

HUMANITIES WRITING COMPETITION INFORMATION 2025–6

1. LR 1110

Object name: Leigong figurine

https://lrc.girton.cam.ac.uk/object-record.php?get_object_record=1132



Material: wood, metal

Height: approx. 30 cm

Place: China

Date: late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Acquisition source: Professor David McMullen, 2020; acquired from Cheffins auction house, Cambridge

A Chinese Daoist deity known as the "Thunder God" who is called on to punish evildoers. One arm is raised with a clenched fist which would have grasped a thunderbolt or hammer.

2. LR 1060

Object name: Eye idol

https://lrc.girton.cam.ac.uk/object-record.php?get_object_record=1076



Material: alabaster, plaster

Height: 4.2 cm

Place: Tell Brak, Syria

Date: BCE 3700-3600

Acquisition source: Dr Joan Oates, 2010

The 'eye temple' at Tell Brak, Syria, discovered by Professor Max Mallowan, husband of Agatha Christie, has yielded thousands of the enigmatic alabaster 'eye idols'. This example, found by Mallowan in 1937-8, was given to the Lawrence Room by Dr Joan Oates, a Fellow of Girton, who headed further excavations at Tell Brak in 1976-1993. They date from the middle to late Uruk period of the Mesopotamian civilisation, c. B.C. 3700-3600 and may represent the worshippers who placed them there as offerings, gazing respectfully at the divinity who they hoped would bring them healing.

3. LR 427

Object name: Apis bull figure

https://lrc.girton.cam.ac.uk/object-record.php?get_object_record=427



Material: bronze

Height: 8 cm

Place: Egypt

Date: BC 664–525

Acquisition source: Gwendolen Crewdson, 1918–19

This miniature figure, finely cast in the round, represents Apis, a deity in the shape of a bull who was worshipped in the Memphis region of Egypt. Apis was the son of Hathor, goddess of the sky. He was frequently shown, as here, with a disc between his horns representing the sun, and was believed to embody courage, strength and spirit, the qualities of a king. This figurine is also decorated with winged scarabs. Small statues like this were commonly given as votive offerings to gods at temples to secure particular favours for the donor.

4. LR 450

Object name: Seated man

https://lrc.girton.cam.ac.uk/object-record.php?get_object_record=450



Material: wood

Height: 10.7 cm

Place: Egypt

Date: BCE 2055-1985

Acquisition source: unknown – donated to the Lawrence Room before 1935

From the late Old Kingdom to the late Middle Kingdom periods of ancient Egypt (about 2246-1840 BCE), carved wooden figurines representing people engaged in everyday tasks, transport or the giving of offerings were often placed in the tombs of high-status individuals, perhaps as a way of ensuring they had the means to survive in the next world. Many elaborate multi-figure tableaux have been preserved, but often these figurines survive only as isolated items without any known provenance, as is the case with this one. He may have been seated in a model boat.

5. LR 822A–C

Object name: Bronze casket fittings (822A pictured)

https://lrc.girton.cam.ac.uk/object-record.php?get_object_record=824





Material: bronze, iron

Dimensions: each approximately 4 cm diameter

Place: Roman cremation grave II, Girton

Date: AD 100–200

Acquisition source: Excavation at Girton College, 1881

Eight bronze bosses in the shape of lion heads, originally fittings for a wooden casket, were found in one of the two Roman graves in the Roman and early medieval cemetery on the college site. (Three of them are in the Lawrence Room, the other five in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.) The same grave

contained some pottery and a glass jar with cremated human remains, which have recently been carbon-dated to 250–350 AD, considerably later than the date of the pottery. The Girton cemetery is unusual in containing Roman and early medieval burials side by side and may help to throw light on the transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England.

Some connecting themes:

The magical power attributed to objects

The divine, the animal and the human

How should museums deal with unprovenanced, fragmentary or heavily reconstructed artefacts?

Culture in times of chaos and transition

The tension between museum displays and religious/cultural beliefs

Anything else an object suggests to you!

Some starting points for research:

Check out our social media, where we will be discussing each object - @girtonoutreach on Instagram and @girtoncollege on TikTok!

Leigong:

<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/lei-gong-deity>

Eye idols:

[Augusta McMahon's chapter on Eye Idols](#)

Seated man and Egyptian wooden funerary figures:

<https://arce.org/resource/wooden-funerary-models-a-snapshot-in-time/>

https://woodenfuneraryfigures.abasetcollections.com/Info/Details/4?f=Further_Reading

Roman bronze casket fittings:

<https://www.girton.cam.ac.uk/about-girton/art-artefacts/lawrence-room> [talk by Emma Brownlee, 'Rethinking the Roman to Early Medieval Transition at Girton's Cemetery', especially at 22 minutes]