

Mesopotamia, Greek, Roman Empire

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Ancient Greek Helmet

This helmet was made about 2,500 years ago. It was found on the shore near Avlida in Greece. Perhaps it was lost by a soldier in a sea fight.

An expert armourer forged this helmet from a single sheet of bronze. It is a 'Corinthian' type of helmet which was worn by Greek foot soldiers, or hoplites. It was shaped to fit the wearer's head closely but made it difficult to hear or look around. Usually this did not matter because soldiers fought face-to-face pushing and stabbing. Figures in ancient Greek art often wear Corinthian helmets.

1 - Monumental inscription

About 2,700 years old
From Nineveh

This is part of a marble monumental inscription from the ancient city of Nineveh, in modern-day Iraq. The symbols are cuneiform text, the oldest known writing system in the world.

2 - Foundation cone

4,120-4,140 years old
Found in Tello, Mesopotamia

Ceramic cones were built into public buildings as a record of work. This cone was issued by Gudea, governor of Lagash, and records his rebuilding of the temple at Eninnu.

Cylinder seals and modern impressions

2,600-5,000 years old

Found in Mesopotamia

Cylinder seals were rolled into clay tablets as an official seal. Each seal is decorated with images relevant to its owner. When not in use it could be worn around the neck, for security and as an amulet.

3 - Cylinder seal

About 5,500 years old

Made from limestone

The fish on this seal suggest its owner may have been an official who dealt with fishing.

4 - Cylinder seal

About 5,000 years old

Made from marble

The scene shows an antelope surrounded by plants and stars.

5 - Cylinder seal

About 5,500 years old

Made from marble

A horned animal stands between a reed hut and a temple building.

6 - Cylinder seal

About 4,500 years old

Made from lapis lazuli

Decorated with a zigzag pattern.

7 - Cylinder seal

About 4,300 years old

Made from serpentine

This is a contest between two bulls, a lion and a bearded man.

8 - Cylinder seal

About 4,190-4,330 years old

Made from shell

The meaning of this seal has been lost in time. On the left is a goddess sitting on a throne with a kneeling bull in front. Behind the bull is a winged gate, and a man holding a rope which is attached to the gate. The scene also includes sun and moon motifs and trees.

9 - Cylinder seal

About 4,100-4,200 years old

Made from chlorite

This scene shows a worshipper with two goddesses. They are surrounded by a sun, moon, birds, scorpions and fish.

10 - Cylinder seal

About 2,600-2,800 years old

Made from chalcedony

This contest scene shows a winged genie fighting with a human-headed bull, surrounded by stars and gazelles.

Cuneiform tablets

About 4,030-4,300 years old

From Umma, Mesopotamia

Tablets like these are among the first known records created by rulers and their officials. The text was written onto wet clay. When dry they formed a lasting record, but they were easily recycled by wetting the clay.

11 - Cuneiform tablet

Records the issue of flour.

12-15 - Cuneiform tablets

These record issues of oil, beer, bread, spicy seed, fish and onions to messengers on official business.

16 - Cuneiform envelope

About 4,030 years old

From Umma, Mesopotamia

Clay envelopes rarely survive as they were usually broken by collectors to reveal the clay tablet inside. The envelope lists animals to be sacrificed for the deities Shara and Gula, from the city ruler Akalla.

17 - Bowl

About 4,000 years old
Black-topped red ware

Red and black vessels are among the earliest pottery made in Cyprus. The colours were a deliberate combination and were the work of skilled crafts people. Very similar pottery was made in pre-dynastic Egypt, and suggests people around the Mediterranean were travelling and sharing ideas.

18-22 - Cups, bowls and jars

About 4,000-4,700 years old
Red ware pottery

The shapes of these pots are practical for cooking and serving food. Though functional they were also made to look beautiful.

23 - Spindle jar

About 3,050-3,650 years old
Wheel-made red lustrous ware

Tall jars with a handle were used by people travelling long distances on horseback. Similar jars were made across the Mediterranean area, the idea for the shape probably moving with the people.

24 - Milk bowl

About 3,050-3,650 years old

White slip ware

White pottery with dark decoration was mass-produced in Cyprus in the late Bronze Age. It was traded across the Mediterranean to Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Greece.

25 - Gourd-shaped jug

About 3,450-3,650 years old

Black slip ware

This shape of jug is thought to imitate a gourd, a type of vegetable which was itself used for cups and bowls.

26 - Vase

About 3,050-3,650 years old

Plain white wheel-made ware

Unlike most Cypriot pottery this vase has not been decorated. It is an unusual jar, probably influenced by ideas from the Cyclades in Greece.

27 - Tankard

About 3,050-3,650 years old

White slip ware

Flat-bottomed vessels like this only developed when there was a flat surface on which they could sit.

28-29 - Jar and spouted jug

About 2,950-3,050 years old

White painted ware

This type of white pottery was made in Cyprus for over 700 years. Different regions of the island developed slightly different styles of decorating the pots.

30 - Dish

About 2,750-3,050 years old

White painted ware

This dish is decorated on both the inside and outside. It was used to display taste and wealth rather than being a practical item. The shape of bowl was introduced to Cyprus from Greece.

31-33 - Jars with geometric decoration

About 2,450-3,050 years old

Bichrome ware

Pottery vessels decorated with brown and black geometric patterns were very popular in Iron Age Cyprus. The symmetry and precision of the decoration required great skill, and probably much practice.

34-35 - Phoenician-inspired design

About 2,600-2,850 years old

Black-on-red ware

This very delicate type of pottery probably originated in Phoenicia, the area around modern day Israel and Syria. It is not as common in Cyprus as the white coloured pottery, and it may have been used for different purposes.

36-41 - Human figurines

About 2,050-3,450 years old

Made from clay and stone

Over hundreds of years human figurines were placed in temples and burials in Cyprus. The first figurines represented females and were made from clay. Later figurines were made from stone. The style of clothing and hair on the figurines changed as people came into contact with other cultures.

42-45 - Temple worshippers

About 2,450-2,750 years old

Made from clay

These figurines show people undertaking activities associated with the temple and its rituals. One figure plays a musical instrument, the others carry animals and birds to be sacrificed.

46-49 - Warrior figures

About 2,050-3,050 years old

Made from clay

Foot soldiers, warriors on horseback and charioteers were among the most popular type of models which were left at temples in iron age Cyprus.

50-56 - Animals and birds

About 2,450-3,050 years old

Made from clay

Models of animals and birds were placed in burials, or left at temples as offerings to the gods. Bulls, dogs and horses were especially popular. Some, like the owl, made a rattling sound and may have been children's toys.

57 - Cycladic statue

About 4,300-4,800 years old

Made from marble

Female figurines like these were mass produced in the Cyclades, a group of islands near mainland Greece, hundreds of years before the Greek empire developed.

58 - Figurine of a seated woman

About 2,600-2,700 years old

Made from clay

This figurine was found in Cyprus and is similar to other seated female figurines made there. She is wearing typical Greek clothing, which shows the influence of Greece across the Mediterranean.

59 - Amphora handle with Greek writing

About 2,100-2,500 years old

Made from clay

This is the handle from a pottery storage jar. Onto it is stamped the name of the person who made the jar. The Greek alphabet is still used today and is the basis for many other writing systems, including our own.

60 - Silver coins

About 2,170-2,425 years old

Found in Greece

The Greeks were the first people to use coins. Each state issued its own coins with set values. Sometimes a hole was pierced through the coin so it could be worn as an amulet.

61-62 - Animal figurines

About 2,300-2,400 years old

Made from clay

These models of a pig and cockerel were found in Cyprus but are in the Greek style. Like the earlier animal models from Cyprus, these too may have been votive offerings.

63 - Model of wrestling boys

About 2,200-2,300 years old

Made from clay

Models were used to decorate tombs and houses. This one shows wrestling, a popular Greek male sport combining skill and physical fitness. It was one of the events in the first Olympic Games.

64-66 - Grotesque human figurines

About 2,146-2,500 years old

Made from clay

Human figurines were decorative items around the house or tomb. They were often playful, showing people in a comic pose. These characters are an old woman nursing a child, a man in woman's clothing and a comic actor.

67 - Warrior oil flask

About 2,500-2,600 years old

Found at Cameiros, Rhodes

This small aryballos flask was used to store perfumed oil. It is shaped as the head of a male warrior, with a moustache and helmet. Small jars like this may have been bought as souvenirs.

68 - Model of a building

About 2,300 years old

Made from clay

This model shows a building with a square doorway, windows, and stone walls. It may have been used as a votive shrine in the home.

69 - Tombstone fragment

About 2,200-2,400 years old

Made from limestone

This is part of a funerary monument called a stele. It shows a man reclining on a couch, holding hands with a lady sitting opposite him. This is a typical Greek scene and shows the soul of the deceased being welcomed into the underworld.

70-73 - Oil lamps

About 2,146-2,500 years old

Made from clay

Lamps which burned olive oil were the main source of light for homes and public buildings in much of the ancient world. Greek lamps were made in a wide range of styles according to fashion and personal taste.

74-78 - Goddess figurines

About 2,300-2,800 years old

Made from limestone and pottery

Numerous small statuettes of goddesses were left in temples by devoted worshippers. Some had pierced holes so they could be hung from a wall. The stone statuette shows Aphrodite, a popular Greek goddess of love.

79-81 - Oil jars

2,600 years old

Made in Corinth, Greece

Small jars like this stored perfumed oil for bathing. The mythical beasts were inspired by Oriental design.

82 - Perfumed oil flask (*alabastron*)

2,400 years old

Made in Athens, Greece

Perfumed oil was often used by women. This decoration shows a woman with the words 'she is beautiful' written down one side.

83 - Oil pourer (*askos*)

2,400 years old

Made in Athens, Greece

Oil pourers stored the olive oil needed to fuel oil lamps. This one is suitably decorated with olive branches.

84 - Small wine bowl (*krater*)

2,500 years old

Made in Greece

This bowl was probably used for mixing wine and water. It is decorated with men and mythical satyr figures who had a love of wine and debauchery.

85 - Cosmetic pot (*pyxis*)

2,450 years old

Made in Athens, Greece

Women used small bowls like this to store their cosmetics or trinkets. This one shows a woman with her female attendants.

86 - Cosmetic jar (*pyxis*)

2,500 years old

Made in Corinth, Greece

This small jar is decorated with a goat, panthers and a mythical siren figure.

87 - Drinking cup (*skyphos*)

2,500 years old

Made in Corinth, Greece

Cups like this were used at symposia wine parties. The bowl is decorated with lions, a bird, a goat and a mythical siren figure.

88 - Perfumed oil bottle (*lekythos*)

2,500 years old

Found in Cameiros, Rhodes

This black-figure oil jar shows the god Dionysus with his maid servants, or maenads.

89 - Plate (*pinax*)

2,300 years old

Made in Campania, Italy

The image on this plate is Pegasus, a mythical winged horse born of the goddess Medusa. He was a popular creature in ancient Greece associated with water and the stars.

90 - Fish plate (*pinax*)

2,350 years old

Made in southern Italy

Plates like this were used to serve fish, with the small depression at the centre holding a small bowl of sauce. The decoration shows three bream, and shellfish represented by white spots.

91 - Drinking cup (*kylix*)

2,400 years old

Made in Athens, Greece

Drinking cups were used at symposia parties. During the party the cups could be used to play the game kottabos, whereby contestants flung their dregs of wine at a target.

92 - Drinking cup (*kylix*)

2,500 years old

Made in Athens, Greece

The shape of these cups made it possible to drink whilst reclining, which was the usual sitting position at symposia. The decoration shows two athletes and two clothed men.

93 - Wine jug (*oinochoe*)

2,300 years old

Made in Cumae, Italy

Jugs like this were used to serve wine, and their Greek name literally means 'I pour wine'. This red figure ware jug shows a young man, and a woman holding a mirror and garland.

94 - Water jar (*hydria* or *kalpis*)

2,300 years old

Made in southern Italy

Wine in ancient Greece was very thick, so water was mixed with it to make it drinkable. Water jars have three handles, two for carrying and one for pouring. This one is decorated with the image of a beautiful woman.

95 - Marriage vase (*lebes gamikos*)

2,350 years old

Made in southern Italy

'Lebes' bowls were first made for storing drink. Later versions like this had handles and a lid, which has not survived in this vase. They are thought to have been used for sprinkling brides with water before their wedding ceremony.

96 - Storage jar (*pelike*)

2,300 years old

Made in southern Italy

These jars were used to store liquids. The image shows Eros, god of love, placing a crown on a woman.

97 - Water jar (*hydria*)

About 2,350 years old

From a tomb in southern Italy

Scratched onto this jar are Greek letters meaning 'Ageso, son of Isander'. The jar was found in a tomb, and probably contained the ashes of this man. In ancient Greece it was very common for everyday pottery vessels to be put in tombs as offerings, or as containers for ashes.

98 - Wine container (*neck amphora*)

2,300 years old

Made in Nola, Italy

The decoration on this amphora suggests it was painted by an artist whose real name is unknown, but is called the 'Ixion Painter'. He was one of the most accomplished vase painters of ancient Greece. This image shows two women in conversation, one holding a mirror.

99 - Dish with Greek inscription

About 2,300-2,700 years old

Found in Chiusi, Italy

The inscription on this dish is written in Greek and reads 'Thania Seiante, Tutnai's daughter, Herini's wife, for her burial'. These people were Etruscans, a civilisation in Italy before the Roman Empire. The ideas of both the Greeks and Etruscans were later incorporated into the Roman Empire.

100-104 - Oil lamps

About 1,600-2,000 years old

From across the Roman Empire

Oil lamps were used by many ancient civilisations but Roman lamps are among the most ornamental. They were decorated with religious images or scenes from everyday life. Some of these images show how ideas of taste have changed.

105 - Samian cup

About 2,000 years old

Found in Nervina, Italy

Samian pottery is one of the most recognisable types of Roman pottery and is found across their empire. It was made in France, but its origins lie in Greek styles of pottery made in southern Italy. This cup is stamped inside with the letters MARCI, the name of the man who made it.

106 - Flagon made in Devon

About 1,700-2,000 years old

Found in Exeter

The Roman town of Exeter was at the western edge of the Roman Empire. Flagons like this are found across the empire from Exeter to Egypt, as Roman ideas and lifestyles were spread by soldiers and merchants.

107 - Monumental inscription

About 1,900 years old

Made from marble

The inscription on this stone records the Roman names Tiberius, Livius, Maximus and Gelonius. The names are written in the Greek alphabet rather than Latin, which suggests they were officials of a Roman town in Greece. Many inscriptions were public declarations recording donations of money for public works.

108 - Fragment from a fountain

About 1,800 years old

Found in Alexandria, Egypt

This was a drinking fountain from a wealthy Romano-Egyptian household. The bearded man is the river god Nilus, a Greek god after whom the river Nile is named. On his right is the Roman 'horn of plenty' which represents abundance. At the bottom, an Egyptian sphinx guards the hole for the water spout.

109-113 - Lamps with religious scenes

About 1,600-2,000 years old

From across the Roman Empire

As well as having a practical use for lighting, lamps were used in temples, tombs and household shrines as devotional items. The symbols on these lamps include Jewish and pagan images.

114 - Gemstones with religious images

About 1,600-2,000 years old

Made from jasper, carnelian and obsidian

These stones were set into rings as amulets or seals. Some seals represent classical Roman gods such as Cupid and Jupiter. Others are mystical pagan creatures, including a snake with a double human head.

115 - Rings with religious images

About 1,600-2,000 years old

Rings made from gold, iron and copper

To avoid offending the gods, the Romans combined local deities with their beliefs. One of these rings combines the Egyptian ankh and sa symbols with the Roman thunderbolt. Roman gods remained popular in later Europe, when old gems were mounted into new gold rings.

116 - Coins with religious images

1,650-1,800 years old

Made from copper alloy

Coins were used across the Roman Empire and were an effective means for emperors to spread ideas to their people. These coins depict gods and goddesses associated with specific traits.

Left to right: Victoria (victory), Felicitas (good luck), Sol (sun god) and Salus (safety and welfare).

117-118 - God and goddess figures

About 1,600-2,000 years old

Made from copper alloy

Religion was an integral part of Roman daily life. Many households had a shrine to their favoured gods containing figurines like these. The deities are recognisable by their pose, clothing, or items they hold.

Top row (left to right): Sol (sun god), Diana Venatrix (huntress), Fortuna (fortune and luck).

Middle row: Hercules (strength and courage).

119 - Human figures

About 1,600-2,000 years old

Made from copper alloy

Many Romans believed humans had a divine spirit which remained after death. Like the god and goddess figures, figurines of humans were placed in household shrines.

Left to right: boxing athlete, child, Amazon warrior, baby.

120 - Animal figurines

About 1,600-2,000 years old

Made from copper alloy

Small models of animals and birds have been found in burials and at temples across the Roman Empire. Some may have been toys, but most seem to have been religious items.

121 - Building plaque

Date uncertain

Made from pottery

Ceramic plaques were placed on the outside of buildings. This scene is very detailed and shows Bacchus, god of wine, surrounded by women, children, real and mythical animals, who are drinking or pouring wine.

122 - Figurine of Athena Parthenos

Victorian

Purchased in Greece

This is a copy of a famous ancient Greek statue in the Acropolis, Athens. It was purchased by a Devon collector who believed it to be an ancient object. Modern scientific tests revealed it is actually a 19th-century fake.

123 - Monumental inscription

Victorian

Allegedly from Pompeii, Italy

This Latin inscription was claimed to have been found at Pompeii. Research by the British Museum has revealed the inscribed letters are a recent addition to an old piece of marble. It is a Victorian fake, made to sell to tourists.

124 - Roman oil lamp

About 2,000 years old

Allegedly from Pompeii, Italy

This lamp was donated to the museum in 1874 by a local collector who bought it while travelling in Italy. He believed it was found during early excavations in the Roman town of Pompeii. Many items were falsely sold to tourists with a Pompeii history, and it is now very difficult to establish where they were actually found.

125 - Reproduction of the Portland Vase

1863

Made by Wedgwood, Staffordshire

The original Portland Vase was probably made in Rome around 20-30 BC and is in the British Museum. This Victorian copy is by Josiah Wedgwood. He helped to establish the fashion for Neo-Classical design, based on ancient Greek and Roman styles.

126 - Silver salt cellar with glass liner

1804-1805

Made by Robert Garrard Senior, London

This salt cellar is based on monumental Roman stone carving. This style was highly popular at the beginning of the 1800s, when objects recalling the splendours of ancient Greece and Rome were popular in wealthy households.

127 - Terracotta Sphinx

About 1875

Made at the Watcombe Pottery, Torquay

Terracotta is an unglazed red clay that was widely used by the Torquay potteries for reproductions of ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian objects. In the late Victorian era these were purchased by wealthy middle class visitors to Devon.

128 - Souvenir bracelet

Probably 1920s

Made in Egypt

Each plaque of this enamel effect silver metal link bracelet depicts an Ancient Egyptian scene. Egyptian artefacts influenced fashion and costume throughout 20th-century, from Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 to Elizabeth Taylor's film role as Cleopatra in 1963 and the British Museum's exhibition of the Treasures of Tutankhamun in 1972.

129 - Classical statue head

18th or 19th century

Possibly from Alexander Pope's grotto, Twickenham

This bust is in the style of an ancient Roman statue but is only a few hundred years old. It is thought to have been made for the poet Alexander Pope, who built an elaborate Neo-Classical grotto near London containing an eclectic mix of objects inspired by the ancient world.