The Ancient Mediterranean and the British Museum (25–27 Feb 26)

Senate House, Malet Street, London, Feb 25–27, 2026
Deadline: Jun 16, 2025

Isobel MacDonald

The Ancient Mediterranean and the British Museum: Pasts and Futures.

The Department of Greece and Rome at the British Museum and the Institute of Classical Studies are inviting proposals for contributions to a conference exploring the past impact and future potential of the Museum's collections from the ancient Mediterranean world, scheduled to take place in-person at Senate House, London, on 25th-27th February 2026.

This conference is being organised in the context of the British Museum's 'Masterplan', a once-in-a-century opportunity to redisplay and re-interpret the collections from the ancient Mediterranean, Egypt, Assyria and the Middle East for twenty-first century publics. The Department of Greece and Rome is one of the Museum's curatorial departments leading this work.

To avoid the repetition of old narratives, and to ensure that the redisplay of the galleries is based on a comprehensive reimagining of the Museum's collections, the Department considers it vital to explore the ways in which the Museum's collections and displays have influenced (for better or worse) modern constructions of Mediterranean antiquity. We wish to invite the widest possible range of contributions and perspectives to inform this reflection. A dialogue has already begun, in a public seminar series co-organised with our neighbour, the Institute of Classical Studies (Revisiting the Ancient Mediterranean World at the British Museum). This conference, also in partnership with the ICS, aims to extend the conversation. Whether you engage with the Museum and its ancient Mediterranean collection academically, creatively, professionally, or in other ways, we invite you to help us investigate its history and plan for the future.

We will consider proposals for single or paired papers of 20-30 minutes each in length that reflect any line of research relevant to the ways in which the Museum's ancient Mediterranean collections have shaped and been shaped by culture, politics and society, from the Museum's foundation in 1753 to the present day. We particularly welcome papers on topics related to the three strands described below, which we have identified as particularly promising areas for exploration. While the focus of the conference will be on the British Museum and on the ancient Mediterranean, we also welcome proposals which introduce cross-institutional, comparative or international perspectives. Proposals for alternative formats, such as panel discussions or creative workshops, are also encouraged.

Artistic engagement.

How have artists and other makers (including for example filmmakers and craftspeople) engaged with the British Museum's collections from the ancient Mediterranean? What was the impact of the collection and its display on artistic practice, and vice-versa? The role of the Parthenon Sculptures in inspiring artists of the early nineteenth century is well-known, as is the extensive use of the Townley and later Graeco-Roman sculpture galleries for the training of artists (Jenkins 1992). There has been vibrant engagement with the classical world, in general, by modern and contemporary artists (Holmes 2017; Squire et al 2018). But there is much more to uncover about artistic engagement with the British Museum's collection.

Literary engagement.

From Lord Byron to HD and beyond, the British Museum is well-known as a site of poetic inspiration and provides a setting and reference-point in numerous works of literature (Ellis 1981; Stallings 2023). What do literary receptions make of the British Museum's ancient Mediterranean collection? Has attention been concentrated on certain objects or tropes, and which figures and receptions have been overlooked to date? In what ways do the Museum's collections from the ancient Mediterranean continue to inspire and provoke contemporary literature?

Scholarship and intellectual history.

The role of museums in the evolution of academic disciplines is an established topic of study (Marchand 1996; Dyson 2006). We welcome papers that examine how the British Museum's collections and galleries have been instrumental in shaping approaches to the material culture of the ancient Mediterranean, or to understandings of ancient societies more widely. How has their interrelation with academic disciplines such as Archaeology, Classics, and Art History changed over time? What have been the impacts of the British Museum's approach to chronological, regional and thematic display, to the representation of different ethnicities, or the division of material into different curatorial departments? Have the particular strengths and omissions of the British Museum collection directed or limited the field of study of the ancient Mediterranean world?

Through all these themes and throughout the conference will be threaded questions of the Museum's relationship with social, political and historical contexts, including colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, gender, race and class. How and why did collections from the ancient Mediterranean take on such prominence in the British Museum? To what extent has the British Museum reinforced messages of power and control? What histories have been neglected and elided? Are there also narratives of subversion and resistance to be found?

The conference will be held in-person only at Senate House (Malet St, London WC1E 7HU) from Wednesday 25th to Friday 27th February 2026. Abstracts of maximum 300 words should be submitted by Monday 16th June 2025, together with a short (100 words) speaker biography. A limited number of travel bursaries will be available to help support attendance for speakers who cannot access alternative sources of funding. Please indicate in your submission if you would need to apply for a bursary and we will be in touch with details of the separate application process.

Please send paper proposals to Dr Isobel MacDonald (IMacdonald@britishmuseum.org).

This conference is co-sponsored by the British Museum and the Institute of Classical Studies, Uni-

versity of London School of Advanced Study.

Reference:

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