

‘WHAT SAID THIS RUDE ANTIQUE’: VICTORIAN RECEPTION OF ROMAN GLASS

Artefact collections are a key means for many people to interact with classical antiquity. The physicality of objects easily appeals to the imagination, evoking associations between the object and the viewer’s experiences. Reception of artefacts is thus multilayered, even regarding what may seem to be very simple objects, such as ancient glass vessels uncovered and collected around the middle of the nineteenth century. Drawing on research into the Damon Collection (Canterbury Museum, New Zealand) this study explores Victorian reception of Roman glass, demonstrating the many and often complex ways in which objects of utilitarian origin in classical antiquity gained new meaning and surprising popularity among a broad public. Glass vessels were receptacles for ideas and the imagination, from adventure to questions of religion and empire. In particular, vessels identified as ‘lachrymatories’ became a very personal empathetic link to the classical past, with influence on popular imagination enduring to the present day.

Keywords: Roman glass, Victorian collecting, classical antiquity collections, lachrymatory bottles, classical reception

Introduction

Among the ways in which people have understood and interacted with classical antiquity, artefact collection holds great importance. The manner of collection and in particular the reasons behind the choice of particular items illuminate many facets of reception. Much work in this vein has focused on the impressive collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on art rather than artefacts, and on the aristocratic circles that typically indulged in this practice. This article, however, is concerned with a collection and collector that reveal the true breadth and depth of classical reception. Far from the exquisite sculpture of a country estate, this collection of ancient glass might easily

be overlooked – but to a Victorian public these humble objects were extraordinarily attractive.

The Damon Collection, purchased by the Canterbury Museum (Christchurch, New Zealand) in 1901, comprises 135 ancient glass vessels, almost entirely from the Roman period and spanning the first to early fifth centuries CE. They were collected between 1873 and 1882 from sites on Cyprus, and at Tyre and Sidon, which Damon visited and at which he probably excavated in person. Robert Damon (1814–89), originally working in an inherited business as a hosier and glover, went on to establish a dealership of natural history specimens based in his local town of Weymouth, Dorset. He published in the fields of conchology and geology and travelled widely in pursuit of specimens with which to furnish his business.¹ He also opened a small public museum in his home, where the ancient glass now in the Canterbury Museum was perhaps displayed prior to its arrival in New Zealand. This collection thus provides a route into seldom-explored avenues of reception studies: a Victorian collection of ancient glass objects established by a man with a background in trade, with a local public audience. In order to establish how a broad public received these artefacts, this study draws on evidence from newspaper articles reporting on excavations, publications, exhibitions, and local lectures. Through both public events themselves and the reports recounting and reflecting on them ideas about the ancient world were widely disseminated.

The reception of artefacts in the nineteenth century was multifaceted, relating to ideas beyond the physical objects themselves. This article will initially discuss the Damon Collection in the context of the methods and motives driving archaeology at the time when the objects were discovered. The adventure of excavation practice gave significance to artefacts before they were even identified. Knowledge and ideas emerging in the Victorian period around religion and empire provided two different strands of thought that converge on the reception of particular sites and the antiquities discovered at them. One such place was Tyre, whence Robert Damon obtained the largest portion of his collection. He collected from particular locations but he

¹ Damon published *A Catalogue of the Shells of Great Britain and Ireland with Their Synonyms and Authorities* (Weymouth, 1857), and *The Geology of Weymouth and the Isle of Portland. With Notes on the Natural History of the Coast and Neighbourhood* (London, 1860). In 1890 he published a local archaeological find: 'Roman Amphora or Wine Jar', *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Proceedings* 11 (1890), 88–90.

also collected particular forms: glass flasks held additional resonances with another thread of Victorian mores. Through sources such as the poetry of the period, I will explain how the most ordinary of ancient glass vessels became one of the most desirable kinds of antiquity, appealing to collectors and to the public at large.

Excavation motives

Robert Damon was probably a hands-on type of collector, though unfortunately no sources are currently known that might provide exact details of his activities. Stephen Dyson has observed that the nineteenth century saw both increasing professionalization of archaeology and 'growing complexity' with the rise of 'middle-class savants'.² A variety of approaches to archaeology persisted, and public attitudes still lauded the treasure-hunter seeking relics of the past. Damon is an example of an excavator-collector, and he reveals just how broad the complexity of the field was. Collectors like him, of middle- and lower-middle-class background with recent roots in trade, were increasing in the Victorian period, bringing more diverse experiences to a once aristocratic domain. Although apparently self-taught, Damon gained sufficient expertise in geology and conchology to become a Fellow of the Royal Geological Society and to join an expedition of the Palestine Exploration Fund. It was perhaps while in pursuit of fossils and geological specimens that he came across antiquities.

We cannot assume, however, that he was operating entirely in isolation. The activities of others surely provided precedent and inspiration, and he probably acquired several artefacts through other parties. Damon's labels give a date and place for the discovery of some of his first ancient acquisitions: Cyprus, 1873. This places the finds within the time that extensive ongoing excavations were being undertaken by the American consul Luigi Palma di Cesnola.³

² S. Dyson, *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts. A History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 64.

³ L. di Cesnola, *Cyprus. Its Ancient Cities, Tombs, and Temples. A Narrative of Researches and Excavations during Ten Years' Residence as American Consul in That Island* (London, 1878), 83, reports having excavated 'from 1867 till the end of 1875 at different intervals'. Although Damon probably never crossed paths with Cesnola, he must have been aware of the excavation sites.

Cesnola embodies the heroic aspects of excavation at the time and also the unprofessional approach to archaeology that was as yet uncensured. His cavalier approach – for example, demolishing Roman tombs without recording them, in order to access lower layers – and his narrow avoidance of what might be considered illegal practices are thankfully condemned today. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, Cesnola was considered ‘thoroughly well qualified’.⁴ Indeed, even people from whom one might expect more professionalism appear to have viewed excavation as something like a tourist attraction. Professor A. H. Sayce was a philologist who dabbled in archaeology on his travels, contemporaneous with Damon’s. An 1881 article quotes him at length:

While I was at Larnaka the Commissioner organised a digging party for my benefit one afternoon; we walked along the road for a mile or two and then watched our labourers while they excavated by the side of the road...we came upon unopened graves, and before the afternoon was over returned with more than twenty Phoenician and early Greek vases, besides many more smaller objects...⁵

With such casual excavation undertaken by an Oxford professor, other travellers no doubt employed similar methods without qualms.

One should note that, rather than total lawlessness regarding excavation, the standard of appropriate conduct was very different from contemporary practice. Ernest Renan’s account of his expedition to sites in ancient Phoenicia, commissioned by Napoleon III, described treasure-hunters like noxious pests crawling all over the terrain and even into the French excavation sites. He reflected with surprise on the number of antiquities remaining, in spite of the people flocking to Sidon. Not all of these were visitors; the thriving local market of tomb treasures is also described, and funds for the expedition were used to purchase items brought to them by locals.⁶ Outright criminal activity also plagued the French, who had bought the land for excavation. Dr Gaillardot, leading the work at Sidon, wrote in September 1867 that the excavation site had been looted. With stone pillaged, the unstable ground collapsed, along with entries to the

⁴ ‘Cyprus’, *South Wales Daily News* (16 August 1878), 2. All articles from British newspapers are retrieved from <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>>.

⁵ ‘Bath Literary and Philosophical Association’, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* (13 October 1881), 7.

⁶ E. Renan, *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris, 1864), 364, 399, 409. The funds were used in this manner for a period of four years, in spite of Renan himself returning to France.

caves. Sarcophagi were hacked apart, and even staircases were removed.⁷

It was perhaps not so much the method of these treasure-hunters that was reprehensible as the fact that they were interfering with commissioned work. Certainly terminology in use at the time does not inspire images of careful examination of finds. An article published in several newspapers announced that another explorer wished to undertake excavations on Cyprus ‘for he believes that Mr. Lang and General di Cesnola have by no means ransacked the island sufficiently’.⁸ ‘Sufficient ransacking’ may sound like an oxymoron to us, but the phrase seems to have met no disapprobation in 1878. There was obviously some kind of balance to maintain between a good adventure and common robbery. Certainly Damon seems to have enjoyed telling the adventure of his travels in a public lecture, for the response to his descriptions of his journey was that it ‘seemed to be a very pleasant sort of thing, having a sufficient amount of risk to make it at times somewhat exciting’.⁹ The fame and public acclaim of people like Cesnola cannot but have made the act of excavation glamorous in itself, with the stories of discovery adding to the desirability of the objects uncovered. Indeed, when discussing the dwindling British excavator-collectors in Italy at the beginning of the century, Jonathan Scott remarks that those excavations that did still occur were motivated more by ‘the excitement of treasure hunting’ than by the hope of significant finds.¹⁰

The thrill of excavation was not, however, the primary objective of archaeology in the mid-nineteenth century. Established in 1865, the Palestine Exploration Fund was founded with the aim of researching the Holy Land.¹¹ Its prospectus proclaimed that ‘no country should be of so much interest to us as that in which the documents of our faith are written’. Archaeology was the primary subject of the Fund, but even geology, especially that concerned with the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, was ‘expected to illuminate Biblical narratives’.¹² The focus on sites with biblical connections must not be underestimated when

⁷ *Ibid.*, 429–30.

⁸ ‘Advertisements’, *New Zealand Herald* 15 (21 October 1878). All articles from New Zealand newspapers are retrieved from <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>>.

⁹ ‘Travels in the Holy Land’, *Southern Times and Dorset County Herald* (5 February 1876), 4.

¹⁰ J. Scott, *The Pleasures of Antiquity* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 236.

¹¹ Quoted in Goren, ‘Scientific organizations as agents of change: the Palestine Exploration Fund, the *Deutsche Verein zur Erforschung Palästinas* and nineteenth-century Palestine’, *Science Direct* 27 (2001), 153–65.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, 154.

considering the reception of classical antiquity at the time, for it is bound up with the dramatic changes that Victorian society faced. With geological discoveries proving the earth to be much older than asserted by biblical authority, and the publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859, Victorian society was undergoing something of a religious existential crisis. As Ruskin memorably wrote in 1851: ‘If only the Geologists would let me alone I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses!’¹³

Archaeology was called upon to help marry everything that had been known with everything that now was understood. There was a desperate search for empirical evidence to provide some basis for biblical stories and to establish a new understanding of what could no longer be taken as absolute fact. Damon was in the midst of this, as a Sunday school teacher and deacon, a geologist, and a correspondent of Charles Darwin. Collecting from Cyprus was perhaps a matter of opportunity and adventure more than anything else, but the focus of his collection of artefacts from Sidon and above all from Tyre must surely have been spurred by this new cultural impetus.

The romance of Tyre

When Damon travelled with the Exploration Fund, the expedition chose a route over land rather than sea ‘partly in order to see Tyre and Sidon’, even if only in passing.¹⁴ Tyre in particular had biblical resonance, as the subject of a lengthy Old Testament passage in which Ezekiel reports God’s threat to lay waste to Tyre.¹⁵ The justification for this destruction gives a detailed account of the city’s trade, intended to express the wealth and arrogance of Tyre. This passage was referred to in many travel articles, and was recommended to the audience of a public lecture on Tyre, in order to visualize the ‘desolation’.¹⁶ To some travellers, who reported that ‘every vestige of the city has disappeared’, the apparent devastation of the site seemed

¹³ E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin. Volume 36. Letters of Ruskin*, (Cambridge, 1909), 115.

¹⁴ R. Conder, ‘The Survey of Palestine: Lieut. Claude R. Conder’s Reports’, *Quarterly Statement – Palestine Exploration Fund* (1873–74), 17.

¹⁵ Ezekiel 26–28.

¹⁶ ‘A Visit to Tyre’, *Reading Mercury* (7 June 1862), 2.

to be the fulfilment of Ezekiel's 'prophecy'.¹⁷ The reception of Tyre's ruins was more nuanced, however. Tyre, like Rome, was thought of as a once great city at the heart of a thriving empire: 'Few cities can boast of a higher antiquity, of grander edifices, and of greater renown, than Tyre.'¹⁸ As the original home of the legendary queen Dido, founder of Carthage, Tyre's mystique was also linked to the *Aeneid* and the tragedy of Dido. Virgil framed Dido's death as foretelling the fall of Carthage, an image poignant enough in the nineteenth century that it inspired Turner's twin paintings depicting the rise and decline of the city. Although historically the fates of Tyre and Carthage were not related, both were Phoenician and linked together as symbols of fallen empire.

An article titled 'The Present State of Tyre' compared the trade of ancient Tyre, so vividly known from the Old Testament, with the produce of the contemporary settlement, whose people were cast as the direct descendants of the fallen empire. The article lapses into poetry on its final note: 'Her harps of gold and enchanting minstrelsy are forever silent, and winds and waves alone lament her departed glory.'¹⁹ Ironically, these lines, and the whole article itself, read as something of a lament for that departed glory, but unwept loss was perhaps more sentimentally appealing. Tyre's fate, rather than being viewed as the long overdue fulfilment of a biblical prophecy, was generally seen as the tragic end of something admirable.²⁰ The ruins of ancient empires were not just pretty remnants of a mysterious past. As Britain climbed to the apex of imperial power, themes of fallen empire held particular resonance. Ruins of places like Tyre were *memento mori* to the civilizations of the present. Thus wrote Byron:

*But Rome decayed, and Athens strewn the plain,
And Tyre's proud piers lie shattered in the main;
Like these thy strength may sink, in ruin hurled,
And Britain fall, bulwark of the world.*²¹

¹⁷ 'The Present State of Tyre', *Coleraine Chronicle* (21 September 1861), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ An 1875 article on a proposed rail network through Syria and Lebanon even comments, regarding ancient Tyre, that 'little weight, however, can be given to anything Ezekiel may have said on the subject'. In contrast to other articles this one describes the contemporary town of Tyre as 'busy, thriving, neat'. With Tyre as a proposed terminus there was incentive in a positive description; nevertheless, it presents a very different view that highlights the exaggeration of the romanticizing accounts. 'Life in Syria', *The Examiner* (10 July 1875), 777.

²¹ G. G. Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (London, 1809).

In the romantic sensibility, melancholy was enjoyable; the warning that present glory could dwindle to similar fragments made remnants of antiquity more powerful in popular imagination.

One can understand, then, why these sites and the artefacts obtained from them were of particular significance in the Victorian period. But we might ask why it was glass, among all other finds, that Damon collected in such quantities. Ancient glass came to public attention, perhaps for the first time, with the vast quantities excavated by Cesnola. As far afield as New Zealand people were eager to learn more about the Cyprus excavations: a letter to the editor of the *Otago Daily Times* requested that an article on Cesnola's excavations be reproduced because it would 'be perused with very much pleasure by a large number' of readers.²² The letter goes on to describe at great length the joy granted from reading this article, even to the extent of quoting passages. Clearly the author had saved the article to pore over again. The sheer age of the artefacts was astounding, and the glimpses of daily life in the distant past entrancing. The letter mentions the glass vessels described, from 'wine bottles and jugs' to 'unguentaries [*sic*] and lachrymatories', and, with excitement, 'an inkstand with the remains of ink!' The familiarity of many objects seems to strike the author, for a joke is made that 'one would hardly have been more surprised had the inkstand been followed up with a number of glass insulators for telegraph posts, with portions of telegraphic apparatus in a good state of preservation'. The author concludes that, for all the vaunting of the technological advancement of the day, the civilizations of the past were not far behind.²³ The combination of ancient and exotic on the one hand, and surprisingly familiar and immediate on the other, seems to have been a potent mixture for capturing imagination and interest.

The ancient glass vessels collected by Robert Damon did not have the presence of mighty columns and heavy capitals, and were usually found in rock-cut tombs that held no grandeur. But they were pieces of the same grand past, and to many the fragility of glass may have been as romantically poignant as more substantial ruins. Most of the vessels in Damon's collection are complete, even those with walls only a millimetre thick. They could easily evoke both melancholy in

²² 'Sphinx', 'Antiquities from Cyprus: To the Editor', *Otago Daily Times* 3530 (29 May 1873).

²³ 'Sphinx' (n. 22).

the face of lost glories and wonder: something so fragile, intact after thousands of years, when the cities of its makers had crumbled away.

Ancient glass also had aesthetic attraction. The colourful iridescence caused by the decay of the glass over time is a feature frequently remarked on in newspaper articles from around the time that Robert Damon was collecting: 'beautiful prismatic colouring similar to the hues displayed by mother-of pearl shell';²⁴ 'all the colours of the rainbow with dazzling intensity – red, orange, green and pink shining out in prismatic colours, like the inside of an oyster shell'.²⁵ Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of iridescence was great enough to be deemed worth imitating, with the Cypriot discoveries described as presenting 'a brilliant and beautiful iridescence such as modern glass manufacturers of the Western world have vainly sought to imitate'.²⁶

Admiration for iridescence on ancient glass had not waned by the time that the Canterbury Museum bought the Damon Collection. A local article remarks: 'It is impossible that human art, however skilful the Phoenicians were in making glass, could have produced these effects, far exceeding in beauty the most exquisite shades of the mother of pearl.'²⁷ One article describes the chemical process by which the effect occurs: it was widely known that the beauty was a result of decay towards inevitable destruction of the material.²⁸ Once again the romance of ruin was evoked in material remains. Nevertheless, this does not sufficiently explain why Damon collected so many near-identical examples of mundane flasks, many of them not only malformed but also caked in more grime than admirable iridescence.

'Lachrymatories'

Physically underwhelming flasks used in antiquity for perfumes and oils make up almost half of the Damon Collection, and three-quarters of the other Roman glass objects in the Canterbury Museum. They are widely represented in many collections. In his catalogue of glass

²⁴ 'Birmingham and Midland Institute Conversazione', *Birmingham Daily Post* (14 January 1874), 5.

²⁵ 'The Roman Remains at Temple-Borough', *Sheffield Independent* (29 November 1877), 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ 'The Museum', *Star* 7087 (1 May 1901).

²⁸ 'Iridescent Glass Making', *Globe* (17 April 1877), 1.

collected by Cesnola, Lightfoot comments that Cesnola's decision to preserve so many perfume bottles was 'remarkable' given their lack of historical significance or intrinsic value.²⁹ We might conclude that they are so numerous in collections merely because they are the most common type of glass vessel among grave goods. Such flasks had, in fact, more intrinsic value in the Victorian period than any other ancient glass object, centred around their identification as 'lachrymatories'.

Items from the Damon Collection were first displayed in 1879 at an exhibition in Damon's home town of Weymouth, an event reported on at great length in local newspapers. Of all the Roman objects he had thus far collected from Tyre and Cyprus, the only ones specifically named were the so-called lachrymatories, described as the 'most noticeable relics'.³⁰ This initially seems baffling, a fact also recognized in the mid-nineteenth century. An 1856 poem in the 'family reading' section of an American periodical begins with a question we may well ask:

*'Tis but a paltry vase,
A fragile glass begrimed with years:
Why keep a thing so base?*

It goes on to supply the answer:

*Ah! Once 'twas moist with human tears.
Hid with a mortal's dust
Full twenty centuries ago,
Black with sepulchral rust,
It speaks to-day of unknown woe.*³¹

The idea that collecting tears in small flasks of pottery or glass was a practice in ancient mourning rituals was not invented by the Victorians. The nineteenth-century popularization of the idea is reflected in newspaper articles which spread and developed an older story. In the work of Shakespeare, for example, we hear Cleopatra chastise Antony for his lack of emotion upon the death of his wife, Fulvia:

²⁹ C. S. Lightfoot, *The Cesnola Collection of Cypriot Art. Ancient Glass* (New York, 2017), 11.

³⁰ 'The School of Art Conversazione', *Southern Times and Dorset County Herald* (22 February 1879), 3–4.

³¹ S.G.W.B. 'A Tear-Bottle from an Ancient Tomb', *The Independent. Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (6 October 1856).

*O most false love!
Where be the sacred vials thou shouldst fill
With sorrowful water? (Antony and Cleopatra 1.3.62–4)*

Similarly, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a play attributed jointly to Shakespeare and John Fletcher, with a mythological Greek setting, a funeral procession is described in which are carried ‘sacred vials filled with tears’ (1.5.5). Shakespeare probably did not originate the idea, inspired as he was by popular histories, but he surely helped to embed the story in common ‘knowledge’. In a 1765 publication of Shakespeare’s works, the commentary for *Antony and Cleopatra* informed the readers that the passage was ‘alluding to the lachrymatory vials, or bottles of tears, which the Romans sometimes put into the urn of a friend’.³²

Authors looked back to biblical authority to provide literary evidence of ancient practices, with archaeological finds in turn corroborating truth within the Bible. An 1843 newspaper report on a Derby Museum exhibition explains:

The curious vessel called a lachrymatory was used at funerals for the reception of tears, which were collected in honour of the deceased. There is a reference to the lachrymatory in the book of Psalms. . . This is an allusion to a well known practice of the ancients. . .³³

It is not clear at what point Psalm 56:8 became associated with ‘lachrymatories’. The connection was made often enough that it prompted Charles Ellicott to write in his 1897 commentary on the Old Testament that ‘we must not, of course, think of lachrymatories’.³⁴ Read in context, this verse certainly has nothing to do with funerary and mourning rituals.³⁵

We often find, however, that by the nineteenth century the idea of the lachrymatory needed no explanation and could be used as metaphor in rhetoric. A report of a political debate at a public meeting

³² S. Johnson and G. Stevens (eds.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (London, 1765). Referred to in M. R. Ridley (ed.), *William Shakespeare. Antony and Cleopatra* (London, 1965), 27–8, which lists several other references to vials of tears in poetry of the same period.

³³ ‘Derby Museum Exhibition’, *Derby Mercury* (30 August 1843), 3.

³⁴ C. Ellicott, *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible. Volume IV. Job–Isaiah* (Eugene, OR, 2016; first published 1897), 167.

³⁵ Psalm 56 is in the words of David, recounting his suffering at the hands of the Philistines. These are sorrows that God has taken account of and will avenge, described in metaphor: ‘You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book’ (verse 8).

in 1832 quotes a speaker: ‘and if the widows and orphans’ tears which they had caused to be shed could be collected into one lachrymatory, they would be sufficient to float all his Majesty’s men of war’.³⁶ Here the speaker’s hyperbole shows that the idea was clearly well known enough to serve as a motif outside of an ancient context. It was not only familiar but also so deeply rooted that the identification could be applied to objects in defiance of logic. Some of the ‘lachrymatories’ in the Canterbury Museum are small slender flasks that could conceivably collect tears. The lachrymatory display, however, also included an example almost twenty centimetres tall with a very broad, flat lip, which should raise questions regarding practicality. Clearly, we are dealing with a story that held very powerful appeal.

As the elaborations of the lachrymatory myth became more common so did insistence from others that the flasks found in ancient tombs were used for ointments or perfumes. The *Tear-Bottle* poem quoted above includes a stanza reflecting that a history as a receptacle for tears makes the humble glass vessel ‘rarer’ than if it were used for storing perfume or wine.³⁷ It essentially acknowledges the more accurate identification but discards it anyway. Even authors who refute the lachrymatory story adopt a similar tone. An article from 1843, reporting the finds from a tumulus in Suffolk, asks the readers to imagine the scene of burial in antiquity, and ‘the glass lachrymatory, filled probably, with some very precious ointment, rather than with their actual tears’.³⁸ The author seeks to recreate the ancient funerary scene, in which ‘the few cherished remains of mortality, which the fire has spared, are brought. . . before the assembled friends and dependants of the deceased, who weep over them’.³⁹ This gives a clue as to why grave goods from antiquity, and ‘lachrymatories’ in particular, were so popular.

The phrase ‘Victorian cult of death’ is often used to describe the mores surrounding nineteenth-century practices of grieving, and the apparent fascination with scenes of dying and death. In the first place, emotional restraint was lauded; the author of the report on the Derby Museum exhibition describes his own time as ‘utilitarian’ and expounds on the lack of ‘proper’ restraint among men of ‘primitive

³⁶ ‘Local Intelligence’, *Chelmsford Chronicle* 3235 (14 December 1832), 4.

³⁷ S.G.W.B. (n. 31).

³⁸ ‘Roman Tumuli at Rougham’, *Bury and Norwich Post, and East Anglian* 3195 (20 September 1843).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

times' and 'uncivilised nations'.⁴⁰ Concurrently, however, there seems to have been a certain delight in discussing funerary and mourning rituals in detail. Visualizing the scene of death, whether in words (as in the article on the Suffolk tumulus) or in imagery, was popular in the Victorian period, even in photographs. An 1858 image titled *Fading Away* romanticizes a young woman's death by tuberculosis, and was apparently popular at exhibitions.⁴¹ The idea of collecting tears in vessels to bury with the deceased's remains romanticizes the grieving process, and, although the idea predates the Victorian period, it is unsurprising that it became so widespread at that time. Patricia Jalland quotes a diary entry from 1872, commenting on a sketch of the writer's deceased brother-in-law: 'Death is horrible but at the first moment there is something beautiful in it too.'⁴² If the Victorians could find beauty in images of death, they could find beauty in objects that had touched death and were a part of funerary rituals. And so, humble scent flasks, perhaps the very cheapest of glass vessels in antiquity, often misshapen, became something beautiful and desirable to the collector of antiquities.

The beauty of 'lachrymatories' was less in the form and more in the associated ideas which appealed to Victorian sensibilities. Studies of Victorian reception of classical antiquity have largely focused on classical authors, particularly poets. These studies may also have something to tell us, however, about the appeal of archaeological artefacts from the tomb. It has been observed that Virgil was beloved by a Victorian audience for his moments of melancholy. Scholars found Virgil's 'deep and tender sensibility' to be completely contrary to their perceived idea of Roman character.⁴³ Nevertheless, parts of the *Aeneid*, particularly the fall of Troy and the tragedy of Dido, provided a connection between the Victorian and Roman worlds, moments that 'seemed to annihilate cultural and historical distance'.⁴⁴ It is likely that objects from ancient tombs provided similar moments, as a connection between the present and a past more vividly imagined through its physical presence in artefacts. Indeed, in research into

⁴⁰ 'Derby Museum Exhibition', 3.

⁴¹ H. P. Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858, discussed in P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford, 1996), 40–1 and pl. 2.

⁴² Jalland, (n. 40), 289.

⁴³ H. W. Garrod, quoted in N. Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997), 145–6. Nineteenth-century scholars attributed Virgil's pathos to some manner of Celtic influence.

⁴⁴ Vance (n. 42), 270.

contemporary displays of classical artefacts, Victoria Donnellan remarks that ‘some visitors make an imaginative leap into empathy with the ancient people, through the physicality of the museum object’.⁴⁵ This was no less true in the nineteenth century.

Connections to the past were no doubt strengthened by resonances between ideas about lachrymatories and Victorian customs related to grieving. Jalland writes about the Victorian need for ‘external symbols of remembrance’, an important aid in the mourning process. Often these were images or jewellery made with hair of the deceased.⁴⁶ According to the lachrymatory story, the vessels were laid in the cinerary urn or tomb of the deceased, and were thus not mementos. Nor were they tokens of the dead kept among the living, but the reverse. Nevertheless, a symbol of remembrance may also be a symbol of grief, a proof of devotion. The idea of a tear bottle appealed to the same sentimentality.

In her article on Victorian relic culture, Deborah Lutz discusses the practice of keeping mementos as a manifestation of the desire to dwell on loss and ‘linger over this evidence of death’s presence woven into the texture of life’. A key point, she observes, is the role of such objects as the impetus for stories, illustrated in many novels of the time.⁴⁷ This is not only true of fiction; as a visible token, mementos invite discussion and provide the opportunity to share memories. So too may ‘lachrymatories’, familiar in sentiment though differing in practice, have invited viewers to discuss the ancient people who once used them, and to imagine their stories. Through lachrymatories Victorians were able to touch the death that surrounded ancient lives.

Such sentiments are evident in nineteenth-century poetry. In Charles Tennyson Turner’s ‘The Lachrymatory’, the titular vessel is the means to conjure spirits of ancient lives cut short:

*From out the grave of one whose budding years
Were cropt short by death, when Rome was in her prime,
I brought the phial of his kinsman’s tears,
There placed, as was the wont of ancient time.*⁴⁸

⁴⁵ V. C. Donnellan, *The Role of Collections of Classical Antiquities in UK Regional Museums. Visitors, Networks, Social Contexts* (London, 2015), 272.

⁴⁶ Jalland (n. 40), 288, 299.

⁴⁷ D. Lutz, ‘The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewellery, and Death Culture’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39 (2011), 127–42.

⁴⁸ C. Tennyson Turner (1864), in F. B. Pinion and M. Pinion, *Collected Sonnets of Charles (Tennyson) Turner* (London, 1988), 66.

And in 'A Tear Bottle', Frank Dempster Sherman plays on the paradox of an object as silent story-teller, aiming to hear the tale of the vessel's ancient past:

*Glass, wherein a Greek girl's tears
Once were gathered as they fell,
After these two thousand years
Is there still no tale to tell?
Buried with her, in her mound
She is dust long since, but you
Only yesterday were found
Iridescent as the dew,—
Fashioned faultlessly, a form
Graceful as was hers whose cheek
Once against you made you warm
While you heard her sorrow speak.
At your lips I listen long
For some whispered word of her,
For some ghostly strain of song
In your haunted heart to stir:
But your crystal lips are dumb,
Hushed the music in your heart:
Ah, if she could only come
Back again and bid it start!
Long is Art, but Life how brief!
And the end seems so unjust:—
This companion of her grief
Here to-day, while she is dust!⁴⁹*

This poem illustrates well the romanticizing of scent flasks. Not only is the premise fallacious, but the poet does not even maintain its consistency, implying that the vessel was buried with the mourner rather than the mourned. The 'tear bottle' is also imagined as having a 'faultless form', though many such flasks are misshapen and bear other signs that show their production was driven by practical demand rather than a desire for objects of aesthetic value.

Edmund Richardson writes that the romantic value of antiquity lay in its 'illusory nature', which gave 'endless creative potential' and made it 'the receptacle for a thousand fantasies'.⁵⁰ Through the romantic lens, 'tear bottles' were the perfect receptacle for a meeting of Victorian and

⁴⁹ F. D. Sherman, 'A Tear Bottle', *Atlantic Monthly* 77 (1896), 186.

⁵⁰ E. Richardson, *Classical Victorians. Scholars, Scoundrels and Generals in Pursuit of Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2013), 102.

ancient Roman or Greek mourning culture. Their connection to death and grief gave entry to imagining ancient life, and imagining it in terms that bridged the distance of time. The 1856 poem 'A Tear-Bottle from an Ancient Tomb' makes the point clear:

*What saith this rude antique?
It saith that on those ancient shores
Of old both Jew and Greek
Did weep like us – had grief like ours.
Oh wonderful sympathy
That binds the scattered sons of men –
The souls that are to be
With those that in the past have been.*

In all ancient grave goods there will have been some sense of connection with the past, but in the 'lachrymatory', the poem tells us, 'there is the sacred bond, the universal bond, of tears'.⁵¹

When the Damon Collection came to Christchurch, tears were more specifically the provenance of widows:

There are a number of bottles called lachrymatories [*sic*], and the story as to the use of these is interesting, even if it is disputed. Every widow was supposed to be possessed of one, and was not allowed to remarry until its production, full of tears, gave practical evidence of her grief for her late departed.⁵²

When exactly this variant emerged is as yet unknown. The focus on widows rather than expressions of grief from all, regardless of gender, perhaps reflects a fin-de-siècle cultural change. The idea of a lachrymatory also appears in different forms among other cultures. Where English literature notably focuses on personal bereavement, French authors of the eighteenth century, by contrast, maintain that lachrymatories were used by professional mourners, with the quantity of tears collected reflecting their skill. In this period no author cites a source for the information they divulge, often simply saying that it is something that is known.⁵³ The variants of tear bottle stories, their differences across cultures, and their change over time are all areas for further study.

The 'universal bond of tears' still seems to thrive in reception of antiquities today: the lachrymatory legend has long outlived the culture

⁵¹ S.G.W.B. (n. 31).

⁵² 'Important Addition to the Museum', *Press* 58 (2 May 1901).

⁵³ J. Labat, *Voyages du père Labat de l'ordre des FF. Prêcheurs, en Espagne et en Italie. Tome IV* (Paris, 1730), 148–9; E. M. Littré, *Histoire naturelle de Plinie traduite en François* (Paris, 1778), 149.

that popularized it. Websites abound that are dedicated to the history of lachrymatories, or selling contemporary examples while citing their use by Egyptians, Romans, and sometimes Greeks.⁵⁴ The practice is typically claimed to have come back into fashion among the Victorians, a story perhaps springing from the prolific use of the idea in metaphors during the nineteenth century. A book published in 2013 includes a small piece on tear bottles that reports it ‘more likely’ they were used for perfume, rather than outright refuting the tear-collection idea, and offers the fallacious nineteenth-century revival of lachrymatory use as fact.⁵⁵ One variant of the story even appears on a contemporary museum label. A Roman scent flask in the collection of the Auckland War Memorial Museum was still on display in 2019 with a label that reads: ‘Small glass bottles like this one were used to hold the tears of mourners and then stored in the tomb of the deceased. When the tears were assumed to have evaporated, the period of mourning was over.’⁵⁶

The persistent misidentification, elaborated with stories that have absolutely no basis in ancient sources, demonstrates how ideas of antiquity have been shaped by the mores of cultures across time, through the development of stories around objects that appeal to contemporary audiences. Such views risk spreading misinformation, but are also testimony to the enduring appeal of artefacts from classical antiquity, and the role they can play in popular imagination.

Conclusion

In spite of a more scientific archaeological method emerging in the nineteenth century, excavation at the time was undertaken by many people, with the allure of adventure adding to the excitement of

⁵⁴ For example, <<https://www.timelesstraditionsgifts.com/history.htm>>, <<http://www.tearbottle.com/>>, and <<https://www.memorials.com/tear-bottles.php>> all sell contemporary tear bottles; <<http://www.lachrymatory.com/>> is dedicated purely to the history of lachrymatory use; and <<http://www.aaronshoulders.ca/tearjar.htm>> gives yet another version of their apparent use by the Greeks and Victorians. Some authors have posted articles online debunking the Victorian layer of the legend: see C. Woodyard, ‘Transparent Fiction: The Myth of the Victorian Tear Bottle’, 16 May 2017, <<http://hauntedohiobooks.com/news/13531/>>; S. Vatomsky, ‘Debunking the Myth of 19th-Century “Tear-Catchers”’, 2 May 2017, <<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/tearcatchers-victorian-myth-bottle>>. All sites accessed 12 January 2020.

⁵⁵ A. Vingerhoets, *Why Only Humans Weep. Unravelling the Mysteries of Tears* (Oxford, 2013), 240.

⁵⁶ Auckland War Memorial Museum, accession no. 1937.17 (no. 12 in the Ancient Worlds room).

discovering artefacts. By the middle of the century, however, archaeology was driven by the need to find a new understanding of biblical sources. The site of ancient Tyre resonated with a Victorian public as both a city of Old Testament fame and a fallen empire whose bygone glory appealed to romantic sensibilities while also serving as a salutary warning to the British Empire. Of the artefacts excavated at Tyre, the glass vessels that Robert Damon collected embodied these ideas in a unique way. Their survival in spite of their often extreme fragility and the beauty of their iridescent decay easily evoked thoughts of ruin and memory, of both the endurance and the ephemerality of all human endeavour. Among glass vessels, flasks, erroneously identified as lachrymatories, had especially broad appeal and intrinsic value for their association with similar ideas on a more personal, individual level. Through the resonances of the lachrymatory story with Victorian mourning customs, people were able to make an empathetic link through these objects to people of the distant past.

ROSWYN WILTSHIRE

St Cross College, University of Oxford, UK

roswyn.wiltshire@stx.ox.ac.uk