It is a commonplace that we know antiquity through our collections – from the Renaissance via the Grand Tour to the imperial excavations and appropriations of the 19th century. Less obvious is the fact that so much of what modernity has collected was itself the product of varieties of collections in antiquity, which packaged the past and the present for its own needs, much as modern museums do now. Among the most famous Sumerian sculptures are the effigies of Gudea, Prince of Lagash, made (well before the period mainly under discussion in this book) in the impressive and hard black stone called diorite towards the end of the third millennium BCE. These were excavated by the French at the Mesopotamian site of Telloh after the 1870s and most are in the Louvre. What is less well known is that Telloh became a Hellenistic palace in the 2nd century BCE, where the local ruler, Adad-nadin-ahhe, a subject of the Seleucid king, excavated the Gudea statues (which were already 2000 years old by his time). He made a collection of his findings, had his scholars read and identify the ancient Sumerian script and re-displayed the Gudea material in his own palace on the site. Preserving and copying the clay bricks with inscriptions from Gudea’s time, Adad-nadin-ahhe added his own brick with an inscription in Greek and Aramaic proclaiming his place in an invented tradition of continuity between himself and Gudea, which his collection had established (Bahrami, 2014: 217–33). Some of our prime prehistoric monuments from the dawn of art history turn out to have been items in a Greco-Babylonian collection.

As the essays in this book prove – alongside a rich recent spate of publication on ancient collecting, well attested in this volume’s bibliographies – the practice of collecting in Greek and Roman antiquity was a fundamental aspect of cultural life among the ancient elite. Collecting is an activity known in prehistoric times, as attested by the assemblages of ancient and foreign objects in elite tombs from the 10th century BCE and after (Duplouy, 2006: 151–83). But it is particularly marked by developments in the Hellenistic and Roman period. Alongside the collection of original works from earlier cultures and contexts (not only archaic, Classical Greek and Hellenistic art, but also Egyptian and Middle Eastern works), went a rich process of copying and emulation that created many new objects in a variety of distinct old styles and forms, particularly during the Roman Empire. The focus in this volume is on material culture and especially on portable works of art. But at the heart of the collecting of objects at any time is an instinct to value certain items of the present or the past, from one’s own culture or from another’s, as well as to select and display them in contexts to which such exhibition adds lustre. That impetus to select, put together, display and curate – with all its significance for social memory, for creating identity in relation to a chosen set of pasts, for framing the conceptual environment of modernity at any given time – is broader than simply the collection of objects.

In this brief Afterword to the book, I wish to make two moves beyond the traditional history of collecting artefacts in antiquity. First, I shall place that process alongside the collection of texts, as part of the same impulse within both the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. The collecting of objects is the material instantiation of processes of thought and classification, as well as the variety of ideological moves such processes determine, that are equally demonstrated (if in somewhat different ways perhaps) by the compilation and selecting of texts. Second, I shall suggest that in addition to being a significant engine for social and cultural self-definition within antiquity, the processes and methods of ancient collecting form a fundamental frame for our own understanding of the ancient world. I shall argue that collecting is not merely an important ontological fact of how antiquity was, but a vital epistemological frame for how we grasp antiquity today.

The nexus of selection, classification, display and aesthetic value which our evidence for ancient collecting reveals – with all the ideological freighting that these procedures carry – is no less true of texts (poems, histories, natural histories) and epigraphic documents. These too were collected, copied, selected, classified and anthologized for display in papyrus rolls and later codices, in ways parallel to the collecting of objects, by elite collectors within the same social sphere as those who focused on works of material culture. Effectively, one may argue that one of the ways that the ancient world functioned was by a constant re-appropriation of the panoply of its pasts (literary and material) made canonical, replicated, taxonomised, reinvented throughout the Hellenistic and Roman eras. The numerous florilegia, anthologies, collections of table-talk – in effect, the disparate antiquarianism of Hellenistic and Roman literary culture in both
Greek and Latin – are the textual correlate of the collections of objects. Moreover, texts in antiquity are no less material-cultural than other forms of object, since they had to be painstakingly selected, epitomized and copied on papyrus rolls just as earlier works of art were collected and copied in paint, mosaic, marble or bronze. They came, as rolls and later as codices, to sit in those very specific collections known as libraries, some (like that in the House of the Papyri at Herculaneum) belonging to private individuals but many with a more public role (König, Oikonomopoulou & Woolf, 2013). Indeed, libraries in antiquity were prime sites for the display of art (Pergamon: Conqueugniot, 2013; Roma: Petrain, 2013).

Ancient Collections and the Ordering of Knowledge

Collections, as a series of material embodiments of the past, selected, set out in a particular order, labelled, rearranged over the years, form a lived-conceptual frame in three-dimensions for the people whom they surround. In this sense they instantiate the orders of knowledge that at given times dominate and structure the attitudes and concerns of a population. Much work has been done in recent years on ancient knowledge – its relations with power, its forms of classification, its structuring of social thought (e.g. Barton, 1994; König & Whitmarsh, 2007). Notably, the models for structuring thought in a large polity like the Roman Empire have both global and local varieties, which different emphases and different gestures of ancestralism (empire-wide knowledge: Murphy, 2004: 49–73; local knowledge: Whitmarsh, 2010). Significantly, the different pressures on the ordering of knowledge in cosmopolitan and local contexts, with different centripetal and centrifugal drives, gave rise to a culture of scholarly and commentarial writing, of florilegia and anthologies, of dictionaries and encyclopaedias from the establishment of the Mouseion in Alexandria through to the middle ages and beyond (encyclopaedism: König & Woolf, 2013). The modern scholarship on this process has not sufficiently seen material culture, and in particular the history of collecting, as the three-dimensional equivalent of the same patterns of taxonomy and classification, governed within the royal, oligarchic and imperial contexts of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, by the same drives and desires. Yet it is the case not only that public collecting and display operated under closely parallel conceptual constraints such that public libraries and public space for viewing art are parallel models of artistic munificence in the late Republic and early Empire (Nicholls, 2013), but that its reach and dissemination to the populace went way beyond that of texts in a culture of limited literacy. A good example of a collection functioning within Roman antiquity as a tool-kit for the creation of new replicas and versions, is the clear evidence of the imperial Mint in Roma possessing a collection of Republican coins which were closely copied in the imperial period (Gallia, 2012: 222–4). One of the things ancient collections taught, simply through the experience of living among them, was a paradigm of how thinking itself was structured.

The range of agendas to which collecting could be put was as large as the range of ideological drives that governed the ancient world. These include the fabrication of false memories (such as the link between Gudea and Adad-nadin-ahhe) and the servicing of parochial claims (for instance, those of every Classical and Hellenistic polis) – both of these models in potential resistance to the pressures of a larger centralizing hegemonic power. The selective strategies of the centre itself were no less varied. The great Greek foundation of Alexandria displayed prime Egyptian antiquities from Pharaonic times in a collection arranged around the famous lighthouse (e.g. McKenzie, 2007: 43–5), making a claim that was simultaneously about multiculturalism in a kingdom that looked both to Greek and to ancient Egyptian culture, and about the dominance of old Egypt by the Makedonian Ptolemaioi. The Roman state’s extraordinary emphasis on the display of Greek and to some extent Egyptian art in its capital city, as well as remarkable quantities of high-quality imitations of these styles and forms, went alongside what appears to be a systematic reluctance to collect or display Iberian, Punic, Gallic or Germanic objects. The absence stresses firmly where cultural priorities lay within the empire. Collecting not only preserved and invented memory within specific contexts (from an individual’s collection to those of cities and capitals), but also allowed experiments in hybridity and assimilation – for instance in the arts of Hellenistic Kommagene in Asia Minor which not only look East to Persia and West to a world fast becoming dominated by the Roman Empire, but announce this mingling in an intriguing inscription of Antiokhos 1, which orders statues and reliefs to be made ‘according to the ancient logos of Greeks and Persians – blessed roots of my clan’ (Dittenberger, 1903: vol. 1, 597, no. 383, line 30). In texts, multilingualism (for instance the inscriptions on the Rosetta stone, see e.g. Parkinson, 2005) and translation (such as the rendering of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint, see Rajak, 2009) are parallel models for this kind of hybridizing transmission.