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Animating Antiquity:
An Interview with Classical Scholar Sonya Nevin
and Animator Steve K. Simons, *thersites* 3 (2016) 37-48.

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Dr Sonya Nevin and Steve K Simons work together on the Panoply Vase Animation Project, creating short animations from the scenes decorating ancient Greek vases. The project website (www.panoply.org.uk) features the animations alongside information about classical culture and ideas for teaching activities. Their animations have appeared in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology in Reading, the University College Dublin Classical Museum, and the National Museum in Warsaw. Steve K Simons is the project's animator. He studied multi-media art and design in Dublin after working as a software engineer and I.T. trainer in the UK and Ireland. He specialises in creating animations from ancient artefacts. Sonya Nevin is a Researcher at the University of Roehampton in London. Her work focuses on historiography, religion in ancient Greek warfare, and classical reception. She is the author of *Military Leaders and Sacred Space in Classical Greek Warfare: Temples, Sanctuaries and Conflict in Antiquity* (I.B. Tauris). Her other publications include 'Animating Ancient Warfare: The Spectacle of War in the Panoply Vase Animations' in *War as Spectacle: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Combat* (Bloomsbury).

thersites: Could you tell us in a few sentences what the Panoply Vase Animation Project is about?

Sonya: The project uses the scenes decorating ancient Greek vases as a medium for creating animations. We use the original artefacts themselves in order to help people enjoy and engage with actual artefacts and to get a feel for ancient culture. We provide a lot of supporting material to go with the animations so that people have the opportunity to follow-up and learn more.

thersites: How did you develop this idea? And how did you get to know each other?

Sonya: We're actually married and we've been together for twenty years this year! I've been investigating classical history for a good few years now, while

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Steve has always had the artistic ability and technical skills. When I was completing my doctorate I chanced to get some ancient world Playmobile figures and thought it would be fun to make some ancient world stories from them. I shot them in stop-motion and Steve worked them into an animation. They proved more popular than we expected, and it became clear that there was an appetite for lively material with a good grounding in the classical world, so we considered how to satisfy that appetite. Using ancient artwork seemed a better way to bring antiquity to life, so Steve developed the techniques for creating the vase animations and I began developing ideas for using them educationally.



Steve Simons and Sonya Nevin (middle and right) at Westminster for an Arts in Parliament showcase, with Amy Smith (left), curator of the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology. Steve holds a vase animation tablet trail that can be taken around.

thersites: What is the main purpose of Panoply? In which contexts are the animations actually shown?

Sonya: The main purpose of the animations is to improve people's engagement with ancient vases and ancient culture. Video and animation are an important part of modern culture; fitting vases into that presents ancient artefacts in a way that increases their approachability and people's interest in and understanding of the vase scenes. Offering that bit of inspiration can encourage people to investigate further. People who already appreciate vases tend to like seeing something creative done with the artefacts they love, while for others, it may be the first time that they think, 'oh – ancient vases can be appealing' – and then maybe they look more...

The ideal way to see the animations is in a museum where visitors can see the vase and its animation together, with the animation on a tablet or mounted screen. This enhances their appreciation of the vase and encourages them to spend longer with it. Some animations have been displayed in museums where the actual vase they're made from isn't present but other vases are. For example, the Antikensammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin lent some antiquities to the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Canada for the Olympus exhibition, and the WAG license selection of our animations that could be viewed in between the vases. That format is great too; it encourages people to see the vitality in the vases around them, or to understand how pieces of equipment might have been used. Then there are the views outside the museum. They get huge views in the schoolroom as they're an effective way to bring a bit of life to classes about vases or about the subjects of the animations – warfare, athletics, myth, and so on. And there are a lot of people, adults mostly, who simply like watching them online for leisure. People in every corner of the world have watched them – it's a great testament to the appeal of classical material.

thersites: What is your target audience and why?

Sonya: Our website is aimed primarily at secondary school teachers (with pupils aged 11-18). There is a lot of information to compliment the topic of each animation, such as links to ancient literature and modern scholarship, examples of related vases, and worksheets and activity suggestions. We designed it this way so that teachers have a lot to choose from information-wise, and they can pick what will suit them and their class. I also published an article in *The Journal of Classics Teaching* which offers suggestions on how to use the animations in class. We aimed at this audience because their pupils

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are at a stage when they may begin to study classical culture and vases in detail while flexibility in class for the inclusion of creativity and multi-media is still important pedagogically. That said, I have used the animations successfully in undergraduate classes and I know plenty of other lecturers who do too. And plenty of teachers use them with primary aged classes as well (5-11) and we're developing that aspect of the website at the moment. Essentially any age group can enjoy them and only the accompanying discussion needs to adapt for the audience.

Young museum visitors watch vase animations in viewing boxes between cases at the Winnipeg Art Gallery *Olympus* exhibition, Canada.



thersites: What are the main (educational) advantages in watching moving images over static ones?

Sonya: Quite a lot of research indicates that animation is good educationally because the way it catches people's attention helps them to engage and to remember some sorts of detail. Once someone's engaged, they're more susceptible to learning. Likewise there is a 'serious fun' element to the animations, whereby watching them feels informal although it's still a learning activity focussed on ancient artefacts. That fun feeling can be beneficial in the classroom because it encourages openness to learning as well as adding variety. Another educational advantage is the way that the animations help

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people to see the vitality and implied movement in the scenes. That can help with interpretation skills, while the linked activities should encourage learners to explore the implications of the interpretation – that is, to think about their own interpretation and about issues of subjectivity more broadly. But the animations are not intended for use on their own – ideally pupils will study the static images on real vases, and the static images in photographs and reproductions, as well as the animations. They belong together.

thersites: *animare* means to enliven: Isn't that part a bit frightening like wakening an ancient sleeping beast?

Sonya: Well, yes! Perhaps waking all these gorgons will prove trouble in the long run! Particularly when we made the first animation, *Clash of the Divers*, there was something magical about that first moment of Achilles blinking on that well-known vase. It was amazing. And we knew it was special when we showed it for the first time at a museology conference and all these classicists and archaeologists gasped in delight. It was great. And that's something that young children quite often say when you watch with them – 'It's on the pot but it's like it's alive.' Brilliant.

thersites: What would an ancient artist or craftsman think about what you do to their work? Have you ever thought about this?

Steve: [Laughs] Great question. Sometimes I think that ancient artists would be amazed and delighted just with the fact that their work is still known and celebrated after all this time. As for the animations, I'd like to think that they would enjoy them – I'm sure they would. They'd want to do their own versions! Given that most of the vases we work with come from ages that knew drama and had very sophisticated ways of visualising stories and ideas the concept would be easy for them to grasp straightaway.

thersites: Do you feel that the vases were meant for setting them in motion? At least in an imaginary way by implied movement?

Sonya: Well some of them certainly contain implied movement. Artists took such care in how they rendered muscle and other aspects of the physical form and in the way that they depicted gesture, feet positions, or swirling cloth that you know they are expressing movement. Sometimes this creates the impression of a snapshot of an ongoing event with clear indications of what happened before or after – those scenes really invite storytelling, storyboarding, and animation. And then there are vases with repeat figures, such

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as the cup used in *The Cheat* and *Hermes' Favour* which has runners all around the exterior. That suggests movement in a different way that also lends itself to animation. Not all vases have those sorts of scene though. Some take a composite approach to a story and put items from different parts of the story together in defiance of chronology. We haven't tried to animate one of those; it would be possible, but there's no benefit to doing it when there are so many more appropriate options.

Vase animations on display at the University College Classical Museum alongside



the vase they were made from.

thersites: How do people usually react to your project?

Steve: People are very positive – they smile and point out some of the details they've noticed. As Sonya said, young children tend to want to describe what's happening – that the people on the pot have come alive. People who like vases like that something creative is being done with them; sometimes they suggest vases that they'd like to see animated. And people who don't usually like vases can be engaged in conversations about antiquity very easily through the vase-animations. We get nice emails from teachers saying how much they've enjoyed sharing them with their class. We love seeing the art-

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work people do in response – pictures, storyboards, stories, pottery. It's very pleasing to be part of that.

thersites: If somebody confronted you accusing you of rendering 'venerable' classical material cartoonish and infantile, what would your response be?

Sonya: [Laughs] Well, everyone's entitled to their own opinion! Firstly I would reassure them that no vases are harmed in the making of the animations - the work is entirely non-invasive. So any problem is purely in the mind, and as for that, I would say that the image of classical culture is robust enough to cope! More than that, artistic responses to classical art are entirely in-keeping with the traditions of art history, from Roman art to Wedgwood pots and Art Deco illustrations. And perhaps the most important thing is that we're encouraging young people and others to explore artefacts and the classical world. That's a good thing in itself and it will help to protect the future of classical scholarship.

thersites: Are there actually any influential art works, movies or even cartoons that you model the animations upon?

Steve: The animations have a touch of Karagiozis about them – from the traditional Greek shadow puppets. Working in 2d gives you that relationship with the traditions of shadow-puppetry and I think that style of work has a really enduring charm.

Hoplites! Greeks at War took some influence from cinema when we were thinking about ways that post-battle battlefields are represented. We were re-watching some favourites with that in mind, such as Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* (1966), and even *300* (2006). We both love animation and have been influenced by many great films, shorts and series from *Adventure Time*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* to anime classics like *Ninja Scroll*, *Akira*, and the Studio Ghibli films and, going further back, *Pingu*, *Morph*, and all of Oliver Postgate's work such as *Bagpuss* and *The Clangers*. Around the time we made the first stop-motion animations Sonya was digging out classically-themed cartoons to show at student society events: *Ulysses 31*, *The Mighty Hercules* from the 60s, *Asterix*... maybe that helped to put the idea into our heads.

thersites: Does the project feel more like art or like scholarship? How does your interdisciplinary cross-over actually work in action?

Sonya: Hmm, I suppose it's fair to say it's art first and scholarship second. The artistic element lies in judging and enacting the reconstructive elements and in actually doing the animation of the figures – that means trying to understand the dynamics of each character and getting their exact movements and timing right. The influence of scholarship lies in the interpretation of details – in *The Symposium*, for example, I knew that a particular object should be made of metal which meant that Steve added a metallic sound-effect to the moment when it falls. Sometimes it's a matter of character emphasis – having a better idea of what an ancient character would do. The cross-over was perhaps most pronounced in *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, our longest animation. I drew on my familiarity with ancient warfare to determine what the key events would be and answered Steve's tricky questions about how things should be held and used and so on. The next division of labour is in our presentation to the public – Steve produces the classically themed designs for products in our online shop, and he built and maintains the website. I write the content for the website and worksheets and do the talks and workshops.

thersites: How do you choose the vases you are going to animate? What are the criteria?

Steve: It depends on a variety of factors. From a practical perspective, it's useful if the curve of the vase is not too severe, so that the characters have some space to play in; kraters and amphoras work well, for example, while we'd prefer to give alabastrons a miss. It's useful if the vase is in good condition. Then the subject matter comes into consideration. Museums tend to prefer working with vases that they use in their education programmes, which often means synching with curriculum topics. We're just finishing *The Symposium* for the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, featuring a black-figure cup with a symposium scene. Symposiums are a topic that all classical civilisation pupils study at some point and one which non-classics pupils can readily get on board with. It's also preferable to choose a vase-scene that will be clarified by the animation – one where moving the figures will help viewers to see what the figures are doing. In the case of *The Symposium*, the movement helps to pick the individual figures out of the mass of black, and it draws attention to details such as symposiasts sharing a cup and the presence of musical instruments.

thersites: Take us through the whole process: what are the necessary steps that have to be taken in order to create such an animation?

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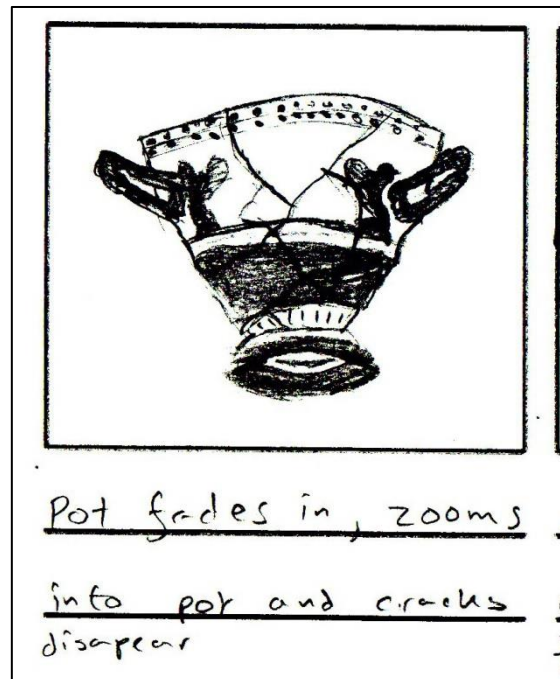
Steve: To start with we agree the overall story, which is then detailed in a storyboard that plans out what will happen stage-by-stage. We source high-quality photographs of the vase, then I cut the figures and other details out of that image. I prepare a surface behind them, using the undecorated surface from the rest of the vase as a guide – that gives a stage on which the figures can move without revealing gaps. The figures themselves must be prepared. I re-work original artwork as much as possible. I'm guided by other, contemporary vases and by Sonya's knowledge of the subject. Sometimes you need a character to turn around or, say, turn their hand over, so I need to create other versions of characters' heads or limbs so that when they turn there's something there. Imagine a figure is lying down concealing one arm; that concealed arm doesn't exist, so I would need to make one if that character is to sit-up. Once all the bits I need are created, the figures are rigged in the animation software, essentially building skeletons for them. Once they're ready to go they're animated digitally. We review constantly to decide if the actions look right or need altering. Once it's essentially complete I map music to it, and then see if any tweaks should be made to the animation to work better with the music. When we're happy with that it's time to add credits, then to render the file together. Job done. Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, but you get the gist!

thersites: How long does it take to produce one clip?

Steve: Each minute of animation takes about a month to produce. Animation is obsessive, painstaking work. You get to know the vase in crazy detail.

thersites: Where do the narratives come from? How are they developed?

Steve: It's a mixture. The ones coming up we're developing within a project about mythology, so we worked out the narratives together thinking about how we could explore different aspects of myth. So we're thinking about what the scenes are, what movements would develop naturally from them, who the characters are and what their motivations are, and we're also thinking about what aspects of mythology and Greek religion could be expressed through those actions. The animation for the Ashmolean Museum we developed in consultation with the director of Classics in Communities, Mai Musié, Clare Corey, an Ashmolean education officer, and Thomas Mannack, Oxford University Reader in Classical Iconography. The narrative we created together reflects the scene and wider values of classical culture.



An extract from a young person's storyboard, based on an ancient vase

Sonya: On other projects the narratives have come from young people or trainee professionals. *The Procession*, for example, was funded by University College Dublin and came out of sessions with Masters students studying ancient material culture. They were planning an exhibition for the UCD Classical Museum and I worked with them to help them develop a storyboard for an animation which would complement that exhibition and improve museum visitors' engagement with and understand of the vase scene. They did a great job. Then the Classical Association of Ireland Teachers sponsored a schools' storyboarding competition and teenagers from all over Ireland sent in ideas for the same vase. The winners' entry was made into *Bad Karma*, which is also on display in the museum. This was partly inspired by the success of projects we were involved in at the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology at the University of Reading. These were projects in which teenagers learned about Greek vases over the course of several weeks and developed storyboards based on a selection of pieces. They did a great job

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too and their commitment was fantastic. Steve and I still had to interpret their storyboards but the ideas were all theirs; the animations can be seen in a tablet trail in the museum. The curator, Amy Smith, and I published a reflection on the process in *Advancing Engagement: A Handbook for Academic Museums* (Museums Etc 2015). Overall I prefer the approach in which we direct the content more closely, but all the projects have worked out well in their own ways.

thersites: What is the source of the music?

Steve: Music is such an important part of an animation's atmosphere, especially when there's no dialogue. For that reason I often use ancient-style music. The unusual sounds and tones distance the animations from the everyday and strengthen their ancient aspect. The experimental music archaeology scene is very dynamic so there is great music available. The Oxford symposium animation features a piece of *aulos* music by Barnaby Brown, a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge who specialises in early pipe music. Many of the animations feature music for *aulos* and *kithara* by Conrad Steinmann and Stefan Hegal. For *Hoplites! Greeks at War*, I adapted a piece of music that was specially created for the animation by composer John White via the Thiasos Theatre Company. That's a very striking piece of music – people quite often comment on what a haunting atmosphere it lends to the animation. A couple are more modern pieces and one is even a remix I made of the sound of feet running on gravel. Getting to collaborate with musicians is a really enjoyable part of the process, and I love having the opportunity to give the musicians a different outlet for their work.

thersites: What are your experiences with working in museums? Do you think you will benefit from the ongoing change in museum culture?

Sonya: Working with museums has been a very positive experience. More than ever there's a desire in museums to be active in engaging people's interest – to reach out and communicate in a variety of ways and to celebrate the diverse ways that people respond to collections. We have fitted into that very well as the animations offer people a new and intriguing way of looking at artefacts and invite further creative responses. The animations also work well online of course, and that's an environment that a lot of museums have embraced in a very positive way. The idea to licence vase-animations to show without the presence of the vases they were made from came from curators. They got in touch and asked about it, showing a very open-minded

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approach. All in all we have a lot of the same objectives: to get people excited about artefacts and collections.

thersites: What animation are you working on right now? Or do you want to surprise us?

Steve: *The Symposium* will be out very soon. I hope you love it – it's a fun piece made from a beautiful vase. Then, come October, we'll begin working on five animations for the National Museum in Warsaw. This is part of a really exciting project called *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, which is funded by the European Research Council and led by Prof Katarzyna Marciniak of the University of Warsaw. The project is examining how Greco-Roman myth has influenced and been adapted for children and young people's literature and culture. We are contributing by making new material to inspire and entertain the children of today and tomorrow. Three of the animations will go into the Museum's newly designed permanent gallery and all of them will be available online. We're always open to new collaborations too, so who knows what will be next?!

thersites: Thank you very much for your time!

Steve: It's been a pleasure.