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# Rosetta

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**Exhibition Review,  
Troy: Myth and Reality,  
British Museum,  
21<sup>st</sup> November 2019 – 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020.**

*Chrysanthi Chrysanthou*

The Trojan War is not just another ancient Greek myth; but rather a timeless story with multidimensional patterns that still influences the world. It is not only a war story with gods and heroes, but also a story of peace, suffering, loss and love. Characters such as Achilles, Priam, Helen, and Astyanax can mirror the emotional state and fate of individuals of any period in as much as Troy can be any city that was, is or will be under war.

The Troy exhibition began with an almost empty, dark room where a sixth-century black-figure amphora (storage jar) stood out to welcome and predispose the attendees for the upcoming journey into time. The vase painting represented Achilles slaying the Amazon queen Penthesilea, who fought on the side of the Trojans during the war. However, this particular episode is not described in the Iliad. There is very little literary evidence of this episode, such as in the lost Aithiopsis which was part of the wider Trojan Epic Cycle. There are also later references and embellishments of the story. However, this important information was omitted from the exhibition. It did not provide the wider literary context that would help a non-academic audience realize that the myth was extended into a series of works that formed a complete story. Nevertheless, this depiction provided a great start within the Trojan journey since it offered some of the fundamental elements of the Trojan War such as death, pain, bravery and love.

Progressing into the next room, this part of the exhibition included various ancient media such as pottery, bronze artefacts and marble reliefs. The exploration of the myth began with an enormous and impressive late sixth-century black-figure dinos (wine-bowl). The dinos' painting depicted the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis, which is considered the first fruit of the Trojan storyline. This is another episode that is not

described in the Iliad but in the Cypria, another work of the Trojan Epic Cycle, like Aithiopsis. Once again, there is a lack of information that would help the audience to link the literary and archaeological evidence.

The route of the exhibition followed a chronological chain of events by emphasizing the successive frame points of the story: discord; war; the fall, and the return, thereby guiding the viewer to the culmination of the myth. Additionally, in between the artefacts that showed the significant moments of the myth, there were depictions of various participants at different phases of the war. Through these you could trace their parallel, individual paths within the myth, and eventually the evolution of the story. A great example was given by a representation of Achilles, the greatest of the warriors. At the same time, in different parts of the exhibition, but still in the same room, you could see him relaxed playing a board game with Ajax, defeating Memnon, grieving the death of his dearest friend Patroclus, and tragically dying by an arrow that has pierced the only vulnerable part of his body.

The room mentioned above was overcrowded and uncomfortable in matters of visibility and mobility. This was frustrating at times since I could not focus on the details of each artefact. Nevertheless, it was full of people that were seeking to dive into a world of culture, human values and adventures through this fascinating story. In attendance were a large number of people, of many ages and different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. A significant advantage of this exhibition was that you could explore the myth through the same media used by the ancient Greeks. All these artefacts stimulated our imagination in the same way they did when they were used in the daily life of an ancient Greek (for example during a banquet). The artefacts were not used just as utensils or decorative elements but they also told a story, bore a social identity, and inspired the conversations and thoughts of the Greeks. This functionality became apparent again around the room. It was within the same room where gods, heroes, mortals and ideas met again.

The following, smaller room was used as a transition from the first part of the exhibition to the next one. After the end of the exploration of the myth through the ancient artefacts, some outstanding written samples of the myth were displayed in a case. You could check the impressive Townley Homer, a manuscript made in Constantinople, dating around 1059 AD, the first printed edition of Homer's work in

Greek. Certainly, this room made you realise that there is a long and storied literary tradition surrounding the story. This demonstrated both the importance and influence of myth throughout the ages.

After the journey into the myth was concluded, the exhibition continued with an archaeological exploration of the city of Troy. The discovery of the place where all these heroes fought and obtained glory was the ambition of many individuals in the 18th and 19th centuries. The discovery of Troy is associated with the name Heinrich Schliemann, a businessman and amateur archaeologist. An almost dark, atmospheric room was calling you to dig in the past of the city through the artefacts excavated from the region of Hisarlik in Turkey. All the artefacts were discovered during the excavation of Schliemann who wanted to prove that he found the Troy of Homer and evidence of the Trojan War.

From the world of Schliemann, we moved into the last part of the exhibition where the visitors explored the modern reception of the myth. The story inspired artists from all over the world, throughout the centuries until today. The final part focused on how the myth was recreated and reconceptualised in modern art. In this section, the 2004 Hollywood movie 'Troy', directed by Wolfgang Petersen, co-existed with the outstanding painting of Henry Gibbs 'Aeneas and his Family fleeing Burning Troy', dated around 1654. Probably one of the most impressive art pieces was the painting depicting Queen Elizabeth I as Paris in the Judgement scene. However, the Queen decides to keep the apple for herself as a gesture of her sovereignty and power. This is a great example of the influence and the interpretation of the myth through modern art and politics. At the end of the exhibition there was the 'Shield of Achilles', a neon lighting installation by Spencer Finch which symbolised the light that Achilles would have seen during fighting. It was an interesting contemporary piece of artwork, deserving of its place in the last section, but not the most appropriate one to close the exhibition. The closing of such an epic topic should have been something more outstanding, dynamic and dramatic that would sum up the whole experience of the exhibition.

The British Museum offered a great opportunity for all the visitors to explore a great range of aspects of this important story. It combined an impressive amount of precious written works, archaeological and artistic pieces to enrich the exhibition and

to represent various aspect of the story. However, the exhibition did not answer any big academic questions such as 'Was there a Trojan War?' It aimed to present the wider context of the story, in a simple and approachable way without providing any other complex information. This concluded in a lack of information that might dissatisfy an academic audience, expecting to see a more comprehensive approach, and possibly mislead the non-academic audience.

This was especially noticeable in not referring to nor explaining the literary background of the Trojan Epic Cycle along with the archaeological exhibits. Undoubtedly, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the most popular pieces, since they survived, but these are just parts of the whole myth. This lack of literary explanation could lead to a misunderstanding of the myth. For example, they could consider that all these episodes such as the wedding of Peleus and Thetis or the death of the Amazon Queen, are all part of the *Iliad*. Based on the museum's standards, the exhibition welcomed visitors from all over the world that might not be familiar with the story. An additional brief combination of the literary and archaeological evidence would provide the correct and integrated information. At the same time it could prompt their curiosity for further learning. Nevertheless, the exhibition presented a fair sample of the richness of the myth, its messages, ideals, and its influence on our culture. Surely, an exhibition cannot accommodate the glory of such a great story at its fullest, though, it surely educated, inspired and pleased each visitor that either already knew the myth or just took their first dive into the world of Homer.

## Figures



Figure 1: Attic black-figure amphora (storage jar), ca. 530-520 BC, found in Chuisi, Italy, British Museum.



Figure 2: Attic red-figure krater (wine-mixing bowl), ca. 490 BC, attributed to the Berlin Painter, found in Cerveteri, Italy, British Museum.



Figure 3: Attic marble sarcophagus, ca. AD 250-60, found in Ephesus, Turkey, Woburn Abbey Sculptural Gallery: Woburn. (On loan to the British Museum)



Figure 4: Filippo Albacini. 1825. *The Wounded Achilles*, Chatsworth House and Gardens: Bakewell. (On loan to the British Museum).

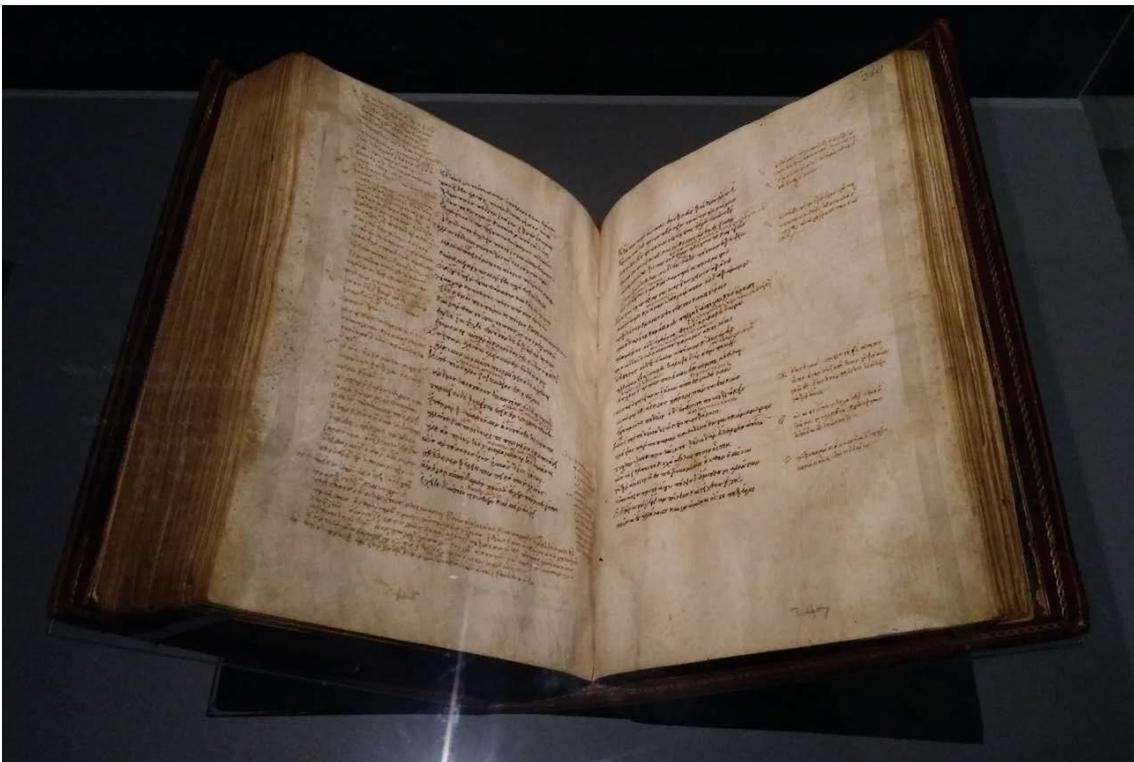


Figure 5: *Townley Homer Manuscript*. ca. AD 1059, possibly made in Constantinople. British Library: London. (On loan to the British Museum).



Figure 6: Henry Gibbs. 1654. *Aeneas and his Family Fleeing Burning Troy*. London: Tate Gallery. (On loan to the British Museum).

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### Exhibition Artefacts and Artworks

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*Athenian storage jar (amphora)*. ca. 530-520 BC. [Pottery]. London: British Museum, Greek & Roman Antiquities.

*Athenian wine-mixing bowl (krater)*. ca. 490 BC. [Pottery]. London: British Museum, Greek & Roman Antiquities.

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### **Modern Reception**

*Troy*, 2004. [DVD]. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen, United Kingdom, Malta, USA: Warner Bros. Pictures.

### **Modern Scholarship**

Pattie, T.S. and McKendrick, S. 1999. *Summary Catalogue of Greek Manuscripts, Volume I*. London: The British Library.