

# Between artefact and text

Caroline J. Tully

The exhibition *Between artefact and text: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome* in the University of Melbourne Classics and Archaeology Collections was on display at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, between 25 October 2014 and 19 April 2015. Curated by Dr Andrew Jamieson of the Centre for Classics and Archaeology in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, Faculty of Arts, the exhibition consisted of objects from the University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection and rare illustrated editions from the Baillieu Library's Rare Books Collection. It was inspired by canonical literary works from the four great ancient civilisations—Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome—that form the basis of Western culture. Divided into quadrants, the gallery space was arranged so as to lead the visitor through a range of carefully selected archaeological material that responded to the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*, Homer's *Iliad* from Greece, and Virgil's *Aeneid* from Rome. The ancient artefacts were complemented at points throughout the exhibition by beautiful examples of the featured texts, drawn from the Rare Books Collection.



The exhibition began with Mesopotamia. Themes of love and war were juxtaposed through the spatial arrangement of bronze weaponry opposite a display of female fertility figurines. The weaponry was accompanied by an excerpt from Tablet V of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,

describing the killing of the forest demon, Humbaba, by Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu.<sup>1</sup> Bronze finials in the form of a male figure subduing animals evoked Gilgamesh, who was often represented as a master of animals. Votive terracotta figurines of Ishtar, the goddess of

Previous page: Attic black-figure *lekythoi* (c. 500 BCE). Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Below: Roman glassware (1st–2nd century CE). Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



love and war, recalled the episode when Gilgamesh rejected her advances. A terracotta bull figurine evoked the Bull of Heaven that Ishtar sent to punish Gilgamesh after she had been spurned.

Egyptian funerary objects illustrated the concern of the hero of the *Tale of Sinuhe* with correct Egyptian burial. As a voluntary exile in Canaan, Sinuhe risked missing out on the essential Egyptian mortuary rituals that guaranteed that the deceased would go to the correct afterlife, unless he returned to Egypt. Two groups of *shabti* (small mummiform figurines placed in a

tomb in order to perform menial work in the afterlife) demonstrated the Egyptian mastery of faience, a type of granular glass moulded into shapes, frequently coloured bright blue. Other *shabti* on display were of limestone and wood, one of the latter featuring a textile wrap. For the existence of this rare item we can thank Egypt's hot, dry climate, which is perfect for preserving many organic materials. Durable bowls made from mottled and striated stone were used in funerary ritual and symbolised eternity. The accompanying ancient text referred to a goddess of woven mummy wrappings, Tayit,<sup>2</sup> and was

complemented by a bronze figurine of Neith, goddess of weaving and warfare, who was a precursor to the Greek goddess Athena.

Homer's *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War; hence the displays in the Greek section of the exhibition included vase paintings and sculptures depicting gods, heroes and hoplites (soldiers).<sup>3</sup> A black-figure *lekythos* (funerary oil vase) featured a procession of gods waiting to meet Athena, who featured prominently in the *Iliad* as patroness of the Greek heroes Achilles and Odysseus. A red-figure *krater* (vessel for mixing wine and water) depicting a departure scene evoked the Trojan hero Hector, while an Attic black-figure amphora is thought to depict the twins Kastor and Polydeukes (Castor and Pollux), brothers of Helen of Troy. Tiny bronze figurines of Heracles and Apollo evoked episodes in the Trojan myth: Heracles sacked Troy before the time of Homer's tale and Apollo—although the quintessential 'Greek' god—sided with the Trojans in the *Iliad*. Along with other terracotta sculptures of deities, actors and Tanagra female figurines (mould-cast statuettes produced primarily in the town of Tanagra, north of Athens), the Greek section included papyrus fragments from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, featuring

**Right:** The exhibition *Between artefact and text* was opened by Professor Christopher Wallace-Crabbe of the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.



**Below: Left:** William Cowper (trans.), *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer* (vol. 1), London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791. Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. **Centre:** Attic black-figure *oinochoe* with scene of running warrior bearing shield and glancing backwards (mid-5th century BCE). Accession no. 2009.0234, gift of David and Marion Adams, University of Melbourne Art Collection. **Right:** Attic black-figure *oinochoe*, Greece, c. 500–475 BCE. Accession no. 1985.0115, purchased 1985, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

other famous Greek texts such as the first book of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>4</sup>

Virgil's *Aeneid* tells of the Trojan hero Aeneas, son of Venus and ancestor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and his journey from the smouldering ruins of Troy to Italy to found the city of Rome. In the exhibition a marble sculpture of Cybele, a major goddess from Asia

Minor who was brought to Rome in the form of a meteor, referred to her patronage of Aeneas. A Roman coin of Julius Caesar depicted Aeneas carrying the *palladium*, a talismanic statue of Athena that fell from the sky and which would ensure the future safety of Rome. Coins of Augustus also evoked a Trojan connection: as heir to Caesar, Augustus could trace his lineage back

to Aeneas, Venus and Troy. A bronze figure of Harpocrates, the Hellenised version of the Egyptian infant Horus, was accompanied by an excerpt from Virgil's *Aeneid* describing Cleopatra VII, famously defeated by Augustus at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.<sup>5</sup> Iridescent Roman glassware provided a practical counterpoint to the political usurpation of the Trojan myth, bringing us back down to





Left: Egyptian artefacts, including canopic jar lids (c. 1570–1070 BCE), statue of Sekhmet (700–500 BCE), and wood and faience *shabti* figurines (c. 1570–1070 BCE). Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Below: A young museum visitor looks at an Egyptian early dynastic alabaster bowl (c. 2920–2575 BCE).

earth and day-to-day activities such as dining and drinking, and using cosmetics and medicines. Glass was not considered a mundane material, however: Virgil likened its appearance to water and in his *Georgics* described sea goddesses sitting on ‘glassy chairs’.

The combination of ancient texts and objects in this exhibition perfectly illustrated the two main types of primary source through which we study the ancient world. While ancient literature provides insight into what people thought, material culture is the physical record of what they did. The pairing of familiar texts from Classical and Near Eastern civilisations with artefacts that often specifically illustrate the content of those texts broadened the literary lens through which these ancient societies are often exclusively viewed. The inclusion of rare editions of the ancient texts from the Rare Books Collection provided a reminder of the continuous reception of the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* since antiquity, and our comparatively more recent acquaintance with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Tale of Sinuhe*. Aesthetically, these rare editions complemented the accompanying ancient sculptures, ceramics and papyri, their frontispieces often being as decorative as—if not more so—than the ancient objects.



*Beyond artefact and text* was both an illuminating introduction to ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome for the general gallery visitor, as well as an educational resource for students of the University of Melbourne, enhancing in particular the Ancient World Studies courses taught in the Centre for Classics and Archaeology. The objects and texts displayed in this exhibition exemplify the remit of the Classics and Archaeology Gallery at the Potter and its dual function: to present its collection to the public and to serve as an educational resource for students of the ancient world.

Caroline J. Tully is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne and has a Bachelor of Fine Art from Monash University. Her current research focuses on late Bronze Age and early Iron Age cultic traditions in the ancient Aegean, eastern Mediterranean and Egypt. Caroline also has strong interests in reception studies and museology.

The Classics and Archaeology Collection is part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection, managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art (see <http://vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au/classics/>). Items from Rare Books at the University of Melbourne can be requested for viewing in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library (see [www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/](http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/)).

- 1 Frank Laurence Lucas, with engravings by Dorothea Braby, *Gilgamesh, King of Erech*, London: Golden Cockerel Press, 1948. Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 2 John L. Foster (trans.), *Ancient Egyptian literature: An anthology*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.
- 3 Texts in this section included William Cowper (trans.), *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer* (vol. 1), London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791 (gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne) and Alexander Pope (trans.), *The Iliad of Homer* (vol. 1/2), 1805, London, printed for F.J. du Roveray by T. Bensley, 1805 (Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne).
- 4 Oxyrhynchus (Egypt), Papyrus with Greek inscription, c. 150 CE. Accession no. 1922.0003 (P. Oxy 1620), gift of the Egypt Exploration Society 1922, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 5 Christopher Pitt (trans.), *The works of Virgil in English verse*, London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1763. Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.