

Heracles to Alexander the Great: Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon

ITM London



Gold shield
decoration

In the first major archaeological exhibition in the new temporary exhibition galleries, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is showcasing over five hundred treasures made of gold, silver and bronze, recently found in the royal burial tombs and the palace of Aegae, the ancient capital of Macedon.

Ashmolean Museum



The main aim of the exhibition, co-organised with the Greek ministry of culture and tourism and the 17th department of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, is to highlight the evolution of the Macedonian kingdom and the era of Alexander the Great.

Most of the items are being displayed for the first time anywhere in the world. They re-write the history of early Greece and tell the story of the royal court and the kings and queens who governed Macedonia from the descendants of Heracles to the ruling dynasty of Alexander the Great.

“It is a tremendous honour for the Ashmolean to be the first place where people can see the latest discoveries from Aegae,” Dr Christopher Brown, Director of the Ashmolean Museum said.

Dr Angeliki Kottaridi, Director of the 17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities described the exhibition as :” The most important Greek cultural event in many years. From the astounding finds made by the late Professor Manolis Andronikos in the ‘70s to the recent discoveries of the past

twenty years, this is a groundbreaking work that tells the story of life in the ancient kingdom of Macedonia in northern Greece. The artistry, skill and foresight with which these objects were made represent a truly sophisticated dynasty about whom there is much more to learn”.

The royal city of Aegae – modern-day Vergina – was the first capital of Macedonia and the seat of power of the Temenid kings, named after Temenus, a descendant of Heracles. The phrase “Temenid dynasty” doesn’t exactly trip off the tongue. But this august lineage, which produced Philip II and Alexander the Great, was key to the development of the Western world. And in the Ashmolean’s dazzling display of archaeological finds the history of early Greece comes alive.

They Temenids from the mid-7th to the 4th century BC, and gave to Greece two of its most famous heroes, King Philip II (382-336 BC) and his son Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). Aegae remained relatively unknown until 30 years ago when excavations

uncovered the unlooted tombs of Philip II and his grandson Alexander IV.

Recent work at the site has continued to unearth a startling wealth of objects – from beautifully intricate gold jewellery, silverware

and pottery, to sculpture, mosaic floors and architectural remains.

We are introduced to the world of the king and his companions at war and hunting; the king as ruler and high-priest, and the royal funeral. On display are arms and

Mask from the ancient kingdom



armour, golden wreaths, life-sized marble sculpture, and painted battle-scenes which illustrate the lives of Macedon's most famous kings, among them Philip II and Alexander IV, father and son of Alexander the Great respectively. The most recent excavations have concentrated on the tombs of the royal women, and the exhibition's next section shows their important role at the court. Jewellery, fashion, and objects used for grooming, as well as sacred objects, such as clay heads of divine and demonic figures, underline the leading role of these powerful women as queens, princesses and high-priestesses, offering a vivid portrayal of the female world in the palace from around 1000 to 300 BC. A centrepiece of the show is the assemblage of five women: four dating to the Early Iron Age (1000-700 BC) and one, the 'Lady of Aegae', to around 500 BC. The 'Lady of Aegae', a queen and high-priestess, was found in an undisturbed tomb, bedecked with funerary goods and dressed, head-to-toe, in spectacular gold jewellery which had been sewn into her clothes.

Life in the palace – its architecture and the symposium (banquet) – is the exhibition's concluding theme. Silverware, ceramics, and architectural fragments from the palace itself give a tantalising glimpse of life in the royal capital of this ancient kingdom. The gallery highlights the development of the 'symposium' – a key expression of the contemporary social and political world, and the rich architecture of the palace built in the reign of Philip II.

'The Macedonians lived under the same political system uninterrupted for some five hundred years. Nowadays we admire the ancient Greeks for their invention of democracy, but even among the Athenians it did not last long. Macedon's system was monarchy, the most stable form of government in Greek history. It persisted from about 650 to 167 BC and only stopped because the Romans abolished it,' Robin Lane Fox, Ancient Historian at Oxford University pointed out.

Dr Susan Walker, keeper of antiquities at the Ashmolean, speculated that these remarkable

Royal women's
fashion



objects could be seen as forebears of the kind of elaborate Hellenistic portraiture created in Alexandria centuries later, which in turn influenced Roman "true" portraiture.

The exhibition perfectly balances the scholarly with the artistic, the informative with downright glamour.

The only criticism is that the objects are displayed in cases with little explanation of the context/situation they were found in. The catalogue does have photos of the excavations.

In a special late night opening the Ashmolean celebrated the Museum's Greek season with an evening of antiquity, theatre, dance and live music. As part of the events series accompanying the landmark exhibition Heracles to Alexander the Great, the evening debuted Pots and Plays produced by the Onassis Programme and Oxford Playhouse, and a programme of live music featuring Kyla La Grange, Ben Westbeeck and Black Discs (Eliot Sumner and Age Salajoe), presented by the Notting Hill Arts Club.

The Ashmolean Museum (in full the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology) on Beaumont Street, Oxford, England, is the world's first university museum. Its first building was built in 1678–1683 to house the cabinet of curiosities Elias Ashmole gave Oxford University in 1677.

The collection includes that of Elias Ashmole, which he had collected himself as well as works he had acquired from the gardeners, travellers and collectors John Tradescant the elder and his son of the same name. The collection included antique coins, books, engravings, geological specimens, and zoological specimens—one of which was the stuffed body of the last Dodo ever seen in Europe, but by 1755 it was so moth-eaten it was destroyed, except for its head and one claw. The museum opened on 24 May 1683, with naturalist Robert Plot as the first keeper. The first building, which became known as the Old Ashmolean, is sometimes attributed to Sir Christopher Wren or Thomas Wood.

After the various specimens had

Silver jug



been moved into new museums, the "Old Ashmolean" building on Broad Street was used as office space for the Oxford English Dictionary staff. Since 1924, the building has been established as the Museum of the History of Science, with exhibitions including the scientific instruments given to Oxford University by Lewis Evans (1853–1930), amongst them the world's largest collection of astrolabes.

The present building dates from 1845. It was designed by Charles Cockerell in a classical style and stands on Beaumont Street. One wing of the building is occupied by the Taylor Institution, the modern languages faculty of the university. The main museum contains huge collections of archaeology specimens and fine art. It has one of the best collections of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, majolica pottery and English silver. The archaeology department includes the bequest of Arthur Evans and so has an excellent collection of Greek and Minoan pottery. The department also has an extensive

collection of antiquities from Ancient Egypt and the Sudan, and the museum hosts the Griffith Institute for the advancement of Egyptology.

The interior of the Ashmolean has been extensively modernised in recent years and now includes a restaurant and large gift shop. The Sackler Library, incorporating the older library collections of the Ashmolean, opened in 2001 and has allowed an expansion of the book collection, which concentrates on classical civilization, archaeology and art history.

Between 2006 and 2009, the museum was extensively rebuilt and expanded to the designs of architect Rick Mather and the exhibition design company Metaphor, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The rebuilding resulted in five floors instead of three, with a doubling of the display space as well as new conservation studios and an education centre. The renovated museum re-opened on 7 November 2009.