



# The Visual Cultures of Classical Greece

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- Introduction [3/10]
- What is “Greek” about Greek art [17/10]
- **Nemea – Olympia – Delphi field trip [20-21/10]**
- Narrativity and story-telling [24/10]
- Monumentality [25/10]
- The visual cultures of Greek pottery [31/10]
- **National Museum class [10/11]**
- **Midterms [14/11]**
- Materiality [21/11]
- Agency [28/11]
- *Mimesis* [5/12]
- Realism [12/12]
- **Acropolis Museum class [15/12; 15:00-17:00]**

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# Agency

*Reading:*

Whitley 2018: 579-595 (in Smith & Plantzos).

Plantzos 2020.

# Materiality:

- “thingly” quality of artifacts
- an object’s **self-value as inanimate thing**, enabling it to act as animate agent
- the **physical properties** of a cultural artifact affect the way the object is used
- artifacts, a priori perceived as passive and inert ‘creations’ subject to human volition, **have the capacity to interact with their makers**, users, or viewers
- The extent to which human lives are allowed to be ***entangled*** with the life of artifacts

# Materiality vs Materialism

- **Materialism** holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are results of material interactions of material things.
- Philosophical materialism: mind and consciousness are by-products of material processes (such as the function of the human brain and nervous system).
- The notion of **materiality**: because objects have **self-value as inanimate things**, they are imbued with a quasi-mental state or quasi consciousness that affords **the capacity to interact with their makers**, users, or viewers

# Distributed person(hood):

- personhood is distributed through inanimate objects carrying a human subject's agency
- social, not biological ontologies
- neither spatially nor temporarily contained
- 'dividual' rather than individuals
- human agents: 'dehumanized' cultural biographies
- social persons, 'present, not just in their singular bodies, but in everything in their surroundings which bears witness to their existence, their attributes, and their agency' (Gell)
- material agencies interfere with human fields of vision in order to re-center social dynamics and cultural flows







**Dexileos stele.  
c. 394 BCE**

# Agents of social meaning

- separate entity
- forging social identity for their dedicant
- discriminatory tools
- mediators between their dedicants and the divinities they portray, in fact mediate their dedicants' social importance to their viewers, as it is them whom they are addressing
- vocal reading / performance on behalf of the viewer

# What is “agency”?

- Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (1998)
- ‘what lies behind the seductive power of Art’ is
  - neither its aesthetic deftness
  - nor its ability to act as a highly sophisticated, and profoundly suggestive, language
- Art not a matter ‘of meaning and communication’...
- Instead: ‘about *doing*’
- Agency: artifacts (including *objets d’art*) function as material entities which interact with their viewers and users by motivating their response.



# Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.31.1-5

When Solon had provoked him by saying that the affairs of Tellus were so fortunate, Croesus asked who he thought was next, fully expecting to win second prize. Solon answered, “Cleobis and Biton.

[2] They were of Argive stock, had enough to live on, and on top of this had great bodily strength. Both had won prizes in the athletic contests, and this story is told about them: there was a festival of Hera in Argos, and their mother absolutely had to be conveyed to the temple by a team of oxen. But their oxen had not come back from the fields in time, so the youths took the yoke upon their own shoulders under constraint of time. They drew the wagon, with their mother riding atop it, traveling five miles until they arrived at the temple.

[3] When they had done this and had been seen by the entire gathering, their lives came to an excellent end, and in their case the god made clear that for human beings it is a better thing to die than to live. The Argive men stood around the youths and congratulated them on their strength; the Argive women congratulated their mother for having borne such children.

[4] She was overjoyed at the feat and at the praise, so **she stood before the image** and prayed that the goddess might grant the best thing for man to her children Cleobis and Biton, who had given great honor to the goddess.

[5] After this prayer they sacrificed and feasted. The youths then lay down in the temple and went to sleep and never rose again; death held them there. The Argives **made and dedicated** at Delphi **statues of them as being the best of men.**”

ΧΗΡΑΜΝΗΞΜΑΝΞΘΙΚΕΝΤΗΡΗΙΑΓΑΛΜΑ

**A kore from Samos.  
c. 560 BCE**



# Monumentality:

- an imposing three-dimensional presence affecting the viewer through the force of the materials it is made of
- *totem*: a sacred object endowed with its own materiality, which enables communication between the world of the spirits and the world of humans
- totems recognized by animistic religions as distributors of spiritual power and human reverence
- triangular relation between man, spirit and the mediator between the two
- entangled agents of cultural interaction

XHPAMVHXMAYEIKANTHPHIAΓALMA







# Monumentality:



- **Animism:** the religious belief that objects, places and creatures possess a distinct spiritual essence.
- animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, human handiwork and perhaps even words: animated and alive
- In Greece: statues endowed with soul (*empsychia*) or breath (*empnoa*)

# Art(ifact) and agency:

- animistic / totemic agents: quasi-prosthetic members of the personages they represent – human or divine (Gell)
- distributed person(hood)
- ocular
- temporal
- performative
- agency: a relational manifestation, ‘a process of becoming’ rather than a state of being – or having been made



ΘΕΡΣΙΟΣ ΕΜΙ ΣΑΜΑ  
ΜΗ ΜΕ ΑΝΟΙΓΕ



EPMOTIMO EMI

D. Plantzos, “For good ye are and bad, and like to coins”: why bother with seal impressions. P.P. Iossif, Fr. De Callataÿ, και R. Veymiers (ed), ΤΥΠΟΙ. Greek and Roman Coins through their Images. Noble Issuers, Humble Users? (2018), 481-490.



**Krater.**  
**6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.**









AXILARY

A.I.S.



# ***Mimesis***

*Reading:*

Plantzos 2016: 142-155; 171-179.

Plantzos 2018: ch. 5.

Halliwell, S. 2002. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.