

ADVERTISING IDENTITIES: ANTIQUITY AND MODERN NATIONS ON THE TRADE CARDS OF THE LIEBIG EXTRACT OF MEAT COMPANY

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The invention of a concentrated beef extract by the German chemist Justus von Liebig in 1847 and its large-scale production and commercialisation from 1862 led to an unprecedented innovation in the food industry. As a cheap substitute of meat, the new product impacted domestic lives across social strata and soon became an unavoidable ingredient of any kitchen. The Liebig Meat Extract was an outcome of Second Industrial Revolution and its rapid and wide spread can be also related with the significant political and social developments that transformed Europe following the Revolutions of 1848. But Liebig's commercial success was further the consequence of another innovation that no doubt contributed to its immense popularity. From 1872, the product was associated to a very imaginative and infallible advertising strategy that would also become a model of inspiration for future commercial brands: the canned product included a collectable trade card with two cooking recipes on the one side and a colourful illustration accompanied by an explanatory label on the other. These lithographies – some were even commissioned to famous artists – depicted stories and themes that were grouped in sets of six cards. History and cultural traditions featured prominently on the cards, and among them events and characters from Classical Antiquity largely contributed to the customary imagery associated with the brand from its outset to the mid 1950s. While some series featuring universal themes were widely distributed across nations, others circulated more locally and were adapted to specific traditions, identities and cultural expectations of particular countries. Despite their undisputable relevance as signs and testimonies of 19th and 20th centuries European cultural ideologies and *Zeitgeist*, the Liebig cards have been widely overlooked so far as historical evidence. My contribution proposes an insight into particular ancient events and characters depicted on cards that were created – exclusively or not – for countries such as Belgium, France, Germany and Italy in specific moments of their history as modern nations. Processes such as the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the unifications of Italy and Germany, the Third Republic in France, the expansion of European colonialisms and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the Greek War of Independence, the First World War, the rise of fascism and Nazism and the Second World War will be considered as relevant catalysers of renewed and revisionist ideas about classical traditions and their inheritance. My paper will specifically analyse the Liebig cards as powerful didactical and propagandistic tools that, beyond the grandiloquent discourses and messages from the realms of politics and public life, managed to penetrate and impact on domestic and everyday lives. Ultimately, I will try to demonstrate that these trade cards provide a valuable historical instrument to better understand the different ways through which collective memories shape national identities. The present research is part of a broader project entitled *Branding Antiquity* and coordinated by Filippo Carlà (Exeter) and myself, which investigates the uses of Classical Antiquity in modern advertising.