

Animations of Ancient Vase Scenes in the Classics Classroom

by Sonya Nevin

Introduction

‘That’s amazing! I can see what he’s doing.’ These words, from a thirteen-year old boy in London, were extremely encouraging. Moments earlier he had been complaining that our imminent ancient history session would stop him playing pool. At his words, his friends looked up from online gaming, and they too began taking an interest in images of ancient vases and learning about ancient warfare. An hour later they hit the pool tables, but for the duration of our after-school session, these reluctant learners had engaged well and taken real pleasure in finding out about the ancient world.

The material that sparked that vital initial interest was an animation made

from a scene on an ancient vase. I was playing *Well-Wishers* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/well-wishers.html#.VKmCSJVybIU> on a loop behind me as I prepared for the session; they saw a *dexiosis* scene on a classical amphora come to life, with a departing warrior bidding farewell to his family. The interest sparked by *Well-Wishers* drew them in for the start of the session and, as the session went on, they seemed to feel rewarded for their continued attention by the occasional playing of further vase animations. Where a static image might well have fallen flat as a visual aid, animation rose to the occasion.

Video and online content play a greater part in people’s lives than ever before. Young people in particular tend to

be enthusiastic about watching and learning through video. For this reason, it is important for Classics as a discipline to be able to respond by offering classically-themed video material of a high standard. Some material of this sort does of course exist. The *Classics Confidential* <http://classicsconfidential.co.uk/> interviews are an excellent example of research in an accessible format. Ray Lawrence’s cartoons about childhood in Rome (made by *Cognitive Media*) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juWYhMoDTN0> are research-backed yet light-hearted and accessible. The *Panoply* vase animations fill an important niche by offering videos that focus on ancient artefacts. In this article I will outline what materials the *Panoply Vase Animation Project* has available and several straightforward ways to include them in a teaching session. I have made extensive use of the animations for teaching BA students, children and teenagers, and many teachers have shared positive feedback about using them. The remarks that follow will be based on these experiences.

The Panoply Vase Animation Project

Animator Steve Simons and I create these vase animations in order to increase engagement with and understanding of ancient vases and classical culture. Steve works as closely as possible with the



Figure 1. | A Screenshot from *Well-Wishers*, made from an Attic amphora (Beazley 9028595).

original images, meaning that the animations keep people's attention on the actual artefacts. In the case of *Well-Wishers*, the *dexiosis* scene is simply acted out and the men shake hands. Likewise, in *The Runners* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/the-runners.html#.VKmFcpVyBIU>, athletes depicted on a fragment run across the shard, acting out the scene in which they appear. Others are more involved, telling short stories that explore the actions and relationships depicted in the original scenes. Steve's knowledge of physiology and fighting techniques informs the movements of the figures; he has said of this work that, 'Paying attention to the small details of movements, such as the slight sway of standing characters, blinking, and the head movements people make when they are watching others, can make all the difference in producing a believable animation.' I advise on aspects of ancient culture that are relevant to the look of the action, on reconstruction, and on aspects of the characters' behaviour. In some cases, such as *Hoplites! Greeks at War* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/everysoldier.html#.VKG0oDpABg>, *Clash of the Dicers* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/clash-of-the-dicers.html#.VLfP2pVyBIU>, and *Hermes' Favour* www.panoply.org.uk/hermes-favour.html we worked together to develop the storylines of the animations (Nevin, 2015). In others, the stories were planned by teenagers engaged on the

museum outreach projects, *Ure View* and *Ure Discovery*.¹ More recently, MA students at University College Dublin developed the plot of *The Procession* www.panoply.org.uk/the-procession.html as part of a module on material culture.² The students' knowledge of ancient culture equipped them to interpret the vase scene effectively and they had the guidance of curator Jo Day and myself to help them to develop a story that would be of educational benefit to viewers as well as being enjoyable to watch. Most of the animations are around 30 seconds to a minute in length, the exception being 2014's *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, which is eight minutes. In 2012 we launched www.panoply.org.uk, which make the animations available online, complete with educational resources and guidance on the manner in which the animations interpret and represent myths and history.

Teaching about vases

When Greek vases themselves are the topic of a teaching session, the animations make a particularly useful resource. Ideally students would watch the animations before, during or after a visit to a vase gallery, when watching the animations would enrich and extend the impact of the visit, but they also support vase-study conducted in the classroom alone.³ *Clash of the Dicers* is the strongest example, as it is made from an Exekias

vase that most Classical Civilisation students study, but the essential benefits apply to the study of any vases.

Communicating the arts of paying close attention and observing detail are core elements of Classical Civilisation teaching; when it comes to vase iconography, the animations encourage both. Watching the animations is an enjoyable activity in itself, which contributes to a relaxed and open atmosphere that is conducive to learning. That makes for a minute well-spent, but there are aspects that develop this benefit further. The pleasure of watching animations encourages students to keep looking at the vase scenes, extending their concentration on (and potentially their interest in) the iconography. Through the story content they are helped to understand the themes in the scenes, while the movement helps them to notice visual clues by drawing their attention to details. One of the advantages of teaching iconography with animation is that the movement is itself an aid to learning. Take Achilles' helmet on the Exekias vase, for example. The introduction of movement through the animation of the helmet forces greater recognition of its presence. So if a teacher wishes students to remember that one of the heroes is wearing a helmet, or which one of them is wearing a helmet, or all the things that they want to tell them about the significance of the helmet, the fact that those students have seen it move in *Clash* means that the information is more likely to register long-term.⁴ With animations made from vases that are not the specific topic of study, learners still benefit from the greater sense they gain of the way in which the various details in a scene contribute to the meaning of the whole.

Because of the animation of body parts, with muscles working and limbs moving, the contrasts between different styles of vase and different qualities of pieces are more pronounced in animation than in static images. For this reason, comparing the black figures in *Dance Off* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/dance-off.html#.VMPpdpVyBIU> with the red figures in *The Procession* www.panoply.org.uk/the-procession.html will help to demonstrate the difference between these two styles. Static images demonstrate the principle; animation can re-enforce and clarify it. Vase animations can also help learners to recognise the dynamic



Figure 2. | MA students, Eoin and Courtney, planning a vase animation for the University College Dublin Classical Museum.



Figure 3. | A quarrel breaks out in *Clash of the Dicers*, made from Exekias' amphora, (Vatican Museum 344).

potential of the vase scenes they are studying. Students who are new to vases can struggle to interpret implied movement as implied movement. When they watch any vase animations it can help them to make that step to interpret further scenes of implied movement more readily and more thoroughly.⁵ In this sense, watching vase animations with students teaches them to be more active (as well as, perhaps, more engaged) interpreters of vase scenes. They are more able to recognise that scenes of implied movement contain an inherently dynamic quality.

Choosing animations by theme

Vase animations can make a useful contribution to classes even when vases themselves are not the specified subject under discussion. When the subject matter of an animation corresponds to the subject of the session, vase animations offer a lively aid and can be used to springboard into related activities.

As mentioned above, *Clash of the Dicers* depicts Achilles and Ajax gaming. Panoply has had lots of positive responses from teachers in the UK and beyond who have shown this animation as part of an introduction to the Trojan War. Teachers can simply show *Clash of the Dicers* as a piece of extra media in their session, supporting an introduction to the characters, to the Trojan War or to its popularity as a subject in ancient art. The lack of dialogue in the animations has helped to make them popular internationally. In addition to the thousands of international views identifiable through web analytics, we have received feedback from teachers including a secondary-school Classics teacher in Costa Rica who shows the animation within introductions to the *Iliad*, and a secondary-school language teacher in Athens who wanted something informal and recognisably Troy-themed that the students could discuss in French.

Similarly, when it is time to teach ancient athletics or the Olympic Games,

the topic alone makes an animation such as *The Runners* or *The Cheat* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/clash-of-the-dicers.html#.VKGOeDpABg> appropriate. When the running scene comes to life, the athletics theme of the decoration is emphasised and reinforced through action. In *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, www.panoply.org.uk/everysoldier.html#.VKGOeDpABg, a warrior trains, sacrifices, fights and celebrates victory. *Hoplites!* therefore complements classes on topics such as citizenship or ancient warfare, or on something more specific such as the Peloponnesian War. The vase's fight scene is expanded into a more extensive depiction of combat, emphasising and reinforcing the vase's original decorative theme. Key topics are illustrated by the events of the animations while their grounding in ancient artwork keeps the illustrating material artefact-based and communicates classical culture's own exploration of those topics.

These are some of the topics that can be enlivened by Panoply animations:

- **Athletics and Sports:** *The Cheat*, *Runners*, *The Love of Honour*, *Dance Off*, *Pelops*, *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, *Hermes' Favour*.
- **Citizenship:** *Well-Wishers* (for family or for warfare as a citizen's duty), *Hoplites! Greeks at War*.
- **Gods, Goddesses, and Religion:** *Eros and Aphrodite*, *Sirens* (includes Persephone's abduction), *The Procession*; *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, *Hoplites! trailer* (both feature a liver examination), *The Cheat*, *Runners*, *Hermes' Favour*.
- **Horses / Chariots:** *The Cheat*, *Amazon*, *Pelops*.



Figures 4 and 5. | Watching animations of different styles of vases helps to clarify the nature of those differences, as with *Dance Off* (left), Ure Museum, (REDMG: 1951.130.1) and *The Procession* (right) (UCD Classical Museum, UCD 197).

- **Monsters:** *Plant Food, Sirens, Heracles, Medusa.*
- **Myth:** *Clash of the Dicers, Pandora, Heracles, Pelops, Medusa, Amazon, Sirens, Eros and Aphrodite.*
- **Symposium:** *The Love of Honour.*
- **Troy / Homer:** *Clash of the Dicers, Amazon.*
- **Warfare:** *Hoplites! Greeks at War, Hoplites! trailer, Well-Wishers, Combat, Amazon, Clash of the Dicers.*
- **Women:** *Pandora, Medusa, Amazon, Sirens, Eros and Aphrodite, Well-Wishers, Plant Food, The Love of Honour.*

The animations can also form a focal point for discussions. For example, in *Pelops* <http://www.panoply.org.uk/pelops.html#.VMPpxZVyIU>, one of the chariots breaks apart. Showing the animation could act as a focal point for a discussion of chariot racing more generally, with a teacher using the animation to stimulate learners' interest and then to help them to think about chariots as moving vehicles. *What do they know about how chariots would have worked? What can they deduce? Why might a chariot break?* Alternatively, a teacher presenting the origin of the Olympic Games might recount the myth of Pelops, including the tradition that Pelops' opponent, Hippodameia's father, would start second in his races, staying behind to sacrifice a ram (as told by Diodorus, 4.73.4). In the animation's retelling of the myth, with a

story created by teenagers, Hippodameia's father is delayed because he is drinking. After watching the animation together, a teacher might ask their students to work together by discussing the different impacts that are created by the different versions. *What are the differences in the stories' messages? Which do they prefer? Why?* This is a great way to get students thinking about myth, particularly as it will raise their awareness of the existence of different (sometimes contradictory) mythic traditions. It is also an effective way to develop their thinking about the interpretive consequences of narrative features. There is no right or wrong answer to which tradition they prefer, so they can talk about the idea openly. As an informal activity, the animation will have disarmed them, helping the discussion to get off to a good start; because watching the animation feels like a fun activity, follow-up discussions do not feel too dry even if the subject matter is quite challenging.

Each animation on the website comes with extra material to support teachers in leading class discussions. There is information on the myths and history featured in the vase scenes and animations, information on the vases themselves, discussions of the interpretations of the original scenes, related images, links to relevant texts (mostly to the Perseus site), and suggestions for further reading and activities. *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, for example, is accompanied by images and information about war in ancient Greece, details on the vase and its use and creation, a downloadable activity sheet

with a scalable lesson plan and slides, and an extensive collection of example artwork which has been collected from project workshops. Even if a teacher had never taught an ancient warfare topic before, the combination of materials would make it straightforward to deliver a class.

Activities

Animations offer a springboard to a host of further activities. The activities suggested here can be chosen or adapted to suit different audiences and different desired learning outcomes. The activity that has been explored most in relation to the vase animations is storyboarding. Storyboarding involves planning a visual narrative by breaking a story down into key frames, showing what a scene would look like and providing just a small amount of explanatory text. Storyboarding is good for holistic thinkers. Learners who favour that style respond well to the way that a big topic is considered overall and *then* broken down into its components. It is also good for other sorts of learners to work with too, as it develops their capacity to do exactly that – to see the big picture as well as the constituent parts.⁶ This activity is now quite widespread in teaching generally and teachers may already use it in any number of contexts. It is a particularly effective exercise for thinking about story-construction. Those engaged in it must decide what is important about the story they are communicating—what does or does not need explaining to the audience, and what would need explaining to an animator or director working from this guide. The visual aspect helps to develop understanding of the different values communicated by different visual prompts.

To incorporate this into a class, students could watch a vase animation or two to understand the concept. They might then look at an example storyboard, such as those provided on the website. After that they would spend time studying a vase, interpreting the scene, and then working together to develop a story from it before planning that story out as a storyboard. This activity encourages close attention and projection. They must look closely at the scene in order to develop it into action and they must use their understanding of ancient



Figure 6. | Battle scene from *Hoplites! Greeks at War* (above), which was created from Ure Museum vase 56.8.8 (below, Figure 7: detail)

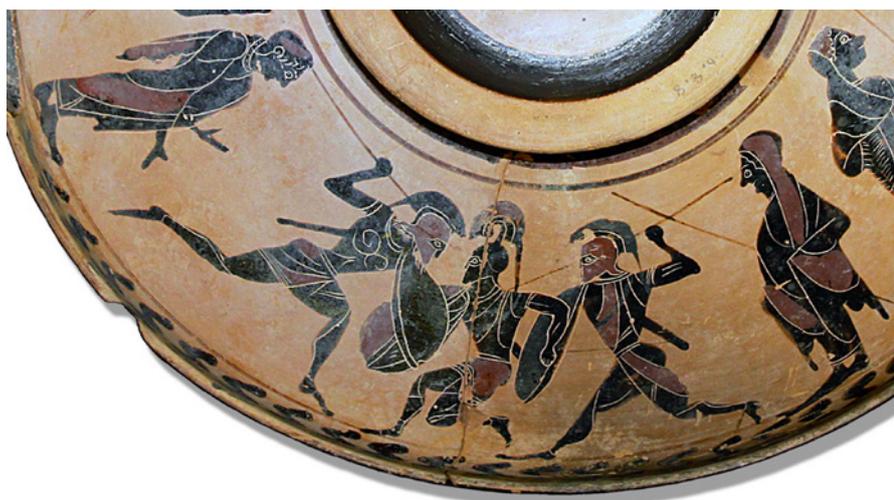


Figure 7. |

culture and of life more generally in order to decide together what those characters are likely to do, and what they would want them to do, if they could move.

Storyboarding with vases also draws on the motivating power of outcome-orientated learning. The students are motivated in their analysis of the artefacts by the fact that they are going to *do* something with the images on them. Looking at vases ceases to be a passive experience; instead it becomes one of creative engagement, which strengthens their understanding of the artefacts and of characterisation, narrative, and communication. This activity can also help students to recognise the various pitfalls and potentials of interpretation. If a class of 30 works in pairs to create 15 different interpretations of a vase scene, this will help those 30 learners to recognise that interpretation is a subjective experience – their interpretation has value, but there are multiple ways that a thing can be perceived. Learners might also be pushed to consider and discuss the nature of the difference between a static and a moving image.⁷

Writing scripts for the animations provides students with an opportunity to improve their expression of character and their literacy. *Clash of the Dicers* and *Well-Wishers* work particularly well for this activity. If it is practical, teachers can help students to record their dialogue and play it along with the animation. Teachers could watch the animations with their class, and then ask the students to consider what is happening, which characters would talk when, and what they are likely to be saying. Another means of using this classical material to strengthen

literacy is to challenge students to write reviews of a vase animation of their choice. They might be asked to comment on how the original scene has been interpreted, how the myth or history behind the scene has been represented, the choice of music or the movement and actions of the figures. This could also involve challenging students to identify where new material has been created and incorporated, once again leading them to observe closely the details of the original artefact.

Another stimulating challenge is to invite learners to become virtual curators, in which they must choose artefacts (perhaps from a specified online museum catalogue) to express a particular theme. They should consider audience interaction with their virtual display, and might like to choose an existing animation to go in their display (and explain their choice), or to storyboard an animation from one of the pieces they have chosen, like a commissioning curator. This activity offers an opportunity for learners to judge how appropriate a piece is to the explanation of a theme. This offers a positive opportunity for learners to picture themselves in a professional role, in which thinking about the needs of others challenges them to draw on their own knowledge and judgement. During the 2014 project at UCD, MA students had the opportunity to engage in this activity for real, selecting the vase to be animated, working as a group to storyboard the animation, and writing and setting-up a supporting exhibition. These activities stretched them to go beyond thinking of what they would find amusing in an animation to considering themselves

as curators and picturing themselves using the exhibition, including the animation, to teach visiting school groups about vases and ancient festivals. This activity has clear vocational benefits that help to develop learners' confidence and their experience as communicators. Being able to do this for real is ideal, but the process of judging and explaining can be explored even when the situation is theoretical.

In Conclusion

The Panoply vase animations offer something that is visually stimulating and technologically intriguing with a core element of ancient culture that recommends them for use with a range of topics and activities. The *Panoply website* www.panoply.org.uk houses all the animations mentioned above; many of them can be seen in galleries alongside their accompanying vases. The website is full of example storyboards and suggestions for activities. Teachers, university students and sixth-formers may enjoy exploring the information on the website, including the blog which offers news and interviews with academics and a student museum intern: <http://panoplyclassicsandanimation.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/museum-internships-interview-with.html>. Young (and not so young) people often spend a lot of time online. Helping students to make use of Panoply's vase animations and perhaps to

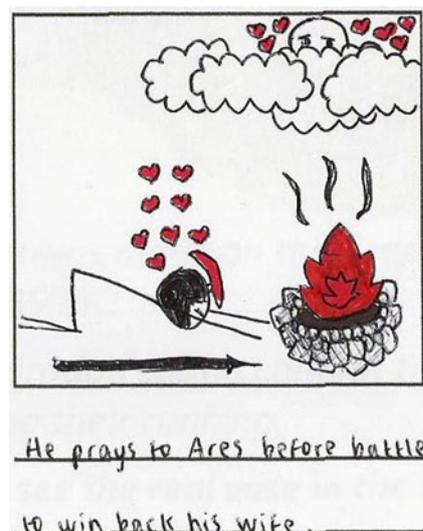


Figure 8. | "He prays to Ares before battle to win back his wife." A frame from a storyboard created in response to *Hoplites! Greeks at War* and Ure Museum vase 56.8.8

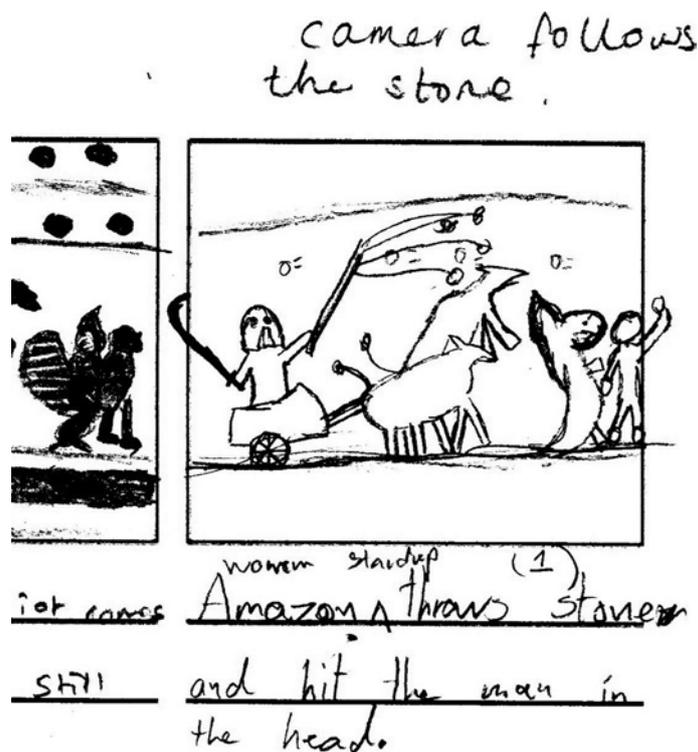


Figure 9. | “Camera follows the stone. Amazon woman stands up and throws stone and hit the man in the head.” A frame from a storyboard for the teenager-planned animation *Amazon*, created from Ure Museum vase 26.12.11.

explore the website is an effective way to expose them to good digital content and to model positive internet use. Sharing the animations with them also communicates the relevance that Classics still has in the digital age, where artefacts and classical culture continue to inspire creativity and new uses of technology.

This year will see the release of new animations and there are plans to continue expanding into new collections, including vases on the Classical Civilisation curricula. Try them in the classroom and find the way to use them that best suits you.

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¹Funded by the AHRC and coordinated by the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology, University of Reading, in 2011-12 and 2012-13. See <http://www.panoply.org.uk/ure-discovery.html> and Smith and Nevin (2014) for further details.

²A project funded by the UCD College of Arts and Celtic Studies, 2014-15. A national competition funded by the Classical Association of Ireland Teachers is currently offering under-18s in Ireland the opportunity to determine the plot of a new animation that will be made from the same vase as *The Procession*.

³On which see Cox-Petersen (2001) and Wetterlund (2008). Vase animations can be seen with their corresponding vases in the Ure Museum in Reading, Berkshire, and in the UCD Classical Museum, Dublin. The animations have been shown in galleries without their corresponding vases in the Nyon Roman Museum, the Leipzig University Museum of Antiquities, and The Winnipeg Art Gallery. A new animation made for the Kallos Gallery in London will be released later in 2015. There are plans to expand into further vase collections in the near future.

⁴People do not always learn technical skills better by watching animations (rather than diagrams) depicting of those skills, but when it comes to humanities-based subjects, images (such as vase scenes) containing implied movement stimulate mental animation when object and situational knowledge are present. Therefore, once learners have been exposed to vase scenes and to vase animations, they are more likely to recall details associated with movement in images they have seen move (such as the helmet) and more likely to interpret similar scenes (i.e. any vase scenes) in terms of movement. For results relating to learning technical skills, see Kim et al. (2007). For evidence of improved comprehension of image and narrative, see Torre (2014) and Coventry et al. (2013).

⁵See above note.

⁶Colón Semenza (2008); Woolland (2008).

⁷There is superb support for approaching storyboarding with ancient material in Fotheringham and Brooker (2013) pp. 168ff, which includes an analysis of contrasting storyboard representations of the *Aeneid*.