the former Persian empire, including Alexandria in Egypt, Pergamon in western Turkey and Ai Khanum in Afghanistan.

The spread of the Greek language strengthened long-distance trade and communication links across the Mediterranean world and western Asia. Local rulers and nobilities developed new forms of luxury objects that merged indigenous styles and beliefs with elements from both Greek and Persian cultures.

## **Case, to right**

### **Group Label:**

#### **Two goddesses**

A female figure may portray the Greek goddess Aphrodite as patron of seafaring, with her child Eros. It was found in Byblos, a Phoenician port in modern-day Lebanon with a shrine to Aphrodite. Other goddesses were worshipped in the city with similar iconography, and the figure's identity is ultimately ambiguous.

The gold figure from Pakistan also resembles Aphrodite and Eros, but could represent different deities worshipped in the region, including the Buddhist protector Hariti.

#### **Figure of Aphrodite and a dolphin, accompanied by a sleeping Eros**

Alabaster, gold leaf and pigment

Found near Byblos, Lebanon

About 150–50 BC

British Museum 1914,1020.1

#### **Figure of a goddess and baby**

Gold, Pakistan

About AD 100–300

Funded by the Brooke Sewell Bequest

British Museum 1962,1112.1

**Object label:**

**Aphrodite–Anahita**

Aphrodite's identity is blurred again in this bronze head from the ancient Kingdom of Armenia, which could represent her or the Armenian–Persian goddess Anahita. The ambiguity may have been intentional, appearing as one deity to the local community and another to the Greek-speaking elite. Originally part of a statue, the head had inlaid eyes of precious stone or glass paste.

Bronze, Sadak, Turkey  
About 100–30 BC  
British Museum 1873,0820.1

**Object label:**

**Dionysos in Afghanistan**

The marriage of Ariadne to Dionysos, god of wine and wild frenzy, was a common subject in Greek and Roman art. This silver plate from Afghanistan presents the story in Central Asian style.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

While Greek depictions show Dionysos riding a chariot drawn by panthers, here he is a royal figure reclining on a throne-like couch, with Ariadne sitting submissively below him.

Silver and gold, Afghanistan  
AD 100–300  
British Museum 1900,0209.2

### **Object label:**

#### **An Armenian bear**

This pouring vessel resembles a species of brown bear native to the Caucasus Mountains. Although made around 100 BC, it recalls an older Armenian tradition of making animal-shaped vessels, including horses, birds and deer, that were filled through funnels on their back. These vessels were probably used to pour ritual offerings from a hole in the animal's mouth.

Pottery, Artashat, Armenia  
About 100 BC  
History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan T-48/13

**Young learner label:**

**What a character!**

The bear looks like it's got a big personality.  
What words would you use to describe it?

**Case, to right**

**Object label:**

**A Hellenistic pharaoh**

Although it looks like an ancient Egyptian pharaoh, this fragment of a calcite statue represents an early Hellenistic king. It may depict Alexander the Great or one of his immediate successors in Egypt, Ptolemy I or II. These foreign kings adopted traditional pharaonic imagery to portray themselves as legitimate rulers of Egypt.

Calcite (Egyptian alabaster), Egypt, possibly Saqqara  
About 330–283 BC  
Donated by Queen Victoria  
British Museum EA941



**Label for materials case:**

**Alabaster**

Alabaster is a soft, luminous stone prized for its subtle coloration and distinctive veining. Believed to have preservative qualities, it was used to make beautifully fashioned containers for perfumed ointments and eye makeup. In antiquity, the Greek term alabaster was applied to both calcite and gypsum minerals, which were quarried in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and along the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts.

**Fragments of calcite alabaster**

Yemen

Donated by Harry St John Bridger Philby  
British Museum 1937,0507.21,34,38

**Image caption:**

Alabaster workshop, Luxor, Egypt

© John Roper

**Quote on adjoining wall:**

A bowl of wine is the Mirror of Alexander – Look,  
it displays the state of King Darius' realm to us

Hafez of Shiraz (about 1315–90), Persian poet

**Theme introduction:**

**Jewellery and craft centres**

Several cities across the Hellenistic east emerged as trading hubs for precious materials such as gold, silver and ivory. They also housed specialist craft workshops, often under royal patronage, where these materials could be fashioned into luxury commodities.

Such objects were symbols of prestige and sometimes presented as gifts to strengthen diplomatic relationships. Their designs mix Persian, Greek, Egyptian and other motifs.

## **Large case**

### **Object label:**

#### **Styles of dress**

With their drapery, preserved colour and jewellery, the terracotta statuettes known as Tanagra figures offer rare insight into idealised Greek styles of high-class dress. Found in graves, sanctuaries and houses across the Hellenistic world, they are particularly associated with Tanagra, a city north of Athens. Their precise purpose remains a topic of debate.

Terracotta, probably from Tanagra, Greece

About 300–250 BC

British Museum 1874,0305.65

### **Object label:**

#### **The largest pearl from antiquity**

This gilded clothing pin incorporates what is claimed as the largest pearl from antiquity.

The pin resembles a miniature column, blending Greek-style acanthus leaves with four animal heads recalling the bull-head column capitals at Persepolis. It was probably made as a dedication.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

A Greek inscription on the shaft states that it was an offering to the goddess Aphrodite from the wife of a Ptolemaic courtier.

Copper alloy, gold and pearl  
Sanctuary of Paphian Aphrodite  
Kouklia (Palaipaphos), Cyprus  
About 250–100 BC  
Donated by the Cyprus Exploration Fund  
British Museum 1888,1115.2

### **Image caption:**

The object on the pin was sometimes thought to be Egyptian porcelain or enamel. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) confirms that it is a pearl. This image shows plate-like structures by which pearls grow.

### **Group Label:**

#### **The Herakles knot**

The Herakles (or reef) knot was associated with healing and matrimony. It features as the centrepiece of an ornate headband (top) and on a gold ornament from Syria (centre) with a figure of Eros, personification of love.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

Hellenistic jewellery increasingly featured colourful inlays, such as the headband's red garnets and enamelled scales.

### **Diadem with Herakles knot**

Gold, enamel and garnet, probably from Melos, Greece  
About 300–280 BC

### **Herakles knot with figure of Eros**

Gold, probably from Syria  
About 300–250 BC  
British Museum 1872,0604.815; 1884,0614.13

## **Group Label:**

### **Animal jewellery**

Animals such as bulls, lions and griffins had been associated with the Achaemenid court. They became common elements in Greek jewellery around 300 BC. The motif probably spread from the Persian world through Thrace (modern-day Bulgaria) and Macedon.

The bull-head tips of the bracelet and a gold lion–griffin pendant are Persian in style.

Crescent earrings feature wild goats with projecting horns.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

Carefully constructed of twisted gold wire or gold tubing, these creatures had eyes of glass or semi-precious stones.

### **Goat-head earrings of gold and garnet**

Probably from Corfu, Greece

About 300–200 BC

Bequeathed by James Woodhouse

British Museum 1866,0504.77–78

### **Goat-head earrings of gold**

Egypt

About 300–200 BC

British Museum 1952,1213.7–8

### **Bracelet with bull-head terminals**

Gold and garnet

About 250–200 BC

British Museum 1867,0508.541.+

### **Pendant in the form of a winged lion–griffin**

Gold

About 400–200 BC

Bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks

British Museum 1917,0601.1826

## **Group Label:**

### **Drinking-vessel jewellery**

Both of these sets of earrings are modelled on luxury drinking vessels. One pair features miniature animal-head rhytons inspired by the tableware of the Persian court. Once the premiere symbol of Achaemenid royal power, here rhytons are transformed into high-end fashion accessories. The other pair of earrings includes small amphorae connected by a slender gold chain. Earrings with elaborate pendants were popular between about 200 and 100 BC. Colour was added to their complex designs as semi-precious stones, enamel or glass.

#### **Earrings with deer-head rhyton pendants**

Gold and amazonite, findspot unknown

300–50 BC

British Museum 1920,0513.5–6

#### **Earrings with amphora (wine jar) pendants**

Gold, carnelian, emerald and pearl, probably from Egypt

300–100 BC

British Museum 1906,0411.1

**Case, to right**

**Group label:**

**Faience**

Alexandria was one of the foremost centres for crafting luxury goods, particularly using glass and faience. 'Faience' is a modern term for a traditional Egyptian material: a glass-like ceramic made from sand with a coloured glaze. Ancient Egyptians associated its distinctive lustre with the stars, the moon and the sun, symbolising rebirth.

The jug displayed here represents Eros riding a duck or goose, combining Egyptian techniques with Greek myth. The leaves of the bowl recall older Egyptian lotus designs.

**Bowl with lotus petals**

Faience, probably made in Alexandria, Egypt

About 300–100 BC

British Museum 1971,0716.2

**Vessel in the form of Eros on a duck**

Faience, probably made in Alexandria, Egypt

Probably found at Tanagra, Greece

About 300–100 BC

British Museum 1875,1110.2



### **Young learner label:**

#### **A strange choice for a ride**

This duck has such fine feathers.

Pretend to be the artist who painted them,  
practise gentle brushstrokes in the air.

### **Object label:**

#### **Marbled glass bowl**

The Hellenistic period saw significant innovations in glass-making technologies. New decorative forms of glassware emulated gold and silver vessels as luxury objects. By marbling sections of multicoloured glass, vessels could be made to resemble semi-precious stones. The purple, green and white glass of this bowl was probably intended to imitate chalcedony.

Glass, acquired in Rome, Italy

200–30 BC

Bequeathed by Felix Slade

British Museum 1870,0901.1

**Object label:**

**'Thousand flower' glass**

The 'millefiori' (thousand flower) technique fused together hundreds of multicoloured glass canes. This particularly extravagant dish incorporates gold leaf into the design.

Glass and gold, found at Canosa di Puglia, Italy  
About 225–200 BC  
Bequeathed by Felix Slade  
British Museum 1871,0518.3

**Object label:**

**Glass and gold**

The delicate process of encasing gold leaf between layers of glass was perfected between about 300 to 200 BC. Here, two nesting colourless glass bowls were heated and fused around a design of golden flowers.

Glass and gold, found at Canosa di Puglia, Italy  
About 250–200 BC  
Bequeathed by Felix Slade  
British Museum 1871,0518.2

**Object label:**

**Gold-band glass bottle**

Gold leaf was also used to make 'gold-band' glass perfume bottles. For this example, canes of coloured glass were heated and layered over a core. When the core was removed, it left a hollow vessel. The spout is made from cast glass and would have dispensed expensive liquids such as perfumed oil.

Glass and gold, Saida, Lebanon  
100–1 BC  
British Museum 1895,0602.1

**Object label:**

**Network glass**

This bowl is a rare example of a 'network' vessel, in which thin strands of blue, yellow, white and colourless glass were painstakingly twisted over a convex mould. In terms of technical skill, it is unsurpassed in antiquity.

Glass, probably from Crete  
About 150–100 BC  
British Museum 1896,0630.2

**Video screen at corner**

**Digital media label:**

**Making a Hellenistic glass bowl**

Acclaimed glassworker Iwao Matsushima 松島巖 uses ancient core-formed techniques to create an exact replica of the network glass bowl.

Duration: about 90 seconds

This film is silent

**Label for materials case:**

**Ivory**

Ivory was used to craft decorative objects and furniture inlays. It was obtained as tusks from elephants or, less commonly, hippopotamuses. The dangers involved in hunting were part of the material's allure. In Alexander's time, most elephant ivory was traded from Asia. Later, Ptolemaic kings exploited new sources in Africa, leading to overhunting and the near-extinction of elephants in parts of north-east Africa from the 3rd century BC.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Tusk of an Asian elephant**

British Museum 2018,3005.365

Acquired by the Sir Victor Sassoon Chinese Ivories Trust  
in 1955

Donated to the British Museum in 2018

### **Image caption:**

Ivory tusks seized by customs, 2015

© Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo

### **Large case, to right**

### **Group label:**

### **Ivory in the Hellenistic kingdoms**

A man carries a small elephant in this stone window grille from southern Egypt. The trade in elephants and ivory drew expeditions from Ptolemaic Egypt to the ancient Kingdom of Meroë in present-day Sudan, as well as to Eritrea and Ethiopia. Live elephants were transported north to Alexandria and beyond for warfare. Ivory was principally used to make luxury objects, such as this finely carved satyr head, which once decorated the headrest of a couch.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Furniture overlay in the form of a satyr's head**

Ivory, findspot unknown

About 200–100 BC

British Museum 1873,0820.661

### **Window grille**

Sandstone, Qasr Ibrim, Egypt

About AD 200–350

Donated by the Egypt Exploration Society

British Museum 2008,1008.2136

## **Group Label:**

### **Spice trade**

Spices and other aromatic plants were traded as luxury commodities, to be used as ingredients for oils, ointments and incense, or added to food and wine. They were frequently sold and stored in stone containers, often made from gypsum, which was thought to have preservative qualities. These bottles are each inscribed to indicate their contents: a medical oil from the 'nikiptu' plant, sweet marjoram that probably came from Arabia or the east Mediterranean, and cinnamon from south-east Asia.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Bottle with cuneiform inscription**

Alabaster, probably acquired in Iraq  
British Museum 91613

### **Bottle with Greek inscription**

Alabaster, probably acquired in Iraq  
British Museum 1888,0512,Bu.735.a

### **Bottle with Greek inscription**

Alabaster, probably acquired in Iraq  
British Museum 139490

## **Case, to right**

### **Group label:**

### **Emulating luxury**

Burying gold objects with the dead or offering them as religious dedications was a luxury that few could afford. A practical alternative was to offer cheaper materials with thin layers of applied gold (gilding). A cremation urn made from pottery includes three Persian-style lion–griffins which are gilded to evoke the prestigious gold vessels of the east. Four terracotta ornaments are also gilded to resemble gold jewellery, including a Herakles knot.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Cremation urn**

Terracotta and gold, Athens, Greece

About 330 BC

British Museum 1842,0728.842

### **Figure of Victory**

Terracotta and gold, Cyrenaica, Libya

About 400–100 BC

British Museum 1856,1112.11

### **Boat-shaped earring**

Terracotta, bronze and gold, Cyrenaica, Libya

About 400–100 BC

British Museum 1856,1001.104

### **Figure of a siren**

Terracotta and gold, Crete

About 400–100 BC

British Museum 1898,0223.6

### **Herakles knot**

Terracotta and gold, Cyrenaica, Libya

About 323–30 BC

British Museum 1856,1001.107

## **Group Label:**

### **Pottery emulating silver**

Potters emulated prestigious metal vessels in innovative ways.



## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

Although these bowls were made around the same time and similarly decorated, one is clay and the other silver. The cheaper version is a form of black glaze pottery with a characteristic lustre that recalls polished metalware. Although not as prestigious as silver, the pottery bowl allowed its owner to participate in drinking practices associated with luxurious living.

### **Black glaze bowl**

Pottery and gold, made in Athens, found at Naukratis, Egypt

About 350–300 BC

British Museum 1888,0601.749

### **Silver bowl**

Silver and gold, probably made in Egypt

About 350–275 BC

British Museum 1901,1216.1

## **Object label:**

### **Tinned bronze bowl**

Coated inside and out with a thin layer of tin, this bronze bowl would have appeared as polished silverware. The tin also prevented the bronze from tainting the flavour of acidic drinks such as wine.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

Bronze and tin, Faras, Sudan

200–100 BC

Donated by the University of Oxford

British Museum 1912,1109.440

### **Centre of the room**

#### **Theme introduction:**

## **The Panagyurishte treasure**

Nine gold drinking vessels were found near Panagyurishte, Bulgaria. This region was once known as Thrace, a bridge between Europe and Asia that fell briefly within the Persian empire, and later the Macedonian empire. Greeks had long settled in cities along the Black Sea coast of Thrace.

Superbly crafted from gold weighing 6.2 kg, the Panagyurishte treasure blends Persian, Greek, Anatolian and possibly Thracian styles. It may have been a diplomatic gift for a Thracian king, exemplifying the political role of luxury in the Hellenistic era.

**Group Label:**

**Rhytons in the shape of female heads**

Three jug-rhytons are fashioned as female heads. One wears a helmet with two lion–griffins. The others wear veils over their hair. The figures could represent the goddesses Athena (with helmet), Hera and Aphrodite. Alternatively, they may be legendary female warriors known as Amazons, or followers of the god Dionysos, called maenads. Although held by sphinx-shaped handles, the vessels were drained as rhytons through small spouts on their necks concealed as lions.

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria, no. 3202, 3201, 3200

**Image caption:**

The treasure was discovered in 1949 by the brothers Pavel, Petko and Michail Deikov when they were digging clay for bricks near Panagyurishte, Bulgaria.

© Regional Archaeological Museum, Plovdiv

## **Group Label:**

### **Ram and stag rhytons**

Although their handles are like Greek drinking mugs, these animal-head rhytons have spouts concealed in their mouths. They are decorated with scenes from Greek mythology: Dionysos with the nymph Eriope, Theseus fighting the Marathon bull, and Paris judging a beauty contest between the goddesses Aphrodite, Athena and Hera.

The figures are identified by Greek inscriptions.

#### **Ram rhyton**

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria, no. 3199

#### **Stag rhytons**

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria, no. 3198, 3197.

## **Labels on other side of the case**

### **Object label:**

#### **Gold libation bowl**

Used for banqueting or ritual libations, this bowl was held by the user's fingers in the raised centre. The concentric circles of heads have the stereotypical features used by Greeks to characterise Black African faces. An inscription gives the bowl's weight as 100 staters (about 850 g), suggesting that it represented gold bullion as much as a finely crafted object.

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria no. 3204

### **Object label:**

#### **Amphora-rhyton with two spouts**

This combination of amphora and rhyton has spouts on opposite sides of the base, which poured simultaneously into two bowls. Two rulers might have drunk from it together to seal a pact, ensuring that one didn't poison the other.

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

It is Persian in shape but decorated in Greek style. The scene probably represents the Greek myth of seven warriors attacking the city of Thebes, or perhaps a ritual Thracian fighting dance.

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria, no. 3203

### **Object label:**

#### **Goat rhyton**

This rhyton with the shape of a goat has no handle. Its user would have held it aloft in Persian style, so that wine flowed from a spout between the goat's legs. The neck is decorated with the Greek gods Hera, Artemis, Apollo and Nike (Victory). Each figure is named with a Greek inscription, possibly to help Thracian users identify them.

Gold, Panagyurishte, Bulgaria

About 350–275 BC

National Museum of History, Bulgaria no. 3196

## Alexander's world – Feasting like Persians

### **Quote:**

The greater the gifts you bestow on this man, the greater the favours you will receive at his hand.

Advice given to Greek historian Xenophon  
(about 428–354 BC) at the court of Seuthes II,  
a Thracian king

**Continue to next section**

**Section introduction, banner to right**

# **Imperial Rome**

## **Luxury after Alexander**

The Hellenistic kingdoms were gradually overtaken by the Romans 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. Her death marked the end of an era.

In Rome, exotic goods associated with the east continued to bestow status and prestige. Yet 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.



**Case, centre of the room**

**Object label:**

**Animal-head rhyton, possibly a deer**

Prestigious styles of luxury once associated with the Persian court continued to evolve across the Mediterranean. Animal-head rhytons were crafted in blown glass, a technology perfected in the Roman era. These translucent, elegant vessels were used by wealthy Romans to imitate eastern styles of drinking. In a fresco from Pompeii, a young man lifts up a rhyton or drinking horn in Persian style to pour wine directly into his mouth.

Glass, said to be from Corfu, perhaps made in Italy

AD 50–125

British Museum 1868,0110.510

**Image caption:**

Fragment of a wall painting showing a reclining figure holding a rhyton

Plaster and pigment, Pompeii, Campania, Italy

AD 50–79

British Museum 1856,1226.1623

**Quote on large banner:**

Now we are suffering the calamities of long peace.  
Luxury has settled down on us, crueller than  
fighting, avenging the world we've conquered...  
...It was filthy money that first imported  
foreign ways, and effete wealth that corrupted  
our era with its disgusting decadence.

Juvenal (about AD 55–130), Roman satirical poet

# Acknowledgements

Supported by

**American Friends of the British Museum**

**BullionVault**

With additional support from

**Julie Fitzgerald and Stephen Fitzgerald AO**

**Steven Larcombe and Sonya Leydecker**

**The Trustees of the British Museum wish to  
thank the following for their generous support  
and assistance in the creation of the exhibition**

The Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria

## **Lenders**

Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Erebuni Historical and Archaeological  
Museum-Reserve, Yerevan, Armenia

## Acknowledgements

History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

National Archaeological Institute with Museum  
at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

National Museum of History, Bulgaria

**All exhibition services unless  
otherwise credited**

British Museum

**Exhibition design**

Aaron Jones Design

**Lighting design**

DHA Designs Ltd

**Digital media design**

Clay Interactive Ltd

**Construction**

Elmwood Projects

**Digital media Hardware**

DHD Services Ltd

**Graphic production**

Praxis, Displayways

**Cost management and  
CDM advice**

Fraser Randall

**Fine art transport**

Constantine Ltd

## Acknowledgements

**With thanks to the following people for  
costume design, creation and photography**

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

Rebecca Southall

Richard Embling

Maninda Singh

Funded by the British Institute of Persian Studies

**Translation of Decree about Tribute  
and Parthenon Treasury List**

Peter Liddel and Polly Low, Attic Inscription in  
the UK (AIUK) project

**Digital media**

**Making purple dye**

Mohammed Ghassen Nour for Argaman

**Making black glaze pottery**

Directed and edited by Spiros Pantazis, scientific  
editor Dr E. Aloupi-Siotis

Film production by THETIS AUTHENTICS LTD  
and CLAYREEL

## Acknowledgements

### **Making a Hellenistic glass bowl**

Iwao Matsushima (glass artist)

Chisa Matsushima

Michiyo Matsushima

This exhibition has been made possible as a result of the Government Indemnity Scheme. The British Museum would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

As part of the Museum's efforts to lessen its environmental impact, materials, fittings and equipment are reused where possible.

The Museum aims to make its exhibitions as sustainable as possible, sharing best practice, resources and the latest innovations with other museums and galleries.

## Acknowledgements

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright owners of images and other print and digital media in the exhibition. If you are a rights holder of an item in this exhibition and are concerned that you did not grant permission to use it, please contact the Exhibitions Department at [exhibitions@britishmuseum.org](mailto:exhibitions@britishmuseum.org)

Find out more

## Find out more

### Events

Learn more about the power of luxury objects in ancient empires through a programme of events including talks, musical recitals and family activities. Visit [britishmuseum.org/luxuryandpower](https://britishmuseum.org/luxuryandpower) for details.

### Related galleries

Nereid Monument (Room 17)

Greece: Parthenon (Room 18)

Greece: Athens (Room 19)

The world of Alexander (Room 22)

Ancient Iran (Room 52), **The Rahim Irvani Gallery**

Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC (Room 55)

### Shopping

Discover a range of products inspired by the show in the exhibition shop or online at [britishmuseumshoponline.org](https://britishmuseumshoponline.org)



Find out more

## Join in online

Share your experience using  
#LuxuryAndPowerExhibition



Hear from exhibition curators and discover more about how luxuries shaped the political landscape of Europe and Asia in the first millennium BC on the British Museum blog – visit [britishmuseum.org/blog](http://britishmuseum.org/blog)

## Become a Member

If you enjoyed **Luxury and power: Persia to Greece**, become a Member and visit again for free. Membership gives you 12 months of unlimited entry to all exhibitions, including the Citi exhibition **China's hidden century** and forthcoming shows on life in the Roman army and how 1,000 years of change in Burma shaped the Myanmar of today.

Join on-site now to redeem the price of your exhibition ticket and enjoy a special discount of 20% on the purchases you make today in the Museum's shops\*. Individual Membership starts at £69\*\*, with Joint Membership and guest facilities also available.

### Member benefits include:

- Free unlimited entry to exhibitions
- Exclusive online and on-site events
- Access to the Members' Room
- **The British Museum Magazine**

## Become a Member

Ask at the Membership Desk in the Great Court.  
You can also join online at  
[britishmuseum.org/membership](http://britishmuseum.org/membership)

\*Valid on day of joining on-site only, 10% discount applies thereafter

\*\*Based on an annually recurring payment by Direct Debit

We want to hear from you

## **We want to hear from you**

Scan the QR code or follow the link to find a short survey about the exhibition that you can complete now or later.

To thank you for your help you will have the chance to enter a draw with a £50 prize.



[link.mhminsight.com/persiatogreece](https://link.mhminsight.com/persiatogreece)

If you wish to share any comments about the exhibition, please go to  
[britishmuseum.org/contact-us](https://britishmuseum.org/contact-us)

Please do not remove from the exhibition

