

# Cultural Messages in the Graeco-Roman World

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The past, it is often stated, is buried. One implication of this might be that the past can be uncovered or excavated. Scholars studying the ancient world, of course, know that there are limits to the interpretation of excavations, and of the material finds which are often, but not exclusively, the result of these excavations. This volume aims to explore some ways in which (and the extent towards which) substantial questions about ancient culture may be answered through an analysis of material sources. It consequently deals with a subject that has been at the heart of the *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* since its very foundation in 1926.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, like the various articles published in *BABesch* - since 2008 *BABESCH* -, the contents of this volume range from the early Greek until the late Roman period. It thus attempts to give a supra-regional and diachronic, although inevitably highly selective, overview of the various modes in which cultural messages may be traced from ancient material sources.

## CULTURAL MESSAGES AND THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

Clearly, this volume does not attempt to trace (diachronic) developments in either the culture of 'the ancient world' itself, nor in the study of 'the ancient world'. Indeed, it could be argued that the ancient world does not exist as anything other than a modern construct.<sup>2</sup> Yet, undoubtedly, there are certain notions that bind together not only ancient Greece and Rome, but also the various modes in which these cultures are studied today. Most importantly, perhaps, the history of ancient Greece and Rome is central to the cultural framework of modern western society. Although this obviously does not mean that Greek and Roman culture was superior to that of other societies, it does seem valid to claim that 'it is precisely the centrality of Classics to all forms of our cultural politics that binds Western civilisation to its heritage'.<sup>3</sup> Because of this centrality, among others aspects, ancient Greece and Rome have been (and can be) fruitfully studied as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

If the decision to look at the Graeco-Roman world as, in some ways, coherent can be considered somewhat traditional, the choice to take material culture as starting point is much less so. Until a

relatively recent past, the primacy of the written word remained virtually unchallenged in classical scholarship, while material sources were largely considered as, at best, a mode of confirming and illustrating literary testimonies. This situation has of course changed tremendously, as is demonstrated, among numerous other examples, by the way in which material and literary evidence are employed side-by-side in some recent handbooks on various periods of classical history.<sup>5</sup> Still, scholarship foregrounding material evidence in order to study ancient culture (often social history), generally focuses on groups that are under-represented in written sources. In this way, material remains become the privileged means to trace the histories of those people who were not part of the literate elites.<sup>6</sup>

This volume has a somewhat different focus. Rather than singling out specific groups or events, it concentrates on two (broad) central areas of classical culture, which were consistently (though not invariably) important to life in ancient Greece and Rome. Two areas, moreover, for which the material record is relatively abundant: funerary culture and domestic culture. It needs to be stressed from the outset that this volume does neither seek to present a general overview of ancient behaviour towards life and death, nor to sketch patterns of change from Greece to Rome in ways of living, or commemorating the dead. Instead, the volume hopes to exemplify some methods with which ancient material evidence may be usefully exploited, while drawing attention to some of the historical and theoretical pitfalls in doing so. To this end, three case studies on funerary culture and three on domestic culture are brought together. Diachronically and geographically diverse in scope, these cases nevertheless centre on the same questions: What messages are communicated by ancient material culture, and how are these messages valued or devalued? How does material culture become meaningful, in ancient as well as contemporary contexts? And what kind of conclusions on cultural norms and social or hierarchical distinctions can one draw by looking at ancient material sources? Consequently, the study of 'cultural messages' in the Graeco-Roman world not only informs the individual cases, but also provides the central topic of this volume as a whole.

The term 'cultural messages', like 'classics', is hardly a neutral one. Pointing simultaneously to classical scholarship and to more recently developed (inter)disciplines such as cultural studies and communication theory, the study of ancient cultural messages can only be positioned somewhere on the brink between antiquity and the present. It is well known that the traditional *Altertumswissenschaft* - German classical archaeology and ancient history in particular - has generally been somewhat reluctant as to the historical uses of contemporary theory. For example, compared to other critical traditions in the humanities and social sciences, scholarship on ancient material culture has remained relatively untouched by the radical critique of knowledge and representation that has been advanced by post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Deleuze.<sup>7</sup> This doubt, however understandable, seems unwarranted, since a contemporary theoretical perspective enables, rather than interferes with a critical understanding of the historical significance of material culture in classical antiquity. This is especially the case with regard to the analysis of past cultural meanings and messages - the question of how material culture generates meaning, or how cultural meanings actually come to 'matter'.

It is imperative to emphasize that the 'classics' form one of the most important 'roots' not only of contemporary western culture in general, but also of post-modern theory and historiography. Consequently, as Paul Allen Miller has recently argued: 'Postmodernism represents not the rejection of the classical tradition but precisely its revitalization as a living means of thought'.<sup>8</sup> A critical focus on the ways in which classical and contemporary culture are both different and interrelated also serves as a corrective to the well-known contention that from a post-modern perspective 'anything goes'. This claim is still prevalent in many, but certainly not all, of the more traditional branches of classical scholarship, even though it confuses a deconstructive reading of the past - i.e. an approach that privileges historicity and multiplicity over transcendence and unity - with the most banal forms of relativism or nihilism.<sup>9</sup> This reading of post-modern historical practice not only repeats some of the worst academic clichés, but actually reinforces the epistemological inaccuracies it seeks to contest.

Indeed, a post-modern emphasis on the multiple, ambiguous, or contingent ways in which meaning *per se* is constituted and negotiated, does not imply that, within a specific signifying context, just any meaning may obtain. On the contrary, the very

notion of signification as an unstable, open-ended, yet highly contextual process serves to analyse the complex interplay in which specific material *realia* actually become meaningful. In other words, while any cultural message - whether text or artefact - is invariably communicated within an ever-shifting network of multiple and contradictory meanings, it still produces singular meaning-effects that may be subjected to a concrete historical inquiry. In fact, in order to explore the specificity of past signifiatory processes, it is vitally important to recognize that cultural messages are not only 'embedded in' but largely 'constituted by' specific, yet discontinuous and changing, historical, social, and material frameworks. This insight seems particularly acute in these post-post-modern days, where a renewed nostalgia for fixed meanings and stable historical identities surfaces in critical thought in the form of 'post-theoretical' discourse and practice. It is equally important to point out that the relatively new emphasis on the personal and affective dimensions of meaning-production in the ancient world do not (or, in any case, *should* not) result in mere speculation as to the way any single individual might have responded to a given cultural artefact. A sensitive theoretical approach rather seeks to explore the specific ways in which the 'personal experience' of any cultural message - past as well as present - is historically, materially, and discursively constituted.<sup>10</sup>

#### MATERIAL CULTURE AND CULTURAL MESSAGES

This volume, then, takes as its premise that looking at modes to analyse cultural messages in the classical world is a valuable approach to the study of antiquity. To this end, we have invited archaeologists and ancient historians whose research has shown their interest in larger methodological and theoretical questions, as well as their willingness to combine the different forms of evidence that are at our disposal, in order to explore how an analysis of ancient material sources may sustain certain conclusions regarding large social and cultural phenomena. Apart from inviting the authors to contribute to current discussions on 'funerary culture' and 'domestic culture' respectively, we have imposed no restrictions on their exact subject matter (although, as we had hoped, they all stayed close to their own area of expertise, which allowed for a balanced division between articles dealing with topics from the Greek and Roman past). In our opinion, the result is a highly interesting mixture of different kinds of studies, all emphasising the critical importance of context -

local, geographical, and in terms of materiality - in any sustainable analysis of ancient cultural messages.

With the exception of Elaine Gazda, who, as we had asked, has kindly indicated new questions and directions in recent scholarship on Roman art in the private sphere - a topic that is greatly indebted to her research and stimulus -, all authors have been casuistic in their approach. The types of cases were very different, with limitations in subject matter, geographical range, and the type of material which was analysed. Noticeably, though perhaps inevitably, many of the articles stress ambiguity. This may well reflect our current state of knowledge, as well as some of the trends in contemporary studies of material culture. Recently, there has been a tendency to undertake more focused, in-depth regional case studies, which apart from anything else have begun to clarify the ways in which the same type of material evidence can have completely different meanings depending on such contextual factors as time, place and socio-cultural location. Even an apparent homogeneity of material, in other words, cannot provide sufficient evidence for homogeneous developments.

The structure of this book closely follows the structure of the workshop. Unfortunately, for reasons of time, Miguel John Versluys, who presented the opening lecture, has been unable to contribute his paper on 'Egyptian style artefacts in Imperial Rome', better, though not entirely correctly, known as *Aegyptiaca*. Discussing both funerary and domestic culture, his paper explicitly and consistently analysed how cultural messages differ when used in different contexts. Versluys argued that the Egyptian style, so often seen as context, should rather be seen in its different contexts, in order to draw meaningful conclusions.

Similarly, different contexts are central to Maria Stamatopoulou's article on 'Totenmahl reliefs', the depictions of funerary banquets in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Stamatopoulou shows how a certain visual repertoire can be widely diffused, but still must be checked by contemporary social realities at a local level. She highlights some indications of temporal or, especially, regional trends, pointing to various iconographic features that set one region apart from the next. Such regional differentiations, as well as the developing popularity of the reliefs over time, enable a critical analysis of the dynamics of multiple social and cultural realities of the ancient world. Perhaps it might even be possible to discern a relationship between typology and ethnicity in the grave *stelai*.

Ted Kaizer discusses funerary religion in Palmyra. Like the previous author, he also touches on images of funerary banquets, which in his case are depicted on the walls of the impressive Palmyrene funerary tombs. These images, however, can be (and have been) interpreted both as entirely profane, and as evidence for 'posthumous banquets'. Indeed, within the relatively abundant funerary source material from Palmyra, there is a significant absence of unambiguous references to 'funerary cults'. This absence, according to Kaizer, contrasts sharply with the dominant world of Palmyrene gods. Consequently, the material sources suggest that funerary life in Palmyra has been a business of individual families rather than a civic concern. Yet a lack of evidence for funerary cult does not mean that the funerary imagery was without significance. Kaizer notes that religious images from one area could become agents of the religious notions that they originally depicted in the new area to which they were introduced.

Rita Amedick, too, notices a remarkable absence within a relatively abundant source material: Roman sarcophagi. Although much research has been devoted to this topic in general, a sarcophagus belonging to an emperor has not yet been positively identified. Starting from the notion that sarcophagi are to be understood as monuments to ensure posthumous fame, Amedick sees them as reflecting social conditions. She particularly questions the various modes in which sarcophagi could be used to express the social distinctions structuring ancient Roman culture. On the basis of a highly detailed discussion of the various types of sarcophagi that were commissioned by persons of different ranks, the author concludes that the elaborateness (or lack of ornamentation) of a sarcophagus does not necessarily indicate the rank of the person buried in it. Much more important was the context, and the material used. It is a false assumption, though a common one, to link imperial sarcophagi (and their presumed ostentation) to those of magistrates, simply because other representations of emperors were also similar to those of magistrates. Instead, Amedick argues that the 'proper' Roman expression of social distinction in this context was conveyed by a grandeur that could not be copied (or only at great costs). She suggests that strigilated porphyry sarcophagi might well be what we ought to be looking for. But, if this is the case, what does that imply for other strigilated sarcophagi? Within a particular cultural framework, one change of meaning may have substantial consequences for our understanding of cultural meanings and messages more generally.

The second section in this volume, on domestic culture, starts with Lisa Nevett's contribution on domestic culture in Classical Greece. Nevett argues that physical housing, much like the tombs discussed in the context of funerary culture, should be seen as a means of communication. In its material form, the domestic sphere took on an important symbolic role, demonstrating membership of a shared Greek domestic culture. Aspects of the actual structure of the house could be manipulated to communicate with visitors and people passing by. Inside the house, there were visual barriers to avoid contact between different users of the same domestic space. This phenomenon might well be associated with the citizen state, and it disappears with the decay of the poleis. It would thus seem to follow the development from conditioned cohabitation to individualism. There may, however, have been a very different situation in the countryside, with its towered manors and fortified villages. It is well attested that many members of the Athenian elite possessed estates in the countryside, and it could be argued that in these landed estates we find expressions of high status, so that not so much the town but the countryside acted as an arena for social competition. Perhaps cultural messages could even differ within the same temporal limits and within very close geographic vicinity.

In Roman times, too, daily life inevitably centred on the house. Yet equally essential in this period were the practices of bathing and - if not sex - than certainly erotic display. The last point is perhaps one of the more alien aspects of Roman culture - which makes it a good test case, as is wonderfully illustrated by Elisabeth Bartman's article on erotic statuary in the Roman house. This article explicitly addresses the notion of public versus private, a topic already implicated in the contributions by Stamatopoulou and Kaizer. More importantly, Bartman shows how the explicit and - in modern eyes, at least - extraordinary erotic statuary suggests the specific modes in which Roman viewers thought about gender, sexuality and the human body. As suggested recently, erotic display may have been an indication of *luxus* and leisure, but it also shows 'otherness', i.e. behaviour which contradicted prevailing social and cultural norms. Again, context heavily influences meaning, and it is striking that in the few instances where there is a (fairly) certain attested location of an erotic statue, it seems to have stood in a public space. It might be possible to see such statuary as 'admonitory', but perhaps these images could also be considered as one of those protrusions of Roman society

that Augustus' adultery and marriage laws had proclaimed to counter. The audiences of ancient visual culture are largely unknown - yet they too must have influenced the meanings and messages communicated by such erotic artefacts. For some, erotic statuary may have symbolically (yet graphically) represented what they secretly would have *liked* to become involved in, despite knowing very well that they should not actually succumb to such desires.

The article by Nathalie de Haan focuses on a bodily practice that, nowadays at least, is much more prevailing and socially acceptable: the phenomenon of bathing. In this context, De Haan addresses the different kinds of audiences, as well as the relationship between literary and material evidence. Since bath-culture was a central aspect of Roman life, much has been written on the topic in antiquity itself, including discussions on the origin of private baths. On that point, however, the literary record appears to be biased and misleading - a distortion that may very well be balanced by the use of material sources. De Haan shows that in dealing with such misconceptions, classical scholars can benefit greatly from theoretical frameworks drawn from the social sciences, focussing especially on social and symbolical anthropology. She consequently brings together the various *kinds* of cultural messages that are necessary to enable sustainable statements about central aspects of ancient societies.

In the final article, which thanks to its broad scope may function as an alternative conclusion to this volume, Elaine Gazda revisits 'Roman art in the private sphere', a topic that she has put on the scholarly agenda in 1991. Gazda mentions many approaches that have dominated areas of research in the recent past, or that are likely to dominate research in the near future, paying particular attention to the 'functionality' of Roman art, notions of spatial and social access, and the geographical extension of research beyond Campania. She ends with a salutary warning on the relation between artefact and Art (with a capital A) - indicative as a cultural marker both for modern scholars and for the ancients themselves.

Of course, neither the final article nor this volume as a whole are meant to draw discussion to a close. Many questions remain. To mention only two examples: if we focus on the ambiguities of meaning, and on the complexities of the ways in which these ambiguous meanings are produced, what kind of practical interpretative tools are left for us to use? Or, to put the question slightly differently: how may we develop new modes of

analysis in order critically to understand the various, and possibly contradictory, messages communicated by ancient material culture? Alternatively, in what ways might it be possible to problematize the notion of personal experience, much more than has been done so far in classical scholarship? By taking the socially and discursively inflected nature of personal response into account, we may perhaps find a way out of the public versus private binary that still sustains too many discussions of ancient material culture. Many more questions could be added, and have indeed been raised in the discussion following the workshop. We hope that some of these explorations will be continued in *BABESCH*, or elsewhere. The articles assembled in this volume, both individually and as a whole, not only seek to open up such debates and new avenues of research on ancient cultural messages, but also to contribute more generally to the current historical and theoretical understanding of the matter of culture.

#### NOTES

\* This introduction has benefited greatly from the various points raised in the general discussion at the end of the workshop, the proceedings of which are presented in this volume. We would like to express our gratitude to the contributors of this volume and to all other participants of the workshop, especially to Jan-Paul Crielaard, Miko Flohr, André Lardinois, L. Bouke van der Meer, Eric Moormann and Miguel John Versluys. We thank the *BABESCH* Board and Supplement Committee for including the volume in the *BABESCH* Supplement Series and for the financial contribution to the workshop (in the framework of the bequest of the Byvanck Foundation). We are also grateful for the financial aid by the Faculty of Arts and the departments of History and Greek and Latin Languages and Culture of the Radboud University Nijmegen (NL). Finally, we owe much gratitude to Lily Schaafsma for her very helpful editorial remarks.

- 1 See also the preface to this volume by Eric Moormann.
- 2 Cf. for instance the convincing statement that any 'decision to treat Greek and Roman civilization as a "classical" whole is traditional, but it is neither innocent nor inconsequential', R. Osborne/S.E. Alcock, 'Introduction', in S.E. Alcock/R. Osborne (eds), *Classical Archaeology*, Malden [MA]/Oxford 2007, 1-10; 1.
- 3 M. Beard/J. Henderson, *Classics. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 1995, 29.
- 4 Much more can (and perhaps should) be said about 'the ancient world' or 'classics' as a topic of research. Obvious starting points are the various works by Arnaldo Momigliano or, more recently, M. Bettini, *Classical Indiscretions. A Millennial Enquiry into the State of the Classics*, London 2001. Specific ways in which the study of 'classics' may be explored as a socio-political phenomenon are elaborated by e.g. C. Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England,*

1830-1960, Oxford 1998, and by B.E. Goff (ed.), *Classics and Colonialism*, London 2005. Good starting points for the role of classical archaeology in this discussion are N.T. de Grummond, *An Encyclopedia of the History of Classical Archaeology*, Westport 1996 and W.W. Briggs and William M. Calder III (eds), *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, New York 1990.

- 5 See, for instance, in the *Routledge History of the Ancient World* series: R. Osborne, *Greece in the Making, 1200-479 BC*, London/New York 1996; T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome. Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000-264 BC)*, London/New York 1995. Still, it is noticeable that the use of material evidence is much less evident in the volumes in the same series for those periods where literary evidence is more abundant, e.g. S. Hornblower, *The Greek World, 479-323 BC*, London/New York 1985<sup>2</sup>; M. Goodman, *The Roman World, 44 BC-AD 180*, London/New York 1997.
- 6 E.g. the excellent recent volume by R.E. Roth, *Styling Romanisation. Pottery and Society in Central Italy*. (*Cambridge Classical Studies*), Cambridge 2007 and R.E. Roth/J. Keller (eds), *Roman by Integration. Dimensions of Group Identity in Material Culture and Text*, Portsmouth 2007 (= *JRA Suppl.* 66).
- 7 See, for instance, M. Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, New York 1980, 109-133; J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester 1984; G. Deleuze/F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London/New York 1987.
- 8 P.A. Miller, *Postmodern Spiritual Practices. The Construction of the Subject and the Reception of Plato in Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault*, Columbus 2007, 10. See also P.A. Miller, 'The Classical Roots of Poststructuralism. Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5.2 (1998), 204-225.
- 9 It is of course impossible to consider the field of 'classics' as a uniform whole, especially in light of the very different ways in which its various sub-disciplines have responded to developments in contemporary theory and critical practice. While, for example, the use of post-modern theory had already been well established in ancient literary studies decades ago, classical (and especially German) archaeology today is still often perceived as embedded in an essentially nineteenth century epistemological framework. Yet here too important exceptions may be mentioned, most notably S. Altekamp/M. Hoffer/M. Krumme (eds), *Posthumanistische Klassische Archäologie. Historizität und Wissenschaftlichkeit von Interessen und Methoden*, München 2001 - a book which may serve as a useful point for departure to explore some of the issues that this introduction can sketch only briefly.
- 10 The primary reference point here is the classic essay on experience by historian J. Scott, 'Experience', in J. Scott/J. Butler (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, London/New York 1992, 22-40.

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