Greek Devotional Images: Iconography and Interpretation in the Religious Arts

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Katherine A. Rask

Graduate Program in History of Art

The Ohio State University

2012

Dissertation Committee:

Mark D. Fullerton, Adviser

Timothy J. McNiven

Sarah Iles Johnston

Hugh B. Urban
Copyright by
Katherine A. Rask
2012
Abstract

This dissertation concerns the uses of iconography, visual culture, and material culture in the study of Greek religion. I draw on methods and theoretical frameworks from outside the discipline in order contextualize the study of images and symbols in larger discourses and to introduce the most recent developments in scholarship. To better understand the religious aspects of Greek experience, this dissertation presents a mixture of intellectual history, historiography, and methodological critique. I provide an interdisciplinary overview of symbol theory and approaches to signs, the deep-seated interweaving of theological and artistic concerns in occultist traditions and 19th century scholarship, and iconographic methodologies employed by Classical studies and archaeology. Several themes repeatedly appear throughout the discussion, including the theoretical relationships between material culture and religion and the perceived dichotomy between phenomenological responses and interpretation.

By exploring these topics, it becomes clear that approaches to religion in ancient Greece need to be adapted to better account for visual and material culture. Despite most emphasis on public, ritual-centered aspects, images and objects attest to private encounters with divinities. Based on comparative analysis, I argue that the religious experience of ancient Greeks exhibits many elements of devotionalism, a religious phenomenon developed by Robert Orsi. Two case studies explore Classical Greek iconography in the context of everyday life, personal biography, and emotional response. The first argues that Athenians interacted with the deceased in much the same way as
with deities, especially in their use of material culture. Using white-ground *lekythoi*, I show that *tainiai* (fabric garlands) are evidence of everyday materials that were used in devotional activity and can be found in women’s domestic experience, shrine activities, and gravesides. In the second case study, I consider iconographic conservatism in the context of personal biographies. I explore childhood encounters with devotional media and the way that such media continued to exert emotional force throughout an individual’s life. I also discuss the emotional impact caused by the perceived uniformity of devotional media, as well as manifestations of the aesthetics of accumulation in the massed votives displayed in sanctuaries.
Acknowledgements

For their support during the completion of this project, I would like to thank my supervisory committee: Mark Fullerton, Tim McNiven, Sarah Johnston, and Hugh Urban. I also owe thanks to Carol Lawton for her assistance with votive reliefs and to Fritz Graf for being so willing to reminisce about his personal experiences in the interest of historiography.

I would like to thank Beth Shively for the many conversations we shared over dinner and across book-laden tables, which have so inspired the direction of this dissertation. Carolina Lopez-Ruiz’s encouragement was also instrumental. My family’s support has been unyielding, and without them this dissertation would have never been completed.
Vita

1997..................................................Chantilly High School

2002..........................................................B.A. History, Virginia Polytechnic Institute

2002..........................................................B.S. Business Management, Virginia Tech

2005..........................................................M.A. Classical Archaeology, Florida State University

2008 to 2009 ...........................................Regular Member, American School of Classical Studies in Athens

2005 to present ........................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of the History of Art, The Ohio State University

Publications


Fields of Study

Major Field: History of Art
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................. iv

Vita........................................................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................................... x

Introduction.............................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The symbol in 20th century theory ..................................................................................... 9

  Art history’s great debate: “the infestation of art by interpretations” .................................................. 10

  Symbols, distance, and forms of thought: Aby Warburg...................................................................... 11

  Decoding the image: signs as bearers of meaning ............................................................................... 28

  “The absurd idea that symbols mean”: agency, psychology, and desire ............................................. 40

  “Phenomenology trumps iconography”: cognitive science and neuroarthistory ............................... 43

Chapter 2: Iconography at the intersection of religion and art ............................................................. 48

  Aesthetic theories and the role of religion ......................................................................................... 49

  Artistic approaches to the religious ................................................................................................... 59

  Occult Meanings and Mystic powers .................................................................................................. 64

  Response, embodiment, and material religion .................................................................................. 78
Cemeteries, women’s devotion, and the role of tainiai ........................................... 191

Implications and conclusions: the female hand as apprehender and creator .......... 208

Chapter 7: Ubiquitous and repetitive images in Greek devotional practice ............. 214

Concepts of continuity and change in the religious arts ........................................... 214

Iconography and religious conservatism in ancient Athens .................................... 221

Continuity and conservatism in Athenian votives ....................................................... 227

Repetition, ubiquity, and the aesthetics of accumulation .......................................... 245

Abbreviations ............................................................................................................. 250

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 251
List of Figures

Figure 1. Marble reliefs showing Zeus Meilichios in the form of a snake. Right: Dedicated by Herakleides, from the Piraeus Asklepeion, 4th century BCE. Left: Dedicated by Aristomenes, from Varrachonis, Athens, 4th century BCE. Photo: Author. ................................................................. 105

Figure 2. Relief dedicated by Xenokrateia to Kephissos at the sanctuary of Echelidai at New Phaleron, late 5th century BCE. Photo: After Ragghianti 1979, p. 118................. 174

Figure 3. Gold rings showing Athena (left) and Aphrodite (right), said to be found together, 4th century BCE. Photo: After Reeder 1995, 178 fig. 32 (left) and fig. 33 (right). ................................................................. 181

Figure 4. Attic white-ground lekythos depicting a woman carrying a basket full of wreaths to a grave monument, found in Eretria, 440 BCE. Photo: After Tiverios 1996, fig. 216................................................................. 195

Figure 5. Attic red-figure pelike, depicting a winged male placing a tainia on a stele, 450 BCE. Photo: After CVA, Munich 2, pl. 77.4................................................................. 197

Figure 6. Attic white-ground lekythos showing visitors at tomb of athlete, 460 BCE. Photo: Left and Right: After Oakley 2004, Pl. VII A, B. ................................. 200

Figure 7. Drawing of an Attic white-ground lekythos showing a prothesis, 420 BCE. Photo: Oakley 2004, fig. 48. ................................................................. 201
Figure 8. Women preparing the funerary basket before visiting the tomb. Left: Attic white-ground *lekythos*, 470-460 BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2004, fig. 13. Right: Attic white-ground *lekythos*, 460 BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2004, pl. I.A. .......................... 202

Figure 9. Attic red-figure vessels depicting *tainiai* tied around victorious athletes, dating to ca. 490 BCE. Photo: After Valavanis 2004, 377, fig. 543 and fig. 544. ....................... 203

Figure 10. Attic white-ground *lekythos* depicting woman and girl with *tainiae* and *kalathos* basket, 470-460 BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2004, fig. 15.......................... 204

Figure 11. Attic red-figure kalathoid vase, showing a woman with a hand-loom, ca. 475-425 BCE. Photo: After Keuls 1993, fig. 100. .......................................................... 206

Figure 12. Attic white ground *lekythos* depicting a seated women constructing a wreath near a *kalathos* basket, found in Athens, 460 BCE. Photo: After CVA 15, pl. 5.8........ 207

Figure 13. Handmade terracotta *liknon* with cakes, from the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, Akrokorinth, archaic to early 5th century. Photo: After Brumfield 1977, pl. 47, 29. .............................................................................................................. 228

Figure 14. Relief from Echinos, showing presentation of child and sacrificial procession to Artemis, 4th century BCE. Photo: After Dillon 2003, fig. 7.4. ......................... 232

Figure 15. Attic red-figure neck amphora showing youth assisting adult male during a sacrifice, from Vulci, 460 BCE. Photo: After Neils 2003, cat. 106................................. 238

Figure 16. A boy ties a *tainia* around a grave marker, while a girl presents a flower and *aryballos*. Attic white-ground *lekythos*, 460 BCE. Photo: After Neils and Oakley 2003, cat. 113, p. 168.......................................................... 242
Figure 17. Girl places figurine at grave. Attic white-ground lekythos, 420s BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2003, fig. 8. .......................................................... 243

Figure 18. Marble relief with family performing a sacrifice; the boy holds a spit of meat and the girl holds a wreath. Dedicated in the sanctuary of Pankrates in Athens, late 4th century. Photo: After Lawton 2007, fig. 2.11. .......................................................... 244
Introduction

Part of what we know—or think we know—about Greek religion derives from the imagery preserved on ancient art. The Parthenon’s sculpted frieze suggests social divisions articulated in the annual procession for Athena; numerous black- and red-figure vases depict festivals, and ecstatic dancing, in honor of the god Dionysos; the few wooden tablets that have survived from antiquity, their tiny painted devotees approaching painted altars, seem capable of telling us a great deal about the ins-and-outs of animal sacrifice. The interpretation of such imagery is one of the most common tools used by classicists interested in religion; yet the iconographic method they customarily employ has not received anything like the same degree of scrutiny to which textual analysis of ancient Greek written materials has regularly been subjected. A reliance on visual culture is even more essential when studying religions that are not text-based, but exist only as archaeological remains.

Although we possess abundant textual references about Classical Greek religion and ritual, the profuse artistic tradition has been insufficiently developed as a historical source. This is not to say that art and iconography have not been used during the last century-and-a-half of study, but that the methodological precision given to textual investigation has not been matched in visual analysis. It is only in the last few decades that the importance of archaeological and art historical material has been recognized as an essential source for any investigation of Classical Greek religion. As such, the study of
ancient religion through material culture and visual media has been done using methods particular to the long tradition of classics and the study of classical art, with only modest references to outside disciplines. This is especially true with respect to the interpretation of iconography (the visual content of images).

This dissertation concerns the uses of iconography, visual culture, and material culture in the study of Greek religion. As Jeremy Tanner has noted, “the dominance of philology over archaeology is a repeating pattern in the history of classical archaeology.”¹ Traditionally, the two disciplines have not integrated entirely successfully. Richard Gordon elaborated in 1979, “the experts on ancient religious art are art historians, not historians of religion…when the two disciplines confront each other in the same book incompatible perspectives simply take turns, they do not meet.”²

This dissertation aims to initiate a conversation in classics and archaeology about iconographic analysis, Greek religion, and the problems inherent in visual interpretation. I draw on methods and theoretical frameworks from outside the discipline in order to contextualize the study of images and symbols in larger discourses and to introduce the most recent developments in scholarship. Surveys in classical archaeology usually confine their methodological reviews to Erwin Panofsky’s iconology and the semiotic traditions. These two approaches, one based in cultural history and philosophy, the other pivoting on the transfer of information, make up only a small portion of the many techniques that have been developed in other disciplines. For this reason, this project

gathers and synthesizes material that has never before been brought together, merging wider theoretical debates and recent advances in iconographic analysis with classical studies and archaeology.

In so doing, this dissertation presents a mixture of intellectual history, historiography, and methodological critique, together with suggestions for new approaches and supportive case studies. I also demonstrate that greater consideration of visual and material culture encourages us to challenge long-standing ideas about the very nature of Greek religious practices. In addition to visual content and symbolic interpretations, this dissertation is therefore concerned with religious material culture and its role in the lives of ancient peoples. Comparative explorations highlight some compelling and novel approaches to devotional objects, which lead me to dispute ritually-centered and publicly-oriented understandings of ancient Greek religious life. I argue that investigating individuals and their personal religious encounters highlights certain facets of ancient practice that have been sorely neglected. In so doing, I also propose that we draw on individual, embodied experience and emotional response in order to more accurately reconstruct ancient religion.

In an attempt to find interdisciplinary approaches to religious images, I employ comparative material, particularly from 20th century American Christian contexts. Many studies from this field provide compelling examples that shed light on aspects of Greek religious life which have been otherwise overlooked. More importantly, people’s experiences with images, symbols, and objects receive special emphasis in the studies that I reference. Scholars of antiquity have been understandably wary of inappropriately
applied modern assumptions and Christianizing concepts. Scott Scullion, for example, objected when the term ‘pilgrimage’ was employed in Greek contexts. Simon Price explicitly argued that Christian paradigms distorted reconstructions of Roman Imperial cults, warning against the naive discovery of ‘emotion’ as a criterion in ancient ritual. He noted the ‘pitfalls’ inherent in applying ‘Christianizing assumptions’ to antiquity, a danger that “may be generally acknowledged, but…rarely avoided.”

For Price, the warnings were especially pertinent, given his particular object of study and the history of scholarship surrounding Imperial cult. The full-scale rejection of comparative analysis expected for all periods of Greek history, however, seems a mistake. Indeed, the complete refusal to consider ‘modern’ examples and paradigms in the study of Greek antiquity reflects the strong positivist undertones of classical archaeology and history. Particularly dangerous is the pervasive certainty that the discipline engages in purely ‘objective’ analyses, a conviction bolstered by the field’s justifiably rigorous requirements for substantiation and argumentation.

Comparison, carefully undertaken, does have a certain value. Jonathan Z. Smith argued for the importance of the comparative method in religious studies. Rather than simply noting similarities, the description and comparison of two separate objects of study (e.g., a Babylonian festival and a Hawaiian myth) allows one to highlight particular

---

elements in useful and interesting ways. At several points in the following dissertation, Smith’s method will be employed. I draw on studies of other religious contexts, sometimes Christian and modern, for specific purposes: first, to provide more complex and inventive ways for thinking about ancient images and objects, second, to stimulate the discourse about Greek religion with alternative approaches, and third, to reconsider the group of activities and ideas usually lumped together under the heading ‘popular religion.’

Although my case-studies involve specific Athenian contexts from roughly the 5th century BCE, this project has a broad chronological and geographical range: Renaissance occultists provide insight into symbol theory, the 20th century encourages regard for material culture studies, while 19th century Europe lays the foundation for recent scholarship exploring Greece. Therefore, the arguments and themes I address develop one from the other, moving from wider, larger topics in the early chapters and narrowing with each subsequent chapter.

In chapter 1, I present an interdisciplinary overview of symbol theory. First, I contextualize Panofksy’s iconographic method in the philosophically-based work of Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer, both of whom considered how the form and content of images reflected symbolic forms of thought. I likewise address Romantic-era ideas about symbolic immediacy and the psychological underpinnings of images. I then address the linguistic and equivalency models of interpretation developed in semiotics.

For example, Jonathan Z. Smith, "A pearl of great price and a cargo of yams: a study in situational incongruity," in Imagining religion: from Babylon to Jonestown (1982). For a more detailed discussion of comparative methodologies, see the chapter “In comparison a magic dwells” from the same volume.
Multimodality and communications theory show the advancements that followed from Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Pierce’s original work. Thereafter, I introduce some of the main challenges to the notion that symbols and images have ‘meaning.’ Alfred Gell’s anthropological theory, which sees images as social agents that can cause affective responses, most famously embodies the anti-interpretive trend. This affective response has become pivotal in advertising’s use of images, which above all seeks to trigger such responses in viewers. Additionally, David Freedberg presents neurobiological data to argue that physical response occurs before interpretation, reviving the classic debate between phenomenology and interpretation.

Chapter 2 explores the relationship between religious studies and the analysis of symbols and images. I show that in fact the relationship is much closer than is usually recognized. Lutheran Pietism from the 18th century shaped the modern concept of art while Renaissance and Enlightenment esoteric traditions prefigured the interpretative theories of today’s iconographic analysis. Several esoteric traditions, however, also believed that images wield spiritual power and manifest the spiritual in physical form. Many of the ideas about religious material culture arise from Cartesian mind-body dualism and the duality of Kantian metaphysics. Moreover, many Christian viewpoints disputed any connection between images and spirituality based on theological arguments. Finally, I introduce response-theory and the idea of phenomenology, usually considered to be pre-interpretive.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the study of images and religions in the Classical tradition. Philology exercises a strong hold on Classics and religious studies. I
consider historian of religion Jane Ellen Harrison, who at the end of the 19th century drew heavily on German and British ideas about art and religion after being trained as an archaeologist and art historian. Her work illustrates that some of the most provocative early work in Greek religion was based on archaeological and art historical sources. I also review basic, practical methods employed in iconographical analysis, such as reconstruction and the creation of typologies. The most common approach to images has been to employ them for documentary purposes, sources meant to aid the accurate reconstruction of Greek civilization. Performance-related approaches to religious images have also increased in popularity. I then return to the perceived division between pre-interpretive phenomenology and interpretative iconography.

Chapter 4 more closely considers the religious models applied to ancient Greece and argues that public, ritual-based models of Greek religion are inadequate. An alternative approach that takes into consideration personal experience is needed. I therefore explore the concepts of devotion and personal, popular practice. A model that more sufficiently takes into account the vital role played by images and material culture also would be more useful. I therefore introduce Robert Orsi’s idea of devotionalism as a possible alternative.

In Chapter 5, I test the model of devotionalism presented in the Chapter 4 against evidence from Greece, showing that there were indeed many devotional elements in the experience of Greek individuals. I particularly stress that many Greeks formed affectionate relationships with divinities and, in order to avoid the overemphasis on ritual, I show that devotion can be documented outside of shrines and sanctuaries.
In chapter 6, I narrow my focus to classical Athens. An important way that our understanding of devotionalism must be altered is that it needs to better account for the presence of the deceased. I draw on white-ground *lekythoi* that depict the activities occurring at gravesides and point out the importance of *tainiai* (ribbons). *Tainiai* have been neglected in studies of religious activity, but they actually reveal many interesting aspects about women’s experience with devotional media. I show that *tainiai* are evidence of everyday materials that were used in devotional activity and can be found in women’s domestic experience, shrine activities, and gravesides.

Finally, chapter 7 begins with the art historical notions of change and continuity in an effort to better understand how religious conservatism affects iconography. In Athenian practice, the term *ta patria* bears many of the connotations associated with the concept of religious conservatism. Rhetoric similar to that of *ta patria* can be seen in Athenian art as well. Nevertheless, I argue that religious conservatism does not satisfactorily explain iconographic conservatism. I offer two possible explanations, both hinging on the emotional responses individuals felt upon seeing images. First, David Morgan argues that for many modern practitioners, ubiquitous, mass-produced, and familiar religious images led to feelings of comfort and sentimentality, often strengthened by memories of childhood interaction with similar such images. I consider whether this might be a feasible explanation for Athenian practices by exploring children’s religious encounters and interactions with objects and images. Second, I consider whether using uniform objects in votive activity and the observation of the subsequent accumulation might also instill feelings of comfort in viewers.
Chapter 1: The symbol in 20\textsuperscript{th} century theory

This chapter sets the stage for the following chapters by surveying the interdisciplinary discourses about symbols which have developed in 20\textsuperscript{th} century thought. Because studies of Greek art mostly spotlight iconology and semiotics, a more extensive review is sorely needed, particularly with respect to the most recent advances.

Erwin Panofsky has often been credited with developing the method of iconology, with Aby Warburg as his predecessor. In point of fact, the study of iconography rests on a strong, complex philosophical basis. Indeed, philosophers have long been occupied with the separation of signs and their meaning and it is probably fair to state that the study of the symbol and meaning has been one of the paramount concerns of 20\textsuperscript{th} century thought. The term ‘symbol’ is certainly a slippery one, ubiquitous in modern usage and philosophical discourse, but accompanied by an extraordinarily diverse set of definitions; some of the examples that I will discuss momentarily exhibit direct contradictions in usage.

In theoretical overviews of the methods employed in art history and archaeology for the interpretation of ‘symbols,’ two trends predominate, iconography and semiotics. For this reason, I begin this chapter by outlining these two standard topics, but with a more comprehensive approach beginning with Aby Warburg, the iconology of Erwin Panosky, and the different permutations of semiotics. From there, I explore communications theory, symbolic anthropology, and cognitive iconology. These last
theories generally view images as passive bearers of meaning. Thereafter, I explore the
counterpart to images that emphasize the agency of images while also recognizing psychological
aspects. In particular I will lay out the anthropological approach of Alfred Gell, the
affective theories of advertising, and neuroarthistorical considerations. The goal of this
chapter is to set the stage by identifying the major approaches to the interpretation of
visual content and their relationship to each other. The next chapter, building upon the
concepts introduced here, will outline the major approaches and debates in religious
visual culture and materiality.

**Art history’s great debate: “the infestation of art by interpretations”**

To begin a review of iconographical analysis, we must turn to one of the most
deep-seated and persistent debates in art history. This divisive issue concerns the relative
merit of form and that of content. Studies interested in formal concerns emphasize topics
such as style, composition and medium, while those interested in content explore subject
matter, meaning, and interpretation.

The preeminence conferred on form can be observed in the work of two
especially renowned art historians active at the turn of the last century, Alois Reigl and
Heinrich Wöfflin. They insisted that art was an entity separate from culture, possessing a
distinct historical evolution that could be traced exclusively through formal criteria. Reigl
studied the non-figural decorative ornamentation in the arts of Late Antiquity, a period
then undervalued, in order to purposefully relegate content to a secondary position.
Wöfflin, who in fact developed classifying principles for formal analysis, insisted that
there was a fundamental antithesis between the two. Throughout the 20th century, the contrast of form and content continued to be a methodological fault-line dividing art analysis; for example, in 1962, George Kubler’s *The shape of time* argued that art, defined “as a system of formal relations…matters more than meaning.” Just four years later, Susan Sontag, who championed the preeminence of form, evocatively described the “infestation of art by interpretations.”

The opposing side, in contrast, asserts that the subject-matter and content contained in a work of art carry an analogous significance. As repositories of meaning, the argument goes, art works bear incredible cultural value and distinction. Art historians strove to access this embedded information – often the remains of historically remote epochs – by developing a method of analysis. Whereas formal art studies employed visual analysis to probe only the visible aspects of an artwork and its connection to other artworks, their counterparts deemed it necessary to look outside the artwork itself in order to effectively identify and define the significance of its content. Although the first inklings of this methodological project are visible in the Renaissance (if not earlier), this overview begins at the end of the 19th century, with a scholar whose academic impact continues to be significant.

Symbols, distance, and forms of thought: Aby Warburg

---


Narratives delineating the history of iconographical methods invariably highlight a handful of scholars; the first name associated with iconography is that of Erwin Panofsky, whose work in the 1920s and 1930s built upon that of his famous colleague, the anthropologist, art historian and symbologist Aby Warburg. Some have insisted that the methods they developed be called iconology, but in common parlance Warburg and Panofsky are more generally associated with the term iconography.

*Aby Warburg: closeness, empathy, and distance in symbolic representations*

Aby Warburg, a German art historian who began his work in the 1880s, has been called the “genius shadow-founder of iconology.” Warburg, interested especially in visual content, was something of a cultural historian. While Wöfflin and Reigl emphasized form, he, in contrast, sought to discern the meaning hidden within figural imagery by drawing on an interdisciplinary series of methods. Because of this eagerness to sample methodologies, he has been heroized to a certain extent in academic circles, considered an ancestor by anthropologists of art, an early champion of feminist ideologies, and a major influence on Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbols.

---

9 The bibliography concerning Warburg has reached enormous proportions over the past few decades. For an extensive list of sources, see Matthew Rampley, "From symbol to allegory: Aby Warburg’s theory of art," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (1997): n. 9 and 10.


It is certainly legitimate to claim that Warburg’s work prefigured the much later disciplines of visual culture and pictorial semiotics, in that he found value in all images, both those of the highest quality and those of the lowest. Because he prized the information that could be derived from figural imagery, he recognized the usefulness of objects that the art world otherwise ignored. It is likely that Warburg’s attention to such commonplace items intensified given his exposure to ethnographic methods while visiting the United States in 1895, when he traveled amongst the Native American tribes in the Southwest and interacted with prominent anthropologists at the Smithsonian. Michael Steinberg notes that Warburg “had clearly been thinking as a cultural anthropologist and historian from the time of his departure for America.”\textsuperscript{14} Within a single decade, Warburg had gone from studying the forms and motifs of Renaissance paintings to participating in ethnographic analysis at Pueblo Indian festivals.\textsuperscript{15} From the earliest stage of his career, then, Warburg exhibited interest in symbols, religion, and cultural studies.

One of the reasons that Warburg continues to remain such an enigmatic figure is that his method and theoretical stance have never been easy to define. Carlos Ginzberg has remarked that “his methodological approaches are anything but obvious,”\textsuperscript{16} Charlotte

\textsuperscript{14} Michael Steinberg, “Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen lecture: a reading,” in  \textit{Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America}, ed. Aby Warburg (1995), 96. Warburg brought his experiences and interests home with him when, for example, he helped museums in Germany acquire collections of American Indian artifacts. Additionally, in 1897 he gave a series of lectures in Hamburg and Berlin that outlined the work of contemporary ethnographers, displayed a large number of slides, and discussed the historic and cultural details of the Indians.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 95-96.

Schoell-Glass that his theories “are difficult to organize into a coherent whole,” and Silvia Ferretti that “Warburg's art-historical writings do not allow for a direct theoretical scrutiny.” It is clear, however, that above all Warburg was interested in symbols and content; as Schoell-Glass remarks, Warburg wanted to “design a theory of signs.”

In order to draw out the inner consciousness of a given culture or epoch through its visual arts, Warburg attempted to contextualize works in their original situations, noting the works’ functions, their social context, and the possible link existing between their content and contemporary patrons, artists, texts, and other visual media. He felt disgust towards despised aestheticizing art history and his embrace of interdisciplinarity must have seemed a logical alternative. In his exegesis of art works, he frequently analyzed visual motifs in terms of contemporary texts and cultural events; for example, in his 1893 dissertation Warburg explored the motif of the running nymph in Botticelli’s Primavera, interpreting it based on Poliziano’s poetry, commentaries and reports on plays, and Alberti’s description of bodily movement. He also recognized the value in tracing visual motifs diachronically as well as tracing their transformation through time; in a 1912 paper, Warburg analyzed the astrological figures in the Sforza frescoes by

---

18 Ferretti, Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: symbol, art and history, xvi.
19 Schoell-Glass, "Aby Warburg's late comments on symbol and ritual," 626.
21 Rampley, "From symbol to allegory: Aby Warburg's theory of art," 42.
tracking their different manifestations in art since antiquity, including their transmission through the work of Arabic astrologers.\textsuperscript{22}

As Ferretti describes, “Warburg broadens the scope of his investigation to encompass everything that contributed to an understanding of the spirit of the times. The work of art is conceived as a reflection of the life of the period and its needs. It is therefore necessary to track down the customs, circumstances, and ideas that engendered it in order to make an interpretation that is both faithful to the work of art and consonant with the spirit of the civilization that produced it.”\textsuperscript{23} Warburg most likely learned this sort of cultural contextualization from his professor, classicist Hermann Usener, whose cultural and psychological approach I will return to in Chapter 3.

Matthew Rampley argues that Warburg’s goals have often been misunderstood and misrepresented; the common description of the iconographic method is that it explains the meaning of an artwork by situating it in its cultural and artistic milieu, through the collection of other cultural manifestations such as texts. But Warburg was doing something more and was deeply concerned with the debates about the relationship between symbol and symbolized; as Rampley notes, Warburg’s concern with symbols and symbolic modes of thought had appeared already in his 1893 dissertation and would continue to infuse his work until his death in 1929. Throughout his career Warburg

\textsuperscript{22} Aby Warburg, “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoia zu Ferrara, 1912,” Atti del X Congresso di Storia dell’ Arte in Roma (1922).
\textsuperscript{23} Ferretti, Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: symbol, art and history, 15.
contrasted the symbolic mode of representation – primitive and mimetic – with the allegorical mode – modern and rational.\textsuperscript{24}

Warburg’s vision of the symbol derived from two influential philosophical constructs, that of mimesis and empathy. In the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, anthropological publications considered mimesis to be a powerful structuring principle and related to the magical and occult power of likeness. The magic system developed by Sir James Frazer in the \textit{Golden Bough} most famously championed this conception of mimesis, embodied in the Law of Similarity and the Law of Contact, together forming the basis of Frazer’s theory of sympathetic magic. The idea of similarity was also central to Robert Vischer’s theory of empathy; for him, empathy can be described as a mode of interaction in which the subject is closely identified with the object.\textsuperscript{25} As Rampley clarifies, “symbolic representation oscillates between two polarities, the one magical-associative, where the symbol and the symbolized merge, and the other logical-disassociative in which a relation of disjunction operates between the symbol and its object.”\textsuperscript{26} Vischer theorized that people projected their emotional and psychological beings into the visual world, thus subjectively engaging with it and in fact animating it. Warburg favored the theory of empathy because, as Rampley explains, in his work “the image, as a symbol of the empathic projection onto the other, itself becomes the empathized other. The symbolic

\textsuperscript{24} Matthew Rampley, "Mimesis and allegory. On Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin," in \textit{Art history as cultural history: Warburg’s projects}, ed. Richard Woodfield (Gordon and Breach, 2001); Rampley, "From symbol to allegory: Aby Warburg's theory of art," 42.

\textsuperscript{25} Steinberg, "Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen lecture: a reading," 17.

\textsuperscript{26} Rampley, "From symbol to allegory: Aby Warburg’s theory of art," 49-50.
representation loses its symbolic quality, the distinction between the image and its symbolized object is collapsed...”

Warburg contrasted the primitive, empathetic, and symbolic sort of thinking, observed in the Hopi Indians he visited in 1890s, with a more modern sensibility that he characterized as rational and technological, manifested in a perceived distance between the object and its subject. The disjunction between the symbol and its object was a mode of representation that entailed intellectual interpretation (logos), since it was only through deeper consideration that a meaning could be properly grasped. The representational form that a culture employed, marked by empathy (closeness), distance, or a mixture of the two, exposed the culture’s psychological underpinnings.

Warburg’s work reveals a mixture of historicism and universalism; that is, he was concerned with the precise historical and cultural realities in the periods that produced his objects of study, while he also believed that beneath these individual contexts lay a substratum of human consciousness to which all historical moments were connected. He was deeply concerned with “the human memory of images,” the re-emergence of superstition, and the Nietzschean polarities between the rational and irrational. For Warburg, visual images – symbols, motifs, gestures – were the primary means of determining the psychological state of distinct cultures and epochs. As Ferretti explains, Warburg explored “the inner realm of the psyche and a mediation on the possibility that art may clarify in history what is buried in the penumbra of the human soul. The dominion of art lies in the sphere of the symbol, which helps the imagination to free itself

---

from the depths and express itself….symbols continue to live in humanity's
consciousness. They lie in its more or less hidden and latent zones.” A particularly well-
known example of this can be found in Warburg’s concept of Pathosformel. Pointing to
the vigorous Ninfa character found in Botticelli’s *Primavera (Allegory of Spring)* and the
exuberant women on Greek vase-painting, Warburg identified a primitive manifestation
of perfectly united form and content; as an unconscious historical memory expressed in
visual formula, the Ninfa figure reappeared throughout history and provided solid
evidence for the dialectical relationship between classicism and primitivism occurring in
the Renaissance.

*Warburg’s notions of distance and Cassirer’s symbolic forms*

Throughout his career Warburg collected an extraordinary number of books,
thanks to his family’s lucrative activities in the banking world. Starting in 1909, Warburg
made his library available to other scholars and, after the First World War, it was turned
into a scholarly institute in Hamburg. A remarkable aspect of the library was that, instead
of dividing the books by traditional subject matter, Warburg organized them on the
shelves in an intuitive manner so that otherwise unrecognized connections between them
might reveal themselves. This interdisciplinary approach was a physical manifestation of
Warburg’s vision for the library: scholars of all disciplines would make new mental
connections via the unanticipated information found thanks to the unusual organization of
the books, as well as the lively company of other scholars working at the Institute.

---

29 Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: symbol, art and history*, 33.
The institution would come to have a lasting effect on the art historical discipline through the figures of Warburg’s successors, many of whom went on to be prominent and influential individuals. Tradition describes one of these, Erwin Panofsky, as Warburg’s academic heir and dubs him the founder of iconographic analysis, or more accurately, iconology. Nevertheless, we cannot effectively understand Panofsky’s stance on iconographic issues, nor Warburg’s influence on his theories, until we first consider one of Panofsky’s contemporaries at the Warburg Institute, Ernst Cassirer.

Warburg’s influence on Cassirer, a major neo-Kantian philosopher, was profound. In 1919, just a year before Panofsky joined the faculty, Cassirer began teaching at the University of Hamburg. Both scholars were active members of the Warburg institution, where they took advantage of the extraordinary library and the lively discourse amongst its community members. Between 1922 and 1925, Cassirer gave a series of presentations that would be published in a three-volume philosophical treatise called *Philosophy of symbolic forms*. Because of his exposure to Warburg’s library, Cassirer’s new interest in culture lead him to “the conception of human beings as most fundamentally ‘symbolic animals,’ interposing systems of signs or systems of expression between themselves and the world.” That is, he believed symbolic thinking to be a filter through which humans comprehended and perceived the world. Major systems of expression – forms - include myth, religion, language, art, history, and science. This

---


combination of cultural phenomena interested Cassirer because, he conjectured, humans utilized them all as a means for comprehending and constructing the world around them. As Holly explains, “human cultural manifestations in all their variety function as a kind of symbolic formal language through which men and women ‘disclose meanings to each other’ at the same time that they try to impose order on the chaos of experience.” In other words, symbolic forms, such as art, “are not an imitation but a discovery of reality.”

Cassirer envisioned a system of consciousness that was hierarchically arranged into ‘thought functions’ on three levels, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated; each level represented a thought process in which humans transformed their perceptions of the world, or impressions, into symbolic forms. The forms associated with each level included myth (the lowest level), language (the middle), and art and science (the highest). The defining facet of each level of thinking was the distance between what humans perceived and reality.

The lowest level of thought function, manifested in myth, was expressive: emotionally constituted, mythical, sensuous, existing beneath the consciousness. As a primitive way of thinking, it was unable to distinguish the difference between appearance, how the world is perceived, and reality. In other words, “consciousness has no distance from this immediacy of images; its reality is the same as its images.”

---

32 Holly, Panofsky and the foundations of art history, 120.
33 Ernst Cassirer, An essay on man: an introduction to a philosophy of human culture (Meiner, 2006), 155.
34 Bayer, "Art as symbolic form: Cassirer on the educational value of art," 55.
The second thought function was *representational* and included the symbolic form of language. Rather than being based on emotion and the senses, it was based on a pragmatic and intuitive approach to the surrounding world. This way of thinking no longer associated human impressions of the world directly and immediately with the expressions used to make sense of and order experience. As Bayer elucidates, “when the image begins to separate into itself and its object, the world of the thing and the thing symbolized arise in consciousness…Language for Cassirer refers to a form of consciousness that orders the world in terms of thing-attribute, subject-object, and symbol-symbolized. It is representational and referential thinking.”

Cassirer’s highest thought function, called *signification*, entailed purely theoretical thought and became manifest in science and art. The immediacy found in the first ‘expressive’ and mythic manner of perception and the distance found in ‘representational’ and pragmatic modes of thought was left behind. Instead, the highest level of thought function led to the greatest separation between our understanding of the world and the world itself, with the result that a cognitive, scientific, abstract, and relational mode of thinking dominated. It is this theoretical consciousness that permits, and is absolutely necessary for, the symbolic manifestation of mathematics, logic, and physics.

*Panafksy as a follower of Cassirer and Warburg*

---

In Cassirer’s *Philosophy of symbolic forms*, expressive immediacy, representational distance, and the full separation of signification coincided with primitivism, pragmatism, and theory. Panofsky was much taken with Cassirer’s thinking, going so far as to sit-in on the other professor’s classes at the university. The influence of Cassirer’s thinking is most clearly visible in Panofsky’s major contribution to the study of visual content, his 1927 *Perspective as symbolic form*.\(^\text{36}\) The article, presented at the Warburg Institute during the earlier part of the decade, established that formal aspects of painting carried cultural significance. Panofsky based his argument in Cassirer’s paradigm, saying that perspectival conceptions of space, “may even be characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art) one of those ‘symbolic forms,’ in which ‘spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign.’”\(^\text{37}\) He also applied the structuring principles of closeness and distance to artistic attempts to render space; for him, antique depictions of space that attempted to reconstruct the ‘curvature of the retinal image’ were mimetic, unreflexive, and primitive. Panofsky believed that, in ancient art, the natural space and painted space were closely and mimetically linked, much as in Cassirer’s primal, mythical, and ‘expressive’ forms of thought. Renaissance artists, however, conceptualized space as “homogeneous, infinite extended substance,”\(^\text{38}\) with a rationalizing, abstract, and self-conscious understanding of its depiction. He argued that the construction of space using

\(^{36}\) Holly notes that Panofsky’s earlier contributions to the iconographic method have been overlooked (and that his theories were therefore misunderstood) because the majority of his earlier articles were never translated out of German, cf. Holly, *Panofsky and the foundations of art history*.


linear perspective reflected a Renaissance world-view tied to the concept of infinity. Therefore, following the steps of Cassirer, Panofsky linked formal artistic principles for depicting space with ways of thinking about space, with the result that perspective was a symbolic form reflecting the overall intellectual state of the Renaissance.

Panofsky’s early philosophically based theories of form gradually simplified into the three-tiered iconographic method most clearly addressed in 1939’s *Studies in iconology* and 1955’s “Iconography and iconology.”39 It was there that he defined iconology as “the branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to form.”40 Essentially, Panofsky adapted Cassirer’s three levels of distance and applied it to visual interpretation. In the first stage, the pre-iconographic, images were recognizable objects based on a person’s lived experience; rather than interpretation; the first stage allowed the simple identification of what the image represented in a mimetic sense. In the second, ‘iconographic’ stage meaning in images could be accessed through familiarity with contemporary texts, motifs, concepts, and other art works. The third stage – iconology – took as its object “the general history of the human spirit.” Iconological analysis results from a more comprehensive and abstract approach to the image, requiring “familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind as realized within the frameworks of a given culture and society at a particular time.”41

In Panofsky’s system, the first two stages were “descriptive and classificatory” in nature, while the third stage required subjective synthesis and abstract thinking. When reviewing Panofsky’s system of iconology, it is difficult not to recall Cassirer’s three functions of symbolic thinking: the first level is phenomenologically and empathically based in the primary senses, the second can only be grasped through language and “signified meaning” (i.e., literature), and the highest level of interpretation can only grasp intrinsic meaning through the contemplation of cultural (symbolic) forms.

Symbols and allegories: from Romanticism to Postmodernism

The concerns of Warburg, Cassirer, and Panofsky with the concepts of symbols, empathy, and distance reflect the deep philosophical interest in symbols and their interpretation. For Warburg and those who followed him, visual content and form took the shape that they did because they reflected the characteristics of thought. The empathic, magical, symbolic thought of primitive cultures served as a contrast to the abstract, allegorical thought of modernity.

The seeds of this concept can be traced back to the 18th century Romanticist ideas about symbols and allegories, when the first attempts were made to differentiate these two forms of representation from one another. Indeed, Rampley notes that Warburg’s formulation of these ideas arose at a time in the 19th century when dissatisfaction with positivism led to a renewed embrace of many Romantic-era ideas. Rampley, "Mimesis and allegory. On Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin," 49.

for its meaning. That is, the essential quality of a symbol was the absolute coincidence between the symbol and what it represented. With an allegory, there was a disjunction between the image and what it represented.

Through the work of Warburg, the dichotomy between symbol and allegory would continue to absorb the attention of several theorists and art historians. In 1969 Gunnar Berefelt explained, “the essential difference between the symbolic reference and the allegoric seems to be that the former is apprehended in a more emotional way…whereas the latter is more intellectual and discursive.”43 Most significantly, Walter Benjamin, who in turn influenced theorist Paul de Man, seriously engaged the work of Warburg. Benjamin and de Man’s work associated the symbol with immediacy, union, and presence, while they envisioned allegory as a representational form marked by disruption, nonidentity, and fragmentation. By the 1980s, Benjamin and de Man’s approach to allegory as disjunction was valorized and taken up in the postmodern endeavor, for which allegorical thinking was abstract and theoretical.44

As art historians, the work and theoretical basis of Panofsky and Warburg went far beyond the cultural history with which they are usually associated. As Rampley has pointed out Warburg’s interest in historically situating symbols and images was in no way unique to his work. It was rooted in the tradition of German Kulturwissenschaft; Jakob Burckhardt, the renowned cultural and art historian, influenced him a great deal.45 Therefore, the general definition of iconographic analysis – involving the interpretation

45 Ferretti, Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: symbol, art and history, 29; Ginzburg.
of visual content through reference to contemporary texts, symbolic representations, cultural traditions, and political situations – does not relate directly to the more innovative and sophisticated connections between Warburg, Cassirer, and Panofsky.

One of the most important ways that Panofsky differed from Warburg, however, was in his approach to the *unconscious* symbol. Although Warburg stressed the importance of historicism, he also believed that humankind shared underlying, unconscious symbols and images. At specific historic moments these powerful images, these *Pathosformel*, reappeared and exhibited a blending of form and content. Didi-Huberman evocatively describes them as ‘ghost’ images with the ability to haunt humankind.  

As Ferretti explains, Warburg focused on the “inner realm of the psyche and a mediation on the possibility that art may clarify in history what is buried in the penumbra of the human soul. The dominion of art lies in the sphere of the symbol, which helps the imagination to free itself from the depths and express itself.….symbols continue to live in humanity's consciousness. They lie in its more or less hidden and latent zone.”

While Warburg was deeply concerned with primitive and psychological manifestations of art, Panofsky seemed decidedly uncomfortable with this topic. Didi-Huberman has emphasized:

> Heir to Kant, the Enlightenment, and the teleology of the symbol invented by Cassirer, Panofsky did not understand that the image – like everything pertaining to the human psyche – requires of us a rationalism not of the Enlightenment, but so to speak, of the *Clair-Obscur*: a tragic rationalism expressed by Warburg in the face of what he called the ‘dialectic of the monster,’ and by Freud in the face of what he called the ‘discontents of civilization.’ But Panofsky, supported in this by the Anglo-Saxon context, wanted the unconscious to be nothing but a mistake:

---

46 Didi-Huberman, *Confronting images: questioning the ends of a certain history of art*, xxii.
47 Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: symbol, art and history*, 33.
which entailed exorcising all of the dark – but efficacious and anthropologically crucial – parts of images.\textsuperscript{48}

Warburg’s psychological understanding of the life of images in the unconscious drew on the work of German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (b. 1826).\textsuperscript{49} Bastian proposed the idea of ‘psychic unity,’ arguing that the human mind, and thus all humans, operated within the same framework and therefore produced a series of universal motifs and themes, or ‘elementary ideas (Elementargedanken).’ In various cultures around the world, the elementary ideas manifested themselves in different ‘folk ideas’ which were often remarkably similar. Bastian’s psychic unity proved foundational for psychological studies, including Carl Jung’s notions of archetypes and the collective unconscious. Interestingly, in 1895 Franz Boas, the American anthropologist, traveled to Berlin to study with Bastian at the Royal Ethnological Museum, where Bastian’s notion of psychic unity would particularly interest him. Warburg, whose interest in psychology was already apparent in his 1891 dissertation, began a life-long correspondence with Boas in 1895 when he travelled to the United States.\textsuperscript{50} In the 1920s, Warburg once again became interested in anthropology (which led him to finally publish the results of his trip among the North American Indians). Letters exchanged with Boas show that one of their methodologically-themed topics of discussion was the relationship between individual and group psychologies.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Didi-Huberman, \textit{Confronting images: questioning the ends of a certain history of art}, xxv.  
\textsuperscript{49} E. H. Gombrich, \textit{Aby Warburg: an intellectual biography} (Phaidon, 1986), 89-90 and 285-287.  
\textsuperscript{50} Benedetta Cestelli Guidi, "Aby Warburg and Franz Boas: two letters from the Warburg Archive: the Correspondence between Franz Boas and Aby Warburg (1924-1925)," \textit{RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics}, no. 52 (2007).  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.: 222.
Decoding the image: signs as bearers of meaning

Warburg was, of course, first an art historian. He fused Romantic theories of the symbol with the images he encountered in visual culture. For him, symbols and allegories in the visual arts were a question of forms of perception and thought rather than a question of the relationship between symbol and object. This view of symbols as independent representations with distinct referents developed out of linguistic theory and in its origin is unrelated to Warburgian symbolic thinking. Although this paradigm is concerned with mimesis and disjunction, it does so in terms of natural signs as distinguished from conventional ones. These semiotic approaches focus on the systemic relationships between subject-object by treating symbols as essential, independent entities, outside and autonomous, rather than being constructions of human consciousness.

Semiotics

Since it first came into use by art historians in the 1960s, semiotics has reigned as the most popular and adaptable method for image interpretation. By mid-century, Panofsky’s iconology was increasingly viewed as old-fashioned; semiotics was lauded as its replacement, given that the old art history had become “totally incapable of renovating its method.”52 As Hubert Damisch would enthusiastically declare, “whereas iconography attempts essentially to state what the images represent, to ‘declare’ their

meaning...semiotics, on the contrary, is intent on stripping down the mechanism of signifying, on bringing to light the mainsprings of the signifying process, of which the work of art is, at the same time, the locus and possible outcome.” By the time it surged in popularity amongst art historians, semiotics was already over 50 years old. It had originated in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, two scholars contemporary with Warburg who were likewise absorbed by the link between symbol and symbolized. Saussure, in particular, explored conventional signs and, as a linguist, developed a model that sought to map the overall system in which they operated. His work, often described as the foundation of 20th century linguistics, posited a dualistic theory of signs in which a signifier is paired with the signified. In syntactical terms, the signifier corresponds to the word while the signified stands for the mental concept to which the word refers. Saussure believed that the relationship between signifier and signified was entirely arbitrary, dictated by convention. Because Saussure’s theory was rooted in linguistic studies, it more or less overlooked ‘natural’ signs, those that bore a close connection to that which they represented; instead, the disjunction implied by the separation of signifier and signified, a disjunction that I previously addressed in the context of visual allegory, predominated in Saussurean semiotics.

Peirce, on the other hand, was a scientist and philosopher who studied the structure of signs and the process of signification. In art history’s symbol-allegory dichotomy, the relationship between the two was marked by how closely (or not) an image resembled its subject. Peirce, too, framed his work in terms of a spectrum of

\[53\text{ Ibid.}\]
likeness and unlikeness, dividing signs into three types: icon, index, symbol. In his formulation, the icon bore the greatest similarity with its subject, an index pointed to or acted as evidence for something else, and a symbol was only conventionally associated with its subject, since it otherwise bore no similitude. A number of scholars have noted Peirce’s imprecise use of language and terminology, especially apparent in his use of the label ‘sign.’

As for the process of signification, Peirce recognized three necessary segments: the sign-vehicle, the object, and the interpretant. The ‘sign-vehicle’ can essentially be defined as the sign or the signifying element. The ‘object’ is that which delimits the sign-vehicle and is the thing or concept to which the sign-vehicle refers. Finally, the ‘interpretant’ is the understanding arising from the recognition of the affiliation between the sign-vehicle and its object. Consequently, interpretation is fundamental to Peirce’s framework. This overview of Peirce’s sign-theory is admittedly rudimentary; after all, he generated it over approximately six decades and his formulations remained fluid throughout the duration. Peirce progressively elaborated and modified his thoughts, so that with each passing decade it became more detailed and complex. In most accounts, however, his theory has been condensed into the standard shape of the tripartite structure (icon, index, symbol).

The work of both Peirce and Saussure was certainly influential within their distinct areas of interest, but it was not until the 1960s that semiotics burst into the consciousness of cultural studies, after its adoption by French structuralists. Because it had originally been developed for the study of sign-systems within linguistic studies, the
Saussurean method was highly structuralist. As a theoretical viewpoint, it imposed an architectural framework on its object of study, postulating an overlying system that exposed patterns, oppositions, categories, and governing rules.

While semiotics appeared to revolutionize the study of meaning and interpretation, it nevertheless immediately began to reveal its limitations. The method was criticized for a number of reasons, and several of those critiques, which we will discuss in more detail below, completely rejected the method altogether. Certain criticisms, however, continued to embrace semiotics as an intellectual tool, but updated and transformed the traditional approach of Peirce and Saussure into more sophisticated, modern, and flexible renditions. Initially, the reappraisal of structuralist semiotics came about because the method, most suited to the study of language and literature, was not so easily transferred to the analysis of other modes of representation, such as the visual arts. The structuralist viewpoint tended to be fully synchronic, regarding sign-systems as unchanging and static. Because it examined structures and the relationship between signifier and signified, the method was essentially ahistoric. Cultural, historical, and sociological studies found fault with this state of affairs due to an alternative conception of meaning-making as a highly-fluid process occurring within constantly shifting and changing historical situations. As such, structuralist semiotics came under attack because it failed to account for how signs were socially constituted. Subsequent to these post-structuralist critiques, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of an adjusted model, dubbed social semiotics, intended to overcome these faults.
Semiotics and the visual arts

As Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress maintain in their 1988 *Social Semiotics*, the new approach recognized that words and language could not alone provide an adequate paradigm for the study of signs and meaning; instead, a proper analysis must consider the existing vast array of visual, aural, and behavioral codes, all of which are established socially. Together with other critics, they stressed the essential cultural and ideological character of sign-making. Rejecting the rigid structuralism of linguistically-rooted semiotics meant that scholars could explore how signs and meaning-making are shaped by historicity, regional influences, power relationships, and other matters dictated by specific cultural and social situations.

In what is now considered a seminal essay from 1975, Herbert Damisch celebrated semiotics as the welcome successor to Panofskian iconographic analysis, which, as I mentioned above, he criticized as old-fashioned and “totally incapable of renovating its method.” In Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson’s view, art history’s embrace of social semiotics ultimately transformed the discipline by introducing “the problematics of authorship, context, and reception; the implications of the study of narrative for the study of images; the issue of sexual difference in relation to verbal and visual signs; and the claims to truth of interpretation.”

Up until that point, semiotics had caused some discomfort for art historians because it was not clear how best to apply it to art. The

---

54 Ibid.
linguistic constraints of Saussurean semiotics were especially apparent when applied to visual concerns, with the result that many art historians preferred Peirce’s tripartite scheme (icon-index-symbol) as an alternative to Saussure. Meyer Shapiro, however, is credited with pioneering a semiotics of visual arts, since he effectively applied its structuralist principles to composition and form. His enquiry sought a way to derive meaning from formal aspects of art, and he ultimately explored binary oppositions such as frontality/profile, field/no-field.57

The study of visual narrative modes likewise developed from structuralist and semiotic principles. Warburg and Panofsky’s successor at the Warburg Institute was Ernst Gombrich, a functionalist art historian interested in the social and psychological aspects of art. Recognizing that the iconological methods of his predecessors were far too often used without “proper controls,” Gombrich offered options for ‘controlling’ the interpretation of images. He believed that the meaning of a work could not be adequately ascertained without a concomitant knowledge of its function.58 As such, the intent of the artist was paramount and provided what he called the dominant meaning, “the intended meaning or principal purpose of the picture.”59 Inspired by the literary historian D. E. Hirsch, Gombrich stressed that the key to understanding the meaning and function of the image was to first establish its genre. He asserts, “the intended meaning of a work can only be established once we have decided what category or genre of literature the work in question was intended to belong to. Unless we try to establish first whether a given

59 Ibid., 15-16.
literary work was intended as a serious tragedy or as a parody, our interpretation is likely to go very wrong indeed.”\textsuperscript{60} In other words, interpretation relied on the form (genre) chosen by the artist. For Gombrich, meaning was crystallized in the intent of the author.

\textit{Multimodality as the new semiotics: a theory of communication and culture}

The second major critique of semiotics developed from the first, in that several of the theorists who had been responsible for the move towards social semiotics still felt dissatisfied with their results and endeavored to develop it further. In the 1990s, some of the most adamant proponents of social semiotics, particularly Gunther Kress, Robert Hodge, and Theo van Leeuwen, wondered how best to apply the method to a symbolic landscape rapidly changing beyond recognition, thanks to technological advances, transformations in media, and a world quickly shrinking through globalization. Whereas semiotics had been employed for the study of languages and art, a more flexible method needed to be developed to deal with all the different visual ways of containing meaning: diagrams, maps, charts, websites, electronic media, film, television, and so on. While they sought to develop a theory applicable not only to language or visual culture, but to all signs and symbols, they nevertheless remained especially concerned with visual expression and literacy. Kress, for example, describes a world in which the image has replaced language and text as the dominant medium for communication. He insists that “the major shift in the new landscape of communication…lies in the increasing use of

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 5.
image, even in situations where previously writing would have been used. Consequently an urgent task is understanding the different affordances of writing and image.\textsuperscript{61}

Kress realized that meaning could be constructed using different modes of representation, governed by the needs of individuals drawing on resources shaped by society. His theory, termed multimodality, differs from the preceding forms of semiotics in several respects. First, for him, symbols are not ready-made and ‘available for use’ due to some inherent connection between signifier and signified, as in the case of Piercian semiotics, nor purely conventional and determined by social accord, as upheld by Sausurre. Instead, signs are made when a sign-maker actively draws on various semiotic resources and modes in order to express meaning; they cannot be truly arbitrary given that the person making the signs must decide how best to combine the resources in order to represent a meaning. In other words, whereas semiotics stresses the social context of symbols, multimodality insists upon the agency of interested and motivated individuals, even if those individuals are limited by convention and the cultural, social, and psychological experience of the sign-maker.\textsuperscript{62}

Kress calls the resources which sign-makers employ in the representation of meaning ‘modes.’ These are semiotic resources, or forms of representation, with different affordances, each mode with its own limitations and potentialities: gesture, speech, writing, color, texture, clothing, etc. The various modes have dramatic effects on the success of representation, since each mode conveys meaning differently. Still,

\textsuperscript{62} Gunther Kress, \textit{Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication} (Taylor & Francis, 2010).
“multimodality's insistence on the multiple resources used in communication is coupled with the democratic stance that all modes are equal.”

The insistence on multiplicity of ways to make meaning arose as a reaction in particular to the idea of a fixed, regular grammar or system of signs, since, as Kress saw it, sign-making was a dynamic process related to social changes. Hodge and Kress explain that their approach to social semiotics (and multimodality after it) was based “on a number of premises in a theory of communication and society.” As Kress indicates with his emphasis on the process of choice, multimodality rests on the assumption that signs and sign-making are constructed for the purpose of communicating meaning. Many symbolic theories are, at heart, theories of communication.

Indeed, the 20th century’s foremost communications model was developed in 1948 by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. This conception, derived from mathematics and electrical engineering, imagines a sender, a code sent along a channel, and a receiver who decodes the message. The transmission model is essentially a condensed form of a much more complex and enduring debate central to the philosophical and ontological interests of the last several centuries: the conveyance and reception of meaning. Some explanations focus their attention on the individual who wishes to express meaning – the sender or the sign-maker. Yet, the ultimate authority of the sign-maker, the author, and the artist has

---

64 Kress, *Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*.
67 Ibid., 34.
certainly been challenged, so that other paradigms highlight the paramount role of the receiver (such as reader-response). It seems, however, that most theories of communication have in common an assumption that there is an *intentional* transference of information (or meaning) on the part of the sender (sign-maker). In art history and visual studies, the communication approach is widespread, to the extent that in some academic institutions art history has been combined with or subsumed by communication departments.\(^{68}\) Although Kress insists that the receiver is the second half of the communicative process and that without an interpretator communication cannot be said to have happened, the bulk of his argument addresses the sign-maker, including his cautionary advice to future sign-makers about the importance of design and rhetoric. Moreover, those working on signs and sign-making are forced to contend with how meaning was created by either individuals or by groups. There are critics who argue that sociological concerns have dominated visual studies and archaeology, where the “strategy has been to demote the individual authority of visual signs in order to make them indexes of social movements.”\(^{69}\)

To a certain extent multi-modality builds upon and reacts to the use of semiotic analysis and visual discourse in symbolic anthropology. This form of anthropological thought was developed in American institutions in the 1960s (before its influence spread to Europe in the 70s) and was grounded in an academic dissatisfaction with scientific methodologies and grand narratives. Symbolic anthropology was concerned especially

\(^{68}\) For example, Art History and Communications at McGill University.

with culture, a system of shared meanings – made up of symbols – that could be interpreted and decoded by researchers. Clifford Geertz in particular described culture as a symbolic text that must be read.70 Popular topics of interpretation included mythology, the performing arts, and religion (to which we will return in the next chapter). As for the visual arts and material objects, they were explored in more detail through what some have called ‘symbolic archaeology,’ otherwise known as post-processualism. In this approach, “the archaeologist’s ability to understand anything about material culture is seen to depend on understanding symbolic meanings, which have their origins in particular historical processes of assigning conventional meanings to material signs.”71 That is, each sign’s meaning is rooted in social (i.e., not individual) convention. Championed by the likes of Ian Hodder and Christopher Tilley, post-processualism was heavily influenced by the cultural particularism and interpretive basis of symbolic anthropology. Contesting the empiricist and positivist beliefs of the archaeological processualists who preceded them in the 1960s, post-processualists like Hodder rebuffed the scientific method’s stance as the most viable archaeological approach, instead praising the new interpretative strategies that had so recently been developed. It is the rallying cry for interpretation, after all, that made semiotic analysis so attractive to art historians. As Bal and Bryson suggested, “semiotics challenges the positivist view of

70 C. Geertz, Religion as a cultural system (Tavistock, 1966).
knowledge, and it is this challenge that undoubtedly presents the most difficulties to the traditional practices of art history as a discipline.”  

Geertz may have received credit for popularizing the ‘interpretive turn’ in anthropology, but critics have identified several weaknesses in his approach, namely that it was atemporal, it poorly managed issues of historicity and change, and it neglected the fundamental role of power relationships within social contexts. Geertz’s conception of culture failed to account for the fact that in social relationships there is always a hierarchy of power, and those power differences have significant bearing on the control of symbols, on their creation, and on their reception. Tying symbols to larger social movements and convention erases the conflict and mediation integral to symbolic construction and reception. As Kress describes, “both arbitrariness and convention point to social power, though in distinctly different ways: arbitrariness as an indication of a social power which is sufficiently strong to tie any form to any meaning; and convention – the effect of social power over time – as a social force which acts to keep signs stable, a stabilizing force for the community which subscribes to it.” Proponents of multimodality have gone to great pains to emphasize how the new model improves upon the traditional semiotics employed by Geertz and his predecessors, by incorporating power hierarchies, the fluidity of meanings, and the agency of the individual.

---

74 Kress, Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication, 63.
75 Ibid., 37-39.
“The absurd idea that symbols mean”: agency, psychology, and desire

The semiotic approaches so far discussed have been founded on the idea that images and signs are bearers of meaning that must be decoded through exegesis and cultural contextualization. While the semiotic framework has become ubiquitous in the humanistic disciplines, attacks have been levied against it. In what follows, I will explore the major reason for this dissatisfaction and explicate several approaches that have been put forth as alternatives.

Agency and affect

To begin, in his influential 1998 book, Art and Agency, Alfred Gell emphatically rejected the idea that images serve as symbolic vehicles of meaning intended to communicate a message that must be deciphered by the viewer. He instead labored to develop a theory of art that followed the traditions of anthropological thinking, particularly regarding the interaction of social persons within individual biographical contexts, rather than sociological (supra-biographical) or psychological ones (intra-biographical). He elaborates, “anthropological theories are distinctive in that they are typically about social relationships; these, in turn occupy a certain biographical space, over which culture is picked up, transformed, and passed on, through a series of life-stages.”76

Gell considered art objects and images to be persons, or more specifically, efficacious social agents. Concepts that we might associate with people, such as

intention, awareness, and agency, can, he argued, equally be applied to objects. Visible art has the power to transform, captivate, provoke, and stimulate. Rather than ‘meaning’ conveyed through artistic forms, Gell called attention to the social encounters occurring between individuals and art objects and, because the objects were social agents, too, those interactions transpiring amongst individuals vis a vis the art object. More simply, Gell defines his anthropological approach to art as one investigating the “social relations that obtain in the neighborhood of works of art.”

Gell demonstrated his theory with the example of the boards displayed on Trobriand canoe prows. Intricately carved and richly decorated, their elaborate appearance was meant to serve as a “psychological weapon” during the process of overseas exchange. As Gell describes it, “the purpose of these beautiful carvings is to demoralize the opposition, so that they will lose the capacity to drive hard bargains or resist the Trobrianders’ blandishments and plausible falsehoods.” He portrays the images as agents that captivate, fascinate, and trap the viewer.

The affective power of images has been embraced outside the realms of art history and anthropology particularly in advertising, where the value of images lies in their ability to persuade. Media studies have actively adopted the communicative and semantic implications of persuasive images (e.g., recurrent terms in advertising texts include ‘decode’ and ‘signify’). Analyses of ads generally seem to prefer Peircian semiotics over other approaches. On a fundamental level, images in advertisements are

---

77 Ibid., 26.
78 Ibid., 69.
thought to signify products and are thus described evocatively as the “commodity-as-sign.” As a matter of fact, due to their semiotic and communicative nature, Fern Johnson maintains that visual advertisements should be recognized as an element of wider ‘discourse.’ Johnson draws on Critical Discourse Analysis, the same approach that influenced Kress to build the semiotic concept of multimodality discussed previously. Symbols, codes, messages, meanings – Critical Discourse Analysis and its offshoots continue to operate under the weight of sign-vehicles. Still, the efficacious agency of images and symbols described by Gell is not forgotten in the concept of ‘discourse;’ as Michel Foucault articulated, an essential aspect of discourse’s power rests in its ability to regulate social behavior. Advertising recognizes and in fact depends on the power of images to modify behavior, especially in a consumer culture. Paul Messaris summarizes, visual “advertising’s goal is to cause us to act.”

Gell’s descriptions of the Trobriand prow-board include one of the ways that advertising images persuade viewers and influence their actions. Often the motivation instituted by pictures in ads results from the way the images affect feelings, purposefully manipulating emotional responses such as fear, guilt, hope, and desire. In point of fact, a notorious method employed by advertisers is the creation of desire through discontent. Pictures of events, places, and people attract spectators by creating a vision of something they want for themselves but do not have; even if this ‘something’ is entirely ephemeral –

---

81 Johnson, Imaging in advertising: verbal and visual codes of commerce, 7.
83 Messaris, Visual persuasion: the role of images in advertising.
confidence, respect, power – the product becomes emotionally linked to the imagined reality.

The discipline of psychology terms the stimulation of emotional response ‘affect.’ The designation likewise appears in philosophical usage, with a slightly modified meaning. Brian Massumi explains, “it is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.”84 Since the 1990s, affects, emotional impacts, and individual experiences have come to the fore in the social sciences; Geertz’s ‘interpretative turn’ has been superseded by the ‘affective turn.’85

Advertisers and anthropologists such as Gell have maintained that most visual culture serves a purpose and is frequently meant to cause emotional responses, rather than exist on its own, for its own sake. Gell adamantly rejects aesthetic portrayals of art objects, citing the ability to otherwise impact human spectators as one of the arts’ most noteworthy elements. This legitimization of emotional response and individual perception reflect the psychological inclinations of the anthropology of art.

“Phenomenology trumps iconography”: cognitive science and neuroarthistory

Both advertising and anthropological approaches, then, appeal to psychological interpretations instead of just sociological ones. Within the last three decades, cognitive

84 Brian Massumi, ”Translator’s foreward: pleasures of philosophy,” in A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia, ed. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi.
studies have also employed individual-centered approaches to images. Cognitive approaches generally dispute the semiological explanations so often used to decipher iconography and symbols, what in 1978 Dan Sperber called “the absurd idea that symbols mean.” In fact, cognitive approaches to art have become increasingly rooted in advances in biological investigations, particularly neuroscience. Several of the most prominent theorists of this subject were in fact students of art historian Gombrich, the successor to Panofksy and director of the Warburg Institute. One of these, John Onians, dubbed this growing movement ‘neuroarthistory.’ He explains that a profound consequence of neurological approaches to art objects has been the necessary rejection of the traditional Western dichotomy separating the mind from the body, a topic we will return to Chapter 2. Neuroscience instead pushes us towards the idea that the body informs the mind.

Another Gombrich student, David Freedberg, who we will encounter in greater detail in the next chapter, has undertaken research projects with a number of neurologists and is an active proponent of the new neuroarthistory sub-discipline. An element in neuroscience that has particularly interested Freedberg and other art historians takes the form of ‘mirror neurons.’ In the 1990s, scientists discovered that when an individual observes another individual moving their hand (e.g., picking something up), the neurons in the first observer are activated in the same manner and part of the brain as if they were enacting the movement themselves. In fact, this neural simulation occurs even during the

86 D. Sperber, Rethinking symbolism (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 84.
87 John Onians provides an introduction, brief historiography, and bibliography related to the increased use of neuroscience in the study of visual culture: J. Onians, Neuroarthistory: from Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki (Yale Univ Pr, 2007), 1-17. See the blog The Beautiful Mind (thebeautifulmind.com) for current and real-time debates and discourse surrounding art and neuroscience.
examination of a static image of movement (as in a picture of someone picking something up). Furthermore, a similar somatosensory activation happens while observing facial expressions and the tactile experience of others; the neurons in the observer’s brain mimic those in the brain of the observed. As Freedberg argues, these studies “enable us to account for three of the chief forms of response to visual images that have hitherto remained unexplained: (i) the feeling of bodily engagement with the gestures, movements and intentions of others; (ii) identification with the emotions of observed others; and (iii) a feeling of empathy for bodily sensations.”

For Freedberg, this is a compelling reason to reconsider Aby Warburg’s notion of *Pathosformel*, in which illustrated bodily movements embody the inner psychic excitement of the figure, as well as the theories of empathy that originated with Warburg’s predecessor Robert Vischer, in which subject and object become one.

Freedberg applied these scientific results to an analysis of Rogier van der Weyden’s 15th century *Descent from the Cross*, which depicts the grieving Mary collapsing in a pose that mirrors the body of Jesus as it is lowered from the cross. Because it was common for 15th century writers to underscore the emotional and especially corporeal manner in which Mary felt the pain of her son, Van der Weyden realized a powerful empathetic mimesis by visually equating Jesus’s experience with that of his mother. What’s more, Freedberg argued that the *Descent* creates a potent response in viewers because, while looking at the two slumping figures, the viewers’ own bodies...

---

unconsciously empathize with the movements of Mary and Jesus thanks to the neurological simulation occurring during the viewing process. In the end, the spectator cannot help but participate in a shared, embodied, phenomenological response.

Freedberg enunciated the implications of ‘mirror neurons’ for the study of visual content. Because neuron activation and movement simulation occurs precognitively, the viewer responds regardless of whether or not they are familiar with the biblical story behind the painting’s subject matter. The feeling of physical weakness, of collapsing limbs, and grief-stricken faces exhibited by the painted figures echo within the viewer’s brain. In other words, a viewer of Van der Weyden’s Descent would feel a visceral response thanks to firing neurons, even if the identity of the painted figures was completely unknown. This neurological simulation means that, for viewers, depictions of movement acquire emotional force, with the result that “phenomenology trumps iconology.”

Freedberg’s prediction for iconography is a momentous one, although few other cognitive art historians have anticipated similarly dire consequences for iconographical studies. In fact, contra Freedberg, several art historians have combined cognitive/neurological advances with more traditional approaches to visual content, exploring, for example, how cognitive science reinforces Panofsky’s idea of a worldview (associated with his third level of interpretation) or how it illuminates the form and content of images in medieval manuscripts. One scholar has even called for the

---

90 Ibid., 352.
91 Pamela Sheingorn, "Making the Cognitive Turn in Art History: A Case Study,” Connexions (June 11, 2010), http://cnx.org/content/m34254/1.4/
development of a ‘cognitive iconology.’ As of now, these experimental attempts are in their infancy and no discernible trend can be identified, but there can be little doubt that a new search for ‘neuroiconology’ has begun.

We will return to Freedberg’s appeal to a pre-cognitive response and a phenomenology that trumps iconology in the next chapter with more focused discussion of phenomenology itself. As we will see, the antagonism that Freedberg described between phenomenology and iconology reflects a long-assumed incompatability between the interpretative (iconology) and the anti-interpretative (phenomenology), which we saw in the Warburgian distinction between the illogical, emotional, and unconscious interaction with images and the logical, intellectual, and abstract response to images.

92 Verstegen, "A plea for a cognitive iconology within visual culture."
Chapter 2: Iconography at the intersection of religion and art

In the previous chapter, I provided a synthesis of the major methods and frameworks employed by the social sciences and humanities for approaching content and symbolism. In this chapter, I narrow the focus to the treatment of religious arts. Although I will address the arts in the wider sense, I will include a special emphasis on iconography. In what follows, I provide a combination of intellectual history, historiography, and methodological critique. As with its predecessor, this chapter is meant to lay the groundwork for the next chapter by providing an initial presentation and analysis of many of the ideas and frameworks that shaped the way classical scholars handled religiously meaningful symbols.

During the last two decades, religious studies has begun to treat visual and material culture in a much more systematic way than it had previously. While this subset of the discipline is still new, the number of publications that cover the topic has skyrocketed. David Morgan, an art historian and religious studies scholar, almost single-handedly accounts for the push for historiographic documentation and methodological evaluation of the trend.\(^93\) My argument in this chapter, however, adds to Morgan’s discussion by featuring material that he has not incorporated into his history of the problem. Moreover, I am the first to provide a history of iconographic studies in relation

---

to the history of religions. This discussion is long past due, not just because it provides a more accurate understanding of iconographic history, but also because the vast majority of new studies about religious material and visual culture include iconographic analysis without adequate comprehension of its various methods. Similarly, traditional iconographic analyses are often unaware of the complexities that religious theory introduces to the study of images.

This chapter has several goals, 1) to document the theoretical connections between aesthetic concerns and religious studies, 2) to outline the major methods employed in the study of religious images and symbols, and 3) to highlight whenever possible the integral position of iconography and visual content in theories about art and religion.

Aesthetic theories and the role of religion

Both art and religion play significant roles in the theories of two foundational Western philosophers, Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. Given their impact on the epistemological and ontological concerns of future generations, including art historians, they serve as an appropriate introduction to both the conceptual links that have been made between religion and art objects and the role visual content can play in that association. The aesthetic theories of both philosophers dealt with art in a manner that closely involved religious ideas, but in different ways. Kant conceptualized art and the aesthetic experience in terms remarkably akin to the predominant religious beliefs of his time. For Hegel, changes in religious types, together with the link between artistic form
and content – an essentially iconographic concern – affected the historic manifestation of *Geist*, a concept central to his philosophy.

**Pietism and the birth of art**

During the 18th and 19th centuries, many intellectuals believed that both art and religion derived from the same impulse within humankind. Although such origins are no longer an abiding topic of interest, historians continue to document the constantly changing perceptions exhibited by people in different historical epochs about the relationship between religious and artistic matters. During the last ten years, several scholars have commented on the similarity between 18th century ideas about art and trends in contemporary reform Protestantism.94 Dag Solhjell has gone so far as to suggest that modern conceptions of ‘art’ originated in Pietism, a Lutheran movement that became increasingly pervasive in central and northern Europe starting in the 17th century; thereafter its tenets exerted an influence on several aspects of continental philosophy.95 Despite Pietism’s unorthodox beginnings, it gained institutional affirmation and cultural authority when it was integrated into the existing Lutheran church and became the state religion of Prussia in the 1760s.96

Popularized by Philip Jakob Spener in the second half of the 17th century, Pietism arose as a reaction against the Lutheran church’s dogmatic emphasis on doctrine and theology. Spener and his followers stressed, as a contrast, the personal, inner quality of

---

religious experience. Rather than simply assenting to orthodoxy and doctrinal beliefs, the founders of Pietism argued that inner faith alone was the way to access the divine. Religion, they believed, was private and subjective, and God was thus available to the laity just as he was to the church hierarchy. The active piety of Pietism advocated good works and service, interpretive readings of Scripture, and intimate, one-on-one relationships with God. Pietists felt that grace manifested itself in the body through sensation and emotion.

It was in the 18th century that a strong connection between religion and aesthetics began to surface in literature. Indeed, Alexander Baumgarten, who coined the term ‘aesthetics,’ came from a Pietist family. Randall Van Schepen argues that during this time a number of writers and early art historians applied notions of spiritual encounter to aesthetic interpretations, particularly the inner spiritualism of Pietism which was often equated with beauty. This trend is apparent in the work of J.J. Winckelmann. Considered one of the founders of art history and the study of ancient art, he is best remembered for his book *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums (History of Ancient Art)*, published in 1764. Therein he praised the ‘noble grandeur and quiet beauty’ of Greek sculpture, believing that beautiful art works appealed to the higher emotions and ought to overwhelm viewers with rapturous bliss. As Moshe Barasch comments, “it was perhaps not by chance and mere scholarly objectivity that a man like Winckelmann, who could hardly control the stormy passions of his own life, discovered ‘calmness’ and

---

97 Morgan, "Art and religion in the modern age," 32.
‘tranquility’ to be the central values of Greek art.” It was not uncommon for art works to be described in blatantly worshipful terms. Wincklemann, for instance, described the moral qualities shining from the face of the stoically suffering Laocoon in much the same terms as he described the Virgin Mary.

Karl Philip Moritz furthered the almost spiritualized relationship between the beholder and the beautiful, articulating it as ‘disinterestedness,’ or the state in which the viewer’s personal desires and interests disappeared as the art object totally captivated them. That captivation and transcendence caused a ‘forgetfulness of self.’ Much like Winckelmann, Moritz described viewers and artworks in the same terms as worshipers and God. Van Schepen notes that “Moritz’s identification of theology with aesthetic experience brought the epiphanic language of ardent religious fervor to the experience of the materially present object.”

The spiritual and Pietist aspect of the German aesthetic tradition infused the work of Kant, who came from a firmly Pietist background. His parents were active participants in the reform movement and the college he attended was founded by a Pietist. His aesthetic theories and descriptions of the sublime had an enormous impact on art history and, consequently, on critical evaluations of modern devotional arts. His adoption of Moritz’s disinterestedness in particular established normative rules for appropriate viewer response. As we will see in Chapter 4, disinterestedness has also characterized normative critiques of religious behavior.

---

100 Morgan, "Toward a modern historiography of art and religion," 29.
101 Van Schepen, "From the form of spirit to the spirit of form," 52.
102 Ibid., 59.
Kant and his recent critics

In his work, Kant constructed the idea of Beauty and the Sublime, which he indicated could be perceived in both nature and art. Beauty and the Sublime, rather than being properties of observed objects, instead resided in the responses of viewers. In this sense Kant was an earlier practitioner of viewer response. His metaphysics also established the duality of immanence and transcendence, the former referring to everything that could be recognized and known in the world, the latter referring to things beyond the possibility of human experience and reason. For Kant, the transcendental was akin to the unknowability of God.103

Thanks to his borrowing of Mortiz’s concepts, the supposed superiority of the disinterested response became a long-lasting and pervasive element of subsequent aesthetics,104 even into the 21st century. Certain trends in modern aesthetics consider ‘disinterestedness’ as the true and legitimate means for considering art works. The discourse contends that the act of contemplation should be entirely free of desire for the object, and accordingly any social concerns, intellectual reasoning, personal reflections, or base emotional responses should not intrude upon aesthetic judgment.

David Morgan maintains that art historians have failed in their attempts to deal with religious material culture precisely because philosophical and academic treatments of art rely on the 18th century idea of ‘disinterestedness.’ He argues that in reality very

104 Morgan, “Toward a modern historiography of art and religion,” 31.
few people actually experience images in this manner. Most visual culture does not exist ‘for its own sake’ and instead is frequently meant to cause emotional responses and desire.\textsuperscript{105} Art critics have responded to a great deal of such imagery by labeling it ‘kitsch,’ describing it in particularly vitriolic terms.\textsuperscript{106} On one side, ‘kitsch’ is uncultivated and the epitome of bad taste; at the other it is evil incarnate and a danger to the world.\textsuperscript{107} Commonly it is considered ‘sentimental,’ a damning label indeed, “connoting superficiality, saccharine sweetness and the manipulations of mawkish emotion.”\textsuperscript{108}

Robert Solomon notes that criticism of kitsch is frequently political and economic in nature, reflecting class distinctions as well as manufacturing ideologies (i.e. disdain for the mass produced). Criticism of the sentimentality it evokes has been used to demonize the uneducated and even the perceived ‘emotionality of women.’ Solomon rises to defend sentimental reactions, however; he says, “is it not one of the essential features of social existence that we can be moved by children and puppies and a happiness not our own, that we can have affections that are superficial…in which [we] have nothing at stake, nothing invested? That is what kitsch provides for us…”\textsuperscript{109} While labeling pictures of kittens and children as ‘kitsch’ seems fairly innocuous, its application to religious art has had a more damaging effect.

\textsuperscript{106} For a lively example, see C. Greenberg, "Avant-garde and kitsch," \textit{Partisan Review} 6(1939).
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.: 9.
For Kant, the truly significant aspect of art existed in the reaction it instilled in viewers, or more accurately, in qualified viewers with the faculties to properly intuit and judge it. The very idea of disinterested judgment, however, derived from a philosophical system deeply colored by Kant’s exposure to Pietism. Many of the underlying themes that can be traced to Kant and his milieu – such as the emphasis on inner feeling, disinterestedness, and the dualism of immanence and transcendence – were taken up by later thinkers, artists, and theologians, several of whom make appearances in the following pages.

Hegel’s approach to religious ideas and the visual arts was fundamentally different than Kant’s, however. Whereas Kant was concerned with the viewer’s consciousness and response, Hegel concentrated on the object itself. More specifically, Hegel expressly addressed the correlation between visual content and form, incorporating that relationship in his historicist philosophy of art.

Hegel and the ability of form to actualize content

Hegel briefly touched on the function of art in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) but most of what we know about his view on aesthetics derives from lecture notes written from 1817 to 1829. In his lectures, he famously developed a historical model that traced the relationship between art and *Geist*, which is variously translated as Spirit, Mind, Consciousness, or Truth (I will use the un-translated *Geist*). What is often overlooked, however, is the importance of subject matter and content to Hegel’s theory of

---

art and \textit{Geist}. In fact, Kai Hammermeister argued that Hegel’s work marked “a turn from a formal aesthetics to one of content.”\footnote{Kai Hammermeister, \textit{The German aesthetic tradition} (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 88.} Surprisingly and somewhat bafflingly, nearly all histories of iconographic studies entirely disregard Hegel’s fascination with this most semiotic and iconological of issues. My goal here is to rectify this noteworthy lacuna.

Before I talk more specifically about the role of content, however, let me briefly present a general (and vastly oversimplified) outline of Hegel’s aesthetics. As described in his writings on metaphysics, Hegel’s ontology concerns the nature of Being, or Reason, which, he argues, becomes actualized through self-realization and freedom. This ultimate consciousness does not exist outside of humanity, so \textit{Geist}’s attainment is entirely reliant on human circumstances. Its ‘actualization’ is contingent on historical and cultural conditions; thus whether or not it is fully or inadequately expressed depends on those circumstances.\footnote{Stephen Houlgate, ”Introduction: an overview of Hegel’s Aesthetics,” in \textit{Hegel and the arts}, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Northwestern University Press, 2007), xiv.}

In Hegel’s view, humankind reaches Reason through the trifold forms of Absolute Spirit: philosophy, religion, and art. Each of these actualizes \textit{Geist} in different ways. Philosophy does so through conceptual dialectics. \textit{Geist} can likewise be fully attained through religion, but instead of using pure concepts as philosophy does, religion does so through feelings, faith, and imagination; because religion concerns god, \textit{Geist} as it is achieved through religion is the Divine. Humans create art in order to physically and sensuously manifest \textit{Geist}, the proper accomplishment of which results in Beauty. Beauty is the perfect material and sensuous expression of \textit{Geist}. 

\textit{\textsuperscript{111}}Kai Hammermeister, \textit{The German aesthetic tradition} (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 88. 
Here is where iconography comes in. According to Hegel, Beauty is achieved through “…the absolute unity of the concept and the object.” In artistic terms, that means the idea (content) is perfectly expressed through form. As Houlgate reiterates, “Beauty…is not just a matter of content: it is the appropriate content expressed in the appropriate sensuous form.”

Because different historical epochs achieve Geist through different aspects of Absolute Spirit (philosophy, religion, and art), Hegel directly related the possibility of artistic Beauty to specific historical and cultural circumstances. Hegel came up with three designations for the artistic stages evident in his historical progression of Geist: Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic. Since Beauty is Geist actualized in art, each of these stages are ultimately characterized by the possible (or impossible) coming together of idea and form, content and object.

Symbolic art, according to Hegel, is best exemplified by Egyptian art. Since Egyptian religion entailed what Hegel considered as vaguely conceived gods, the Divine could not properly be grasped in physical form and could only be expressed symbolically. To clarify, in Egyptian art there was not a perfect coincidence between Divine (Content) and its physical manifestation in art (Object).

According to Hegel, Beauty, the perfect connection between the Divine and its artistic formulation was achieved in Classical Greece; the Greek gods were anthropomorphic and could thus be represented in the natural form of the human body. D.

\[113\] Ibid., xviii.
James notes, “the Greeks are therefore seen as having developed a conception of the divine that constitutes a suitable content for art, in so far as the latter is to fulfill its highest vocation of bringing the divine into consciousness.”

Because art, in Hegel’s view, is less able to actualize spirit than philosophy and religion, at a certain point in his historical progression, Hegel believed that it became possible for the Divine to be best manifested internally as faith, rather than physically as in art. Because of this, it becomes impossible to represent the Divine in a physical object. In other words, as Houlgate explains, Geist “does not need to be given aesthetic expression in order to become determinate and intelligible for us, but can be fully comprehended within religious feeling and faith.” Hegel categorizes this phase of art as the Romantic.

In Hegel’s philosophy, Geist is manifested in art as Beauty, which can only occur when form and content are perfectly aligned. It is no surprise, then, that when Hegel discussed the various stages of art, including detailed discussions of the various forms of architecture, sculpture, and painting, he spent a fair amount of time directly addressing visual content and iconography. Indeed, for Hegel, the best subject-matter to represent the Divine reflected “religious and moral seriousness in the treatment and presentation of the ideal beauty of form.” He described “the Holy Family, and above all the Madonna’s love for her child, as the absolutely suitable ideal subject for this sphere.” In contrast, he disparaged allegorical images, opining that they “lack inner life and

---

115 James, Art, myth and society in Hegel’s Aesthetics, 28.
118 Ibid., 819.
individuality of figure, they become vague, uninteresting, and cold.”119 Worse, he exclaimed, was the depiction of “physical agony…the traits of stubbornness, crudity, and ruggedness, or those of trivial people…”120

**Artistic approaches to the religious**

Until this point I have been discussing the German tradition and particularly ideas about religion in philosophical approaches to art. I now would like to turn from the philosopher’s perspective to the artist’s perspective and from Germany to England. As the next section will demonstrate, artists in the 19th and 20th centuries consciously participated in a dialogue with the theological questions of their time and region. One group, for example, championed the material and sensuous aspects of religious experience and ritual, while their successors rebelled against positivism by attempting to transform art into a religion that emphasized the immaterial and the spiritual, through the exploration of myths, morality, and psychology. In order to meet these goals, both groups carefully manipulated visual content.

**The avant-garde, iconography, and ritual aesthetics**

In the 1830s and 1840s, a group of scholars at Oxford expressed discontent with the Church of England by publishing a series of pamphlets. Called the Oxford Movement or the Tractarians, they, together with a number of other intellectuals and priests, called for a renewal of Catholic authority and tradition. Of those Catholic traditions, ritual was

---

119 Ibid., 859.
120 Ibid., 873.
an element specifically separated out for praise. The Tractarians believed that the experience of worship had become too ‘plain.’ It was thought that in the past, solemn Catholic practices powerfully embodied penance, faith, and spiritual emotion. They praised the movements and actions associated with Catholic worship, believing it should be undertaken with both souls and bodies. The Movement engendered a growing interest in symbolic and ritual items used to such consequence in Catholicism\textsuperscript{121} as well as the materiality of religious experience.

As such, theologians gave new attention to ritual activity, vestments, and liturgical objects. English priests became fascinated by what was called ‘visible devotion’ and they sought to enrich their churches with color, light, warmth, and ceremonial clothing. Scholars, priests, and other influential individuals were not the only ones to be inspired by these ideas, of course. Many artists reacted against the English church’s stringent policies regarding art, ornament, and architecture by painting ritual scenes and supplying an increasingly captivated clergy with altarpieces and church decoration.

Indeed, the Tractarians’ praise of ritualism and the new direction of the Anglican High Church proved foundational for an entire British artistic movement, informing the ideological stance of an up-and-coming group of painters. In 1848 they dubbed themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and, although their unity as a group dissolved fairly quickly as they went their separate ways in the 1850s, their eventual impact on other artistic movements was impressive. Furthermore, they have been called the first avant-garde painters because they adopted a polemical stance towards the conventional

artistic output and training produced by the Royal Academy of Arts. The Pre-Raphaelite painters consciously embraced the archaic. They employed gold leaf and the colors reminiscent of Early Renaissance visual culture. Believing that Raphael and his successors had ruined art, they took inspiration from the artists of Quattrocentro Italian and Flemish painting; they admired the rich colors, the detail, and the elaborate compositions. In addition to the revival of Catholic pageantry, the new discipline of archaeology provided ancient objects and images that could be carefully emulated in the minutely detailed realism of the Pre-Raphaelites. The formal qualities of this ‘ritual aesthetic’ did not make up the sole feature of the group, however; subject matter was a major component of Pre-Raphaelite identification. Paganism was a prevalent topic, “in order to displace dominant Christian ideologies and construct other social realities of religious experience.”\textsuperscript{122} Iconographic details preoccupied them. The painters illustrated ancient and medieval mythologies, ritual scenes and processions, pagan priestess and femmes fatales, and especially symbolic iconography such as lilies, doves, and evocatively unbound hair. They likewise exhibited sacramentalism, carefully depicting items used in ritual and other liturgical material culture.

Two architects working at the same time as the Pre-Raphaelites and likewise working within the Tractarian ideology explained sacramentalism in this way: “By this word ‘Sacramentality,’ we mean to convey the idea that, by the outward and visible form,
is signified something inward and spiritual: that the material fabrick symbolizes, embodies, figures, represents, expresses, answers to, some abstract meaning.”

The Pre-Raphaelite painters demonstrated how much theological discontent shared with visual artists in the 19th century. Together with the theologians of the Oxford movement, they championed the very materiality and aesthetic orientation that the Protestant Reformation had previously demonized. They highlighted the intensely sensuous associations people connected to their imaginings and memories of religious experience. Similar concerns preoccupied their artistic descendents, the Symbolists.

Symbolism and the iconography of the immaterial

Although the Pre-Raphaelites did not last long as a tightly knit group, they widely inspired the subsequent avant-garde trends, particularly the Symbolist movement, which arose in the 1880s. Its artists and poets operated in a milieu marked by dissatisfaction with and distrust of positivism; relativism and ambiguity were increasing. They followed in the footsteps of Romanticism by expecting their art to access and funnel the immaterial and spiritual. The Pre-Raphaelites had focused on stylistic realism and sensuous experience, but the Symbolists did so to a lesser degree. The connections between the painters were less characterized by stylistic similarities and instead with theoretical considerations and a need to draw out spiritual and mythical components of art. For the Symbolists, art was fundamentally religious and, because its spiritual quality had been

---

diluted, the Symbolists charged themselves with bringing it back.\textsuperscript{125} They spoke about art in specifically religious terms, equating painters with priests and prophets, calling those artists dedicated to mimesis and naturalism ‘false priests.’\textsuperscript{126} Like the Pre-Raphaelites before them, their battle-cry pitted them against the art academies and the perceived corruption represented by the stilted art academies. Naomi Maurer notes that “for [Symbolist painter Vincent] Van Gogh, the preoccupation of the Academic artists with elegant forms and refined surfaces was the equivalent of false and superficial values in religion.”\textsuperscript{127}

Nevertheless, the Symbolists were still avidly concerned with content. Their preferred depictions included mythological topics, manifestations of the unconscious, the conflict between good and evil, and religious themes.\textsuperscript{128} They reveled in depicting otherworldly and disquieting images that could in no way be mistaken for naturalism or mimesis, illustrating demons, angels, and mythical creatures; their art dwelled on dreams and the imagination, exposing the disquieting side of the immaterial. Whereas the Pre-Raphaelites had employed recognizable Renaissance symbols, mainstream iconography, and archaeological imagery, Symbolist painters pulled from a much wider and diverse range of sources, with the result that some of their content was indistinct and obscure, often individually meaningful and private.

Significantly, the Symbolist movement was enmeshed in and informed by the occult revival in Europe. The painters represented a growing transcendentalist,

\textsuperscript{125} N.E. Maurer, \textit{The pursuit of spiritual wisdom: the thought and art of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin} (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 1.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 6.
spiritualist, and occultist fascination that permeated intellectual thought during the 19th century but was particularly strong in the 1880s and after. The generations of artists following the Symbolists – such as the surrealists, minimalists, and cubists – were also strongly shaped by occult theory and spiritualism. In fact, the avant-garde continued to deal with the concerns of the mystical and religious well into the 20th century. Tom Gibbons has shown that Cubists were particularly smitten with the idea of the Fourth dimension, considered at the time to be “a supernatural, spiritual or transcendental order of existence outside our own three-dimensional, material existence: the domain of the infinite and eternal as opposed to that of our everyday, finite and circumscribed lives.”

Historians point to Wassily Kandinsky as the most representative painter of the spiritual trend, thanks to his attempts to find formal means for depicting the immaterial and his belief that painting communicated with the soul. Celia Rabinovitch argues, in contrast, that it was Surrealist painters who most forcefully transformed occultist philosophies into the visual arts. Fascinated with the uncanny, the weird, and the mysterious, Surrealist artists attempted to convert ordinary objects into formidable and occult images.

### Occult Meanings and Mystic powers

Definitions of the occult describe it as secret, concealed, and esoteric knowledge, usually of a paranormal sort. Symbols and images played a major role in occult

---


130 Morgan, "Toward a modern historiography of art and religion," 33.

methodologies and for this reason an understanding of esoteric and occult practices is essential for both the history of iconographic studies and also for more general beliefs about religiously-oriented visual content. In fact, as I will discuss further below, it has been suggested that the idea of the ‘sign’ (as it is used in semiotics) directly stems from esoteric and occult traditions for deciphering concealed secrets. In what follows, I will highlight the enduring connection between visual symbols and esoteric practices. This requires a brief sojourn to the Renaissance, an introduction to the esoteric traditions that molded so many influential intellectuals, and a consideration of efficacious occult objects. Throughout the discussion, three trends will repeatedly surface in the various occult approaches to symbolism. First, occult signs and images bore hidden and mysterious meanings because their true significance could only be recognized or accessed by those who had been initiated through rituals or who attained the proper spiritual wisdom through study. Second, symbols possessed power because they had direct access to the divine. Not simply bearers of hidden secrets, they somehow connected to the spiritual and cosmic realm. Third, because esoteric symbols drew on divine and inscrutable sources, they were efficacious and, like the art-agents described by Gell, acted upon the world.

*Symbols and their roots in esotericism*

The central role of figures and symbols in esoteric practices has a long history tied to Renaissance magical, alchemical and theological inquiries. A clear representation of this connection can be observed in the Renaissance and Enlightenment fascination with
Egyptian hieroglyphics and the mystical ancient writings of Hermes Trismegistus, which made up the 2nd century CE Corpus hermetica. The discourse about hieroglyphics from the Renaissance often appears remarkably akin to modern deliberations on signs and their meaning. For example, Father Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), who Christopher Lehrich compared to Panofsky, believed that hidden, spiritual truths could be accessed through the allegorical readings of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Kircher wrote that the Egyptians “used them to express hidden powers and functions, and they signify the greatest mysteries in nature…Moreover, the hieroglyphic figures do not show simple syllables or names, but whole concepts, so that if you look at a scarab, it does not refer just to the animal, or to the physical sun, but the occult operations which its archetype causes in the intelligible world…” Allegoric readings of images were of course standard fare at the time; after all, the iconographic handbook of allegoric and emblematic images by Cesare Ripa (Iconologia overo descrittione dell’imagini universali cavate dall’antichità et da altri luoghi) had been published in 1593. But the allegorical readings of images, emblems, and symbols were matched by more complex approaches by contemporary intellectuals.

The belief that a mystical reality – invisible to everyday experience – could be accessed through the creation, contemplation, and manipulation of symbols and images was widespread at the time. Accordingly, by the 17th century, it was customary that

---

133 Ibid., 102.
esoteric and scientific books be illustrated with symbols and emblematic illustrations.\textsuperscript{134}

In the previous century, the Elizabethan mathematician and occultist John Dee dedicated an entire book to one symbolic configuration. Dee operated in a tradition intensely interested in finding transcendental symbols that might serve as a universal language connecting humans with the divine. His quest culminated in the \textit{Monas Hieroglyphica} (1564), in which he illustrated and described the monad, a symbolic construction that Dee presumably invented himself. György Szőnyi suggests Dee modeled his symbol on the monad described in the \textit{Corpus hermetica} of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, because, similar to the monad described therein, Dee declared that his symbol embodied oneness and unity but also contained the elements of all astronomical signs, letters, and forms. More simply, the monad was “supposed to demonstrate all visible and metaphysical aspects of the universe in the form of a geometrical-alchemical-philosophical image.”\textsuperscript{135}

With respect to astronomical signs, Dee extols the monad in this way:

Or is it not rare, I ask, that the common astronomical symbols of the planets (instead of being dead, dumb, or, up to the present hour at least, quasi barbaric signs) should have become characters imbued with immortal life and should now be able to express their especial meanings most eloquently in any tongue and to any nation? Yet a further great rareness is also added, namely that (by very good hieroglyphical arguments) their external bodies have been reduced or restored to their mystical proportions.\textsuperscript{136}

Dee’s monad, then, embodied the perfected representation of astronomical bodies and other cosmic truths. Several scholars have noted the Kabbalistic grounding of Dee’s

\textsuperscript{134} G.E. Szőnyi, \textit{John Dee’s occultism: magical exaltation through powerful signs} (State University of New York Press, 2004), 164.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{136} Lehrich, \textit{The occult mind: magic in theory and practice}, 48.
work. Kabbalah was (and is) an esoteric teaching that centers on the contemplation of the Hebrew letters (which were associated with creation), letter-number transpositions, and cosmological truth. Through meditation on the letters, individuals hoped for greater understanding and spiritual elevation. Like the letters of the Torah, Dee’s hieroglyphic monad enabled a ritual exegesis that likewise sought cosmic perfection. As Szönyi describes, “we have good reason to say that [Dee’s monad] was to function as a revelatory mandala in order to propel the soul’s flight, that is, to bring the viewer into the state of exaltation, an intuitive understanding of the cosmos and a unification with the wisdom of God.”

Kabbalistic studies also affected the symbolic theories of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who, it has been argued, had a profound influence on later philosophy and theories of the sign. An engineer, spy, theologian, and mystic, he famously proposed the theory of ‘correspondences.’ Marsha Schuchard recently demonstrated that Swedenborg was an intelligence officer deeply entrenched in the esoteric networks linking Europe’s political and social elites. He studied Kabbalah from an early age, but also dabbled in astrology and alchemy, two traditions to which visual symbols were integral. Steeped as he was in Hermetic studies, he also participated as an active member of the Freemasons, visiting lodges across Europe. Masonic practice placed extraordinary emphasis on the hidden, shrouded meanings and cosmic values permeating

137 Szőnyi, *John Dee’s occultism: magical exaltation through powerful signs*, 162.
symbols and images; additionally a rich, secret symbolism was of paramount importance in the private and mystical initiation rituals orchestrated by the Freemasons.

In 1744, Swedenborg experienced a transformative series of visions in which he reported conversing with angels and witnessing events as they unfolded in heaven. Thereafter he wrote the 8-volume *Arcana Caelestia*, wherein he laid out his concept of ‘correspondences.’ He formulated a ‘dual aspect’ metaphysics that incorporated a spiritual and a material world. As Gregory Johnson explains, he claimed “that all beings exist simultaneously in the spiritual and the material worlds, that all beings have both spiritual and material aspects, and that even disembodied spirits exist in relationships of ‘correspondence’ to material objects.” He envisioned a relationship, or correspondence, between material things and their spiritual counterparts; because the spiritual world was hidden from normal human perception, the ability to behold the spiritual representations was rare. Swedenborg, fortunately, was friends with angels who described the correspondences to him. A more detailed example should help to explain what he meant by correspondences. As he wrote in the *Arcana Caelestia*:

> On several occasions when I was speaking of the viscera of the body, and was tracing their connection from those which are of the head to those which are of the chest, and so on to those which are of the abdomen, the angels that were above me led my thoughts through the spiritual things to which those viscera correspond, and this so that there was not the least error. They thought not at all of the viscera of the body of which I was thinking, but only of the spiritual things to which these correspond. Such is the intelligence of angels that from spiritual things they know all things

---

in the body in general and particular, even the most secret things, such as can never come to man's knowledge. (2992)

Swedenborg’s influence has been traced in an impressive list of thinkers, most notably Immanuel Kant, whose dualist metaphysics (discussed above) was directly drawn from Swedenborg.141 As Clarke Garrett describes it, “throughout Europe, those who dabbled in alchemy, cabalism, and Mesmerism found in Swedenborg’s spiritual experiences one more confirmation of the existence of truths beyond the reach of the five senses.”142 The esoteric tendencies which Kircher, Dee, and Swedenborg represented and championed continued to gain admirers during the spiritualist and occultist waves of the 19th century, particularly in England, France, and Germany. The influence of Renaissance occult symbolism and its interpretation can also be found throughout the academic output of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This is especially true with respect to iconography’s early history. For example, Lehrich postulates a direct link between Saussure’s semiology and the writings of the Renaissance Hermeticist Giordano Bruno (b. 1548), commenting that his work “treats nothing more nor less than the composition – both formation and formulation – of images, signs, and ideas…in something extraordinarily close to modern semiotic

---

141 Several years before writing the *Critique of Reason*, Kant was obsessed with Swedenborg and his reported mystical encounters. Johnson makes the connection unambiguous: “Swedenborg offers a dualistic account of the cosmos as being divided into both spiritual and material worlds, the spiritual world being governed by “pneumatic” laws, the material world being governed by physical laws...These claims correspond precisely to Kant’s dual aspect metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which claims that all being exist in both the phenomenal (= material) and noumenal (= spiritual) worlds.” Ibid.

senses.”¹⁴³ Celia Rabinovitch is particularly firm, stating that “…the assumption that to understand a work we must decipher its ‘code’…provides the clue to the occult origins of the concept of the sign.”¹⁴⁴

Still, in many occultist examples, symbols and images were not meant to be decoded. Instead, Dee’s declaration held true: the images and signs were not just empty symbols on a page or inscribed on an item, pointing outward to some separate referent or connected with an abstract equivalence; they were not just bearers of meaning intended to communicate secrets, otherwise ‘dead’ and ‘dumb.’ Instead, they were ‘imbued with immortal life’ or, in Swedenborg’s formulation, one and the same with that to which they corresponded. Such visual symbols and figures, then, physically manifested otherwise unseen spiritual properties.

Several attempts have been made to conceptualize and categorize the link between material forms and the ‘immortal life’ residing within them. I would like to discuss three major approaches in what follows, looking at Mircea Eliade’s hierophany, the anthropological concept of the fetish, and the notion of presence.

Occult symbols and objects

The first model was developed by a historian of religion, Mircea Eliade. He demonstrates an approach that will sound familiar given the dualist models already discussed, as he posited a strict division between the spiritual (the Sacred), and the

---

¹⁴³ Lehrich, The occult mind: magic in theory and practice, 84.

71
profane world of humans. When the divine or Sacred bubbled over into the profane world, as during a god’s epiphany, there appeared what he called a hierophany.

Discussions of symbols and symbolism flood his work and he believed that on some occasions, a symbol was likewise a hierophany. Instead of just pointing to the Sacred, in these instances the material object became the Sacred itself. More specifically, he stated “it is not only because it continues a hierophany or takes its place that the symbol is important; it is primarily because it is able to carry on the process of hierophanization and particularly because, on occasions, it is itself a hierophany – it itself reveals a sacred or cosmological reality which no other manifestation is capable of revealing.”

While Eliade joined symbols to the universal Sacred, he simultaneously postulated numerous levels of meaning for each one. He located the ‘multivalence’ of the symbol in a structuralist model, describing a ‘framework of symbolism’ in which the system of meanings and associations clustering around symbols were historically, socially, and regionally constructed.

The majority of the symbols Eliade contemplated were universal concepts and broad subjects such as the ‘Center,’ water, or time. Nevertheless, Eliade, who was raised in an Eastern Orthodox tradition, was attuned to the significance of the arts and material culture in religious practices. His work reveals an interest, for example, in modern art and the sacred, ritual masks, and the relationship between divinities and their symbols. He studied architecture, describing constructions like the Mesopotamian ziggurats as cosmic

---

145 For a more detailed discussion and critique of Eliade’s concept of the symbol (hierophany) and symbolism (the system of symbols), see Bryan S. Rennie, Reconstructing Eliade: making sense of religion (State University of New York Press, 1996), 47-60.
146 M. Eliade, Patterns in comparative religion (Bison Books, 1996), 447.
mountains and he linked temples and cosmogony. Surprisingly, when he analyzed actual iconographic examples in Indian art, he declared that they were not symbolic. He says, “Indian iconography in its totality is nothing but an endless series of human dramas of ascents toward perfection…that is why every iconographic theme – being connected with a certain meditation, a certain experience – has its own separate key. It is what Europeans call the ‘symbolism’ of Indian iconography. Actually, it is nothing but its algebraic formulation…”147

Despite the multivalent and historically grounded framework he envisioned surrounding symbols, he still believed that symbols were also universal in that they could be appearances of the Sacred. Eliade described the power in some symbols in terms of divine epiphany. They were sites where the ‘numinous’ broke into the profane world.

The second trend can be observed in anthropological and ethnological thinking. In the middle of the 19th century, the French philosopher and founder of sociology Auguste Comte described fetishism, a religious mode that conferred power and agency to physical objects. Many academic circles have since retired the designation, given that the colonialist contexts of the term ‘fetishism’ and its use as a marker of difference have since become a topic of criticism. Jay Geller explains, “there are indeed material objects believed to be imbued with force or power, the nature of which varies with object and culture, and that are used with the intention of achieving particular ends…. However,

147 M. Eliade, Symbolism, the sacred, and the arts (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), 79.
these objects and their use by no means constitute a system or the entirety of any culture's religious practices and beliefs.”

Nevertheless, the term fetish has become part of popular vocabulary, especially in discussions of the occult and magical practices. It is often used interchangeably with designations applied to more specific objects and symbols that possess a force of some sort, such as amulets, talismans, apotropaia, relics, etc. What marks all of these objects is that they hold power independently and, in many cases, are considered to be beyond human knowability. Like the objects described by Gell, they are capable of being agents and working upon the world.

These powerful objects constituted the actualization of an efficacious image, instead of being iconographic or semiotic bearers of meaning. Malcom Quinn’s discussion of the swastika provides an excellent example, though not of a specifically religious kind. When it comes to the swastika, Quinn suggests, semiotic interpretations fall short, since the visual impact of the swastika cannot be explained simply in terms of decoded meanings. He argues, “rather than being a representational sign [it] is an apotropaic and repulsive object,” it has a “hypnotic power” causing “paralysis of the spectator’s gaze.” In fact, it acts as a shield or barrier to meaning; “the swastika is not so much a pornographic image as a device which occupies the place of the obscenity which cannot or should not be represented: the Manson murders, Gestapo cellars, Nazi

---

149 M. Quinn, The swastika: constructing the symbol (Burns & Oates, 1994), 14.
atrocities.”\textsuperscript{150} It thus exhibits a “‘heraldic’ strategy which at once precedes and announces the revelation of meaning and obscures and delays meaning precisely by \emph{not} revealing it…”\textsuperscript{151} Attempts to superimpose a new (or to ‘restore’ an original) signification to the swastika have so far failed; instead, counter-culture individuals and groups – such as Manson or 70s-era punks – display it as a “boundary marker,” a marker of “absolute difference,” an indicator of their place in the “outside.” Quinn specifically describes it as a fetish – not as an anthropomorphized agent with intentionality, but as an image that nevertheless exerts tremendous force.

A third way of describing invisible power attached to objects and images involves the idea of ‘presence.’ As a concept especially applied to religious experience it is usually traced to Martin Buber, who delivered a famous lecture in 1922 where he pondered absence and the happy removal of absence by the presence of God. He laid out his theory in a lecture series was titled ‘Religion as presence.’\textsuperscript{152}

Whereas Buber’s presence was essentially abstract, in recent years it has become increasingly common for the idea of presence to be tied to religious materialism. It was especially articulated by Peter Brown in his 1981 study of early Christian saints. Brown pointed out that the presence (\emph{praenestia}) of the saint was one of the most fundamental values in early Christian belief and practice. The saint’s presence resided in his or her corpse, in the portions of the corpse distributed as relics, and in objects otherwise associated with the holy figure. Moreover, it could be transferred to other items that came

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[150]{Ibid., 7.}
\footnotetext[151]{Ibid., 8.}
\footnotetext[152]{P. Huston, \textit{Martin Buber’s journey to presence} (Fordham University Press, 2007); Ralph Harper, \textit{On presence: variations and reflections} (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).}
\end{footnotes}
in physical contact with the saint’s tomb or relics. For example, Brown describes the small cloths lowered to the tomb of St. Peter, which became imbued with the saint’s presence and were thereafter scattered in all directions by pilgrims.¹⁵³

Brown’s brand of presence has become widespread. Robert Orsi, for example, describes devotional images as “media of presence…used to act upon the world, upon others and upon oneself…These objects are believed to hold the power of the holy figure…and to make it present.”¹⁵⁴ He describes them as “points of encounter” and declares that “such objects cannot be understood apart from the phenomenology of presence.”¹⁵⁵

The examples described by Brown and Orsi specifically relate ‘presence’ to individual saints or holy figures, but this specificity need not apply in all cases. In fact, presence need not relate to individual anthropomorphic powers at all; scholars such as Colleen McDannell generalize the phenomenon by referring to the ‘affective presence’ of objects.¹⁵⁶

These three cases exhibit attempts to deal with powerful objects and signs by either relating them to a metaphysical sacred, providing anthropological notions of agency, or by considering them as material markers of presence. Considering symbols and images as efficacious objects in this way, whether in occult rituals or statements of propaganda, creates something of a methodological contradiction with semiotics and the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 60.
iconographic models discussed in Chapter 1. In such interpretive frameworks, a symbol stands for something else, a representation referring to the represented, a sign to its signifier. In Saussure’s linguistic analysis the connection between the two is entirely arbitrary. For Panofsky, ‘meaning’ is found outside of the image in an amorphously imagined cultural context. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 1, the equivalency model – postulating that X represents Y – proved problematic for those studying the non-linguistic arts. Attempts to find meaning through allegorical interpretations, cultural contextualization, and semiotic models overlook the complexities associated with religious concepts and materiality. So, while the idea of the symbol and its interpretation may derive from esoteric traditions, these methods of decoding are less helpful when theorizing objects imbued with efficacy, agency, or force. The matter of representation and represented, sign to signifier, seems fundamentally incompatible with respect to the melding of material form and invisible power. As we have seen, in many conceptualizations the material object is linked to a spiritual force, oftentimes conceived as a specific divinity or as a specific sort of magical control. On other occasions, no separation is made between the symbol and a separate source of power; they are described in a monistic sense, being one and the same.

Furthermore, investigations into the relationship between object and what it symbolizes or the power that it embodies is reminiscent of the historically significant debates concerning iconoclasm and idolatry. At the very root of the iconoclastic debate
lay the conceptual link between the material object and its prototype. Critics accused idolators of worshipping images because of the belief in the fundamental separation of the material and the divine. In Christian history, this debate was made explicit in the prolonged theological discourse about the human and divine natures of Christ and their representation in art. The serious nature of the argument took shape in the violent iconoclastic outbreaks of iconoclasm under the Byzantine empire and subsequent iterations throughout history. Again, although the debates at the very core of iconographic studies relate to some of the most momentous conflicts in the history of Western religions, no historiographies or intellectual histories of iconography mention this connection.

**Response, embodiment, and material religion**

I would now like to return to a topic that surfaced briefly in our discussion of occult symbols and objects, specifically the manner in which humans interact with images and items. Esoteric traditions frequently required individuals to meditate upon, study, or ritually engage images, symbols, figures, and letters. David Freedberg’s work has proven particularly influential for those who found those activities to be compelling topics, given that his approach to art stressed the centrality of response. The main thrust of his work included a discussion of the actions and behaviors of viewers in relation to images. This sort of response theory explores how individuals engage with art works,

---

texts, and other objects in the world. Interest in response stems from hermeneutical analysis, which reifies the subject-object relationship. It is also intimately related to phenomenological thought, which I will address below. And which appeared in Freedberg’s discussion of neurology in Chapter 1.

Given the optical foundation of visual studies, the primary art historical way of dealing with response has been the creation of a framework of response centered on the viewer and the gaze. The study of ‘viewing’ has been central to art historical discussions of religious images. Diana Eck’s seminal book *Darshan* laid important groundwork for an awareness of visually-centered religious activities. *Darshan* is a devotional seeing that plays a major role in Hindu piety and occurs when worshippers behold sacred figures or objects and when religious figures reciprocally observe devotees. Eck asserts that “the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine.”

David Morgan stresses that the gaze is socially constituted. He defines the components of the gaze as “a viewer, fellow viewers, the subject of their viewing, the context or setting of the subject, and the rules that govern the particular relationship between viewers and subject.”

---

gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance.”\(^{160}\)

But, as art history has only recently accepted, interaction with visual culture involves more than seeing, since the viewer consists of more than just a ‘disembodied eye’. Instead the viewer is an embodied, sensuous, and material being. Within the humanities and social sciences, theorists of the 1980s and 1990s began to recognize the central importance of the physical, material, embodied self. In fact, the development of a philosophy of the body arose within feminist critiques of Western thought’s Cartesian mind/body dualism, which generally characterized women as more corporeal and natural in contrast to intellectual and cultured men.\(^{161}\) Thereafter the body as an object of study entered religious studies because, Lawrence Sullivan explains, “the body lies at the center of the cultural worldview, especially at the heart of religious experience and practice.”\(^{162}\) McDannell warns, “to shy away from discussing the role of the body…is to neglect the primary mediator of religious experience.”\(^{163}\)

More importantly for us, following the rise of material culture studies, the embodied human’s response to objects has become a major topic of interest in religious studies. As I have already observed, materiality and bodily encounters certainly occupied theological and artistic discourses in the past. The Tractarians and the ritualist Pre-Raphaelites valued objects of all sorts, and later the Symbolists and their followers strove


\(^{163}\) McDannell, Material Christianity: religion and popular culture in America, 14.
to express the immaterial, the invisible, and the numinous in material form. In this struggle to account for the religious uses of objects and images, the dualist metaphysics of Kant, with its separation of material and transcendental, collides with the Cartesian duality of mind-body. This nexus of dualist frameworks can be observed in older approaches employed in the academic study of religion, which traditionally de-emphasized the material aspect of religious experience in order to emphasize the immaterial aspects, such as faith, inwardness, and the biblical Word. McDannell explains the intellectual roots of this framework: “Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy asserted that the highest form of truth and beauty is spiritual and therefore disconnected from the earthly and the material. There is a cosmic hierarchy that proceeds from the mind and soul downward to matter.”

Parallel to Kantian and Cartesian dualism, historians of religion have supported a similar hierarchy with regard to their source material, generally privileging texts as the primary historical object of study. From a methodological point of view, this convention stemmed from the discipline’s origins in theology, biblical exegesis, and linguistics. Moreover, Gregory Schopen has argued that the emphasis on text over objects can be directly traced to the theological arguments of 16th century Protestant reformers who championed the ‘primacy of the Word’ over, as Calvin put it, “images and like things” that he called “innumerable mockeries ... which pervert religion.” Protestant values thus intentionally rejected the visual and material manifestations of religious practice.

---

164 Ibid., 9.
Once the various academic disciplines were established and institutionalized, the dualist methodology which privileged texts and the immaterial reinforced the categorical divisions between disciplines, with the result that areas such as archaeology became peripheral and essentially irrelevant to the way scholarship and theology conceptualized religion. Yet, archaeology, which in turn located religious studies at its periphery, also dealt with religious topics in a manner that reinforced the disciplinary divisions. What is more, the discipline undertook its own methodological struggle about the very possibility of studying religion from a primarily material standpoint. For a positivist discipline, religion and belief appeared too unscientific.

The debate started and virtually ended in 1954, when Christopher Hawkes published his infamous ‘ladder of inference’ in the journal *American Anthropologist*. His ladder described the relative ability of archaeology to understand certain topics about past cultures. He argued that data about site formation and production economies were much easier to explore than ancient ideas and beliefs, a viewpoint that persuasively convinced many of his contemporaries. Over the next several decades, however, new schools of archaeological thought, such as post-processualism and cognitive archaeology, challenged Hawkes’ view, asserting that archaeology in fact does reveal information about past beliefs and religion. Colin Renfrew in particular systematically addressed the archaeology of religion, compiling a list of 16 indicators that pointed excavators to the presence of cult material. Despite his championing of contextual archaeology and material culture, Renfrew believed that when it came to providing useful source material

---

for understanding past religions, these methods still came second to iconography. If we are lacking written texts, he said, “the most coherent insights into the belief systems of the past must come…from the analysis of symbolic systems.”\textsuperscript{167} By symbolic systems he meant iconography, citing the images of the gods as a crucial element in the development of religion. He says, “without artefacts, material goods, many forms of thought simply could not have developed. This is clearly true in the field of religious belief, where the distinctions made between deities, for instance, are in part dependent upon the possibility of representing them.”\textsuperscript{168}

Nowadays, many scholars of religion incorporate material and visual culture directly into their conceptions and descriptions of forms of religiousity. David Morgan, for example, describes ‘visual piety,’ a religious way of being that centers on ‘seeing.’ Robert Orsi considers material items and images to be integral to the devotional practices that he studies – “statues, medals, blessed liquids, car and bicycle medallions, kitchen shrines…”\textsuperscript{169} That is, for Orsi, religion is not just belief, or faith, or ritual – it also exists in things. In a very influential book from 1995, Colleen McDannell emphasizes the material dimension of American Protestantism and in 2005 the periodical \textit{Material religion: the journal of objects, art, and belief} was launched. These descriptions and labels sound remarkably reminiscent of that designation created by the Tractarians in the 1830s (and ultimately forgotten): visual devotion. Schopen satisfactorily notes, “it is possible, finally, that the old and ongoing debate between archaeology and textual studies

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Orsi, \textit{Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them}, 8.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Phenomenology

The widespread interest in response and its various forms grew out of a long history of phenomenological discourse. Many of the themes we have discussed so far are phenomenological in nature, so I believe it is necessary to more closely examine this philosophical idea. Phenomenology is the study of how we perceive the world around us and how phenomena appear to our consciousnesses. Stephen Melville aptly notes that it is “less a method than a commitment to the careful description of things as they show themselves in our experience of them.”¹⁷¹ Phenomenology, as it is now understood, was developed by Edmond Husserl from 1900 to 1931, but naturally drew on earlier thinkers, notably those from the German tradition. For example, a major influence on phenomenological thought was Friedrich Schleiermacher, who in a polemical reaction against Descartes and the Enlightenment principle of Reason, declared that the essential elements of religious being were feeling and intuition.¹⁷² In keeping with the Romantic appreciation for emotion and feeling that we have discussed, phenomenologists argue that one of the ways human consciousness experiences the world is through feelings.

¹⁷⁰ Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant presuppositions in the study of Indian Buddhism," 23.
¹⁷² J.L. Cox, A guide to the phenomenology of religion: key figures, formative influences and subsequent debates (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 35.
Indeed, phenomenologists were dissatisfied with the Cartesian mind-body dualism as well as Kant’s immanence-transcendence dualism. Some phenomenologists wanted to move away from metaphysical and epistemological treatments of human understanding and instead focus on ‘experience’ and, more specifically, ‘lived experience,’ “the vitalistic and vibrant resonance of experience, with experience as that which man [or woman] lives through.”\textsuperscript{173} In 1969, Calvin Schrag argued that the way to avoid the mind-body dualism was to create an ‘ontology of experience’ based on embodied encounters and perception. In contrast to the ‘transcendental ego’ of Kantian metaphysics, he argued that a person’s “common center…is the experience contextualized by virtue of his [or her] embodiment, speech, and sociality.”\textsuperscript{174} As an experience that someone lives through, Schrag’s phenomenology emphasizes personal biography.

Additionally, phenomenology provided insight for scholars unhappy with Kant’s division between the material (immanent) and the spiritual (transcendental). An ontology of experience, Schrag believed, “marks itself off from traditional metaphysics not only by relocating the inquiry-standpoint so that the experience of world as a region of concern is given primacy but also by abandoning the quest for a supranatural world behind the natural world.”\textsuperscript{175}

\textit{Perception as relational}

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 253.
As we have so far discussed, focus on embodiment also acknowledges the interaction between people and material and visual culture as an important part of religious being. Phenomenological approaches have begun to describe this in terms of interactions in which both viewer and object play equally significant roles. As Freedberg insists in his discussion of response, “we must consider not only beholders’ symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do but also what images appear to do; not only what beholders do as a result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expect imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all.”

Alan Paskow similarly describes the ‘personhood of things’ and their ‘personality-like’ qualities. This viewpoint also brings us back to Gell’s notion that people develop social relationships with art objects. Paskow argues, “because we do take aesthetic objects to be more than mere appearances of our own subjectivity and thus as in some way ‘real’, and because they often ‘speak to’ us as individuals, to the very significance and direction of our lives, to refer to our ideal responses as ‘disinterested’ is altogether mistaken.”

Freedberg, Paskow, and Gell contend that images are ‘real’ in that they interact with people and people interact with them, regardless of iconoclastic and positivistic critiques that images are only representations and not ‘real.’ It is the very fact of these interactions and the personalities we imagine based on them that suggests individuals actually form relationships with images and objects. Indeed, those relationships involve

---

178 Ibid., 9.
not just the thing the object represents or refers to, in a semiotic sense of equivalence, but also the actual physical item itself. Orsi defines religion in much the same way, “not as a web of meanings but of relationships between heaven and earth.” He rejects symbolic and semiotic approaches (with particular reference to Geertz) and instead views religion as the formation of relationships between people and invisible powers.

In many cases the relationships people develop with images and symbols overlap and merge with the interactions between individuals and divine powers. For example, David Morgan describes the way Protestants connect to Jesus through the famous *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman, praying to him, talking to him, and in turn receiving reassurance and succor. But the relationship that is developed with Jesus through this activity intertwines with a relationship created with the actual painting itself. In point of fact, the feelings many Americans carry for that specific Warner Sallman image are extraordinarily fierce; copies of the painting fill the Protestant landscape and engender in many viewers a deep and comforting sense of familiarity, attachment, and safety.

In light of these considerations, it appears that one of the ways people experience the world is relational, involving the creation of relationships between themselves and the things they encounter, both material and immaterial. As I have noted, several phenomenologically-oriented scholars – e.g., Paskow, Orsi, Freedberg - have highlighted the ways individuals interact with objects and invisible forces, with both imagined as efficacious person-like others. No one yet, however, has formally described this as a

---

179 Orsi, *Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*, 5.
structure for experiencing the world. Moreover, a relational perception, relying as it does on memory, past encounters, and reciprocal expectation, fits well with the idea of ‘lived experience’ and personal biography. I suggest, then, that this framework can be expressed as a ‘phenomenology of relation.’

The phenomenology of religion

The phenomenology that we have discussed so far is based on the study of perception and the ontology of experience. A surprising array of definitions of phenomenology exists in the literature, however. This is particularly true regarding the phenomenology of religion, which in many details appears to bear little resemblance to other forms of the method. In particular, phenomenology of religion views ‘religion’ as irreducible and *sui generis*, reflecting the essentializing view that the core of religious being is the ‘numinous.’ Proponents maintain that the study of religion therefore requires its own set of methods. Rudolf Otto asserted, for example, that religion should only be studied by those who were religious themselves, because only they could understand religious modes of thinking. Following Weberian traditions, the phenomenology of religion is greatly concerned with morphologies and the creation of typologies, reflecting a desire to align the framework with scientific modes of analysis. The comparison of types has led the phenomenology of religion to be closely associated with the comparative study of religions.

---

Because of the view that religion is an independent object of study, phenomenologists of religion have deliberately set themselves apart from many of the other considerations that we have been discussing, such as embodiment. Combined with its extreme emphasis on morphology and typology, this approach does not justify use in this current project.

Conclusion

This brings us to an important question. Is there, or can there be, a correlation at all between the phenomenological approaches I have discussed and the iconographic study of images? Phenomenology has often been described as a method that eschews interpretation and meaning, being pre-interpretative. This is a significant issue and one that I believe must be overcome if iconological studies hopes to remain relevant in the future (especially with respect to ancient religious imagery).

As I hope to have shown, ideas about religion that have been developed by theologians, philosophers, and artists, when not soundly contradicting one another, have continuously interwoven in significant ways. This is a worthwhile assertion because it reveals overlap amongst habitually divided disciplines, it demonstrates the interconnections between the often reified subjects of religion and art, and it also underscores continuing interest in the uses of iconography and methods for expressing visual content. In fact, iconography has been central to many of the inquiries shared by the disciplines. From Hegelian aesthetics to esoteric traditions, images, what they represent, and their material nature have been both major topics of sometimes heated
discourse and also a stimulus for theoretical advancement. Additionally, the importance of pre-interpretative phenomenology to recent trends in ‘material’ religious studies, as well as to art historical theory, indicates that the position of visual content needs to be evaluated and, to a certain degree, defended.
Chapter 3: Classical studies and religious iconography

In 2005, Greg van den Heever expressed discontent with conventional treatments of Greek and Roman religion, noting, among a variety of problems, “the unspoken textual bias operating in scholarship on religion.”\(^{182}\) The consideration of religious art, on the other hand, has represented a major topic in classical archaeology and art history. Throughout the history of the disciplines, however, the relationship between religion and material culture in the minds of scholars has varied dramatically and it would be a disservice to oversimplify such a complex situation. In the short space available to me in this chapter, then, I do not intend to present an overarching historiographic narrative. Instead, I will 1) briefly focus on one scholar in order to provide a snapshot of the issues involved, 2) explore religious iconography from the viewpoint of classical archaeology, and 3) link both of these sections to the previous two chapters as the material demands. As with Chapters 1 and 2, the themes developed in this discussion will be expanded upon in the following sections.

The first portion of this chapter considers Jane Ellen Harrison, an extremely influential historian of Greek religion working at the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, who was at heart an archaeologist and art historian. Although a British academic, Harrison was particularly steeped in the traditions of Germany, whose scholarly institutions in the 19\(^{th}\) century witnessed an increasingly troubled fascination with the relationship between

---

religion and art. Because Germany exerted such a powerful influence on the art historical
discipline at large, I would like to begin by considering trends in German classics and
religious studies in the 19th century, some of which will be familiar from our earlier
discussions of Warburg and Panofsky (Chapter 1).

**German classics: religion, art, and archaeology**

From the earliest stages of scientific archaeology in Germany, a small number of
classicists theorized that art and religion were related. One of the more influential
scholars to champion this cause was August Böckh, who had gained a professorship at
the University of Berlin in 1811. He believed that a proper understanding of antiquity
could not be acquired solely through philological research, but must also rely on history,
economics, law, art, religion and so on. Böckh’s influence continued throughout the
century, as his students became some of the most famous and prominent German
Classicists, all with strong interests in material culture: Karl Otfried Müller
(mythologist), Theodor Mommsen (Roman historian), Richard Lepsius
(Egyptologist), and Ernst Curtius (Director of Olympia Excavations).

---


184 Müller’s knowledge of physical antiquities was acquired through direct observation while traveling in Etruscan Italy, the Peloponnesse, and Athens, culminating in his archaeological treatises’ *Die Etrusker* (1828) and *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst* (1830). He would eventually excavate at Delphi, where sunstroke would kill him in 1840.

185 Mommsen was one of the founding members of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome.

186 Lepsius led a four-year Prussian expedition to Egypt and the Sudan (1842-6), which resulted in the massive *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*. He was the director of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome from 1867–1880.

187 Curtius’ impressive bibliography was based on extensive travel and study in Greece.
At a time when the academic world put great store in the explanatory power of origins, the developmental relationship between religion and the arts occupied Böckh and his students. For him, “art was a product of religion,” stemming from a “subconscious, naïve expression of communal beliefs…”\(^\text{188}\) Like his teacher, Müller also stressed the connection between art and religion: “Greek art owed its perfections primarily to the optimal blend of the natural and supernatural in Greek religion; the glories of Greek sculpture were a function not of political freedom, but of spiritual harmony.”\(^\text{189}\) Müller felt that Greek religion determined the characterization of Greek art.

The German Classicist and historian of religion Friedrich Creuzer provided a different origin story in his 1810-12 *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Volker*.\(^\text{190}\) His book was practically scandalous, instigating an academic furor. Creuzer argued that religion developed out of symbolic thinking. He believed that the most primitive form of human thought and communication was the symbol, something which expressed things otherwise inexpressible. In his reconstruction of history, the pre-rational symbol grew into myth, and myths into natural religion, and so on, with each stage progressively more

\(^{188}\) Marchand, *Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970*, 43.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 47. Müller says, “However, art universally stands most especially in connection with religious life, with the conceptions of deity, because religion opens up to man a spiritual world which does not appear externally in experience, and yet longs for an outward representation which it more or less finds in art according to the different tendency of nations.” Karl Otfried Müller, *Ancient art and its remains; or, a manual of the archaeology of art* (B. Quaritch, 1852), 11.

\(^{190}\) For Creuzer’s work in the history of Greek religion, including discussions of the Eleusinian Mysteries, see George S. Williamson, *The longing for myth in Germany: religion and aesthetic culture from romanticism to Nietzsche* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 121-150.
Symbols “precede language and myth, which are more discursive, but less powerful and immediate means of communication.”\textsuperscript{192}

Creuzer believed that symbols had two competing elements, the material and visible, and the immaterial and invisible; certain artistic forms, such as Greek sculpture, distilled the two elements into one.\textsuperscript{193} Because symbols were not confined to language, but were also expressed in visual form, “rather than concentrate on the etymology or narrative structure of ancient myths, he investigated the images inscribed on coins, vases, reliefs and other physical artifacts…”\textsuperscript{194} Classical philologists vehemently attacked Creuzer’s method, challenging the appropriateness of artistic and archaeological material as historical sources. As Marchand notes, following the Creuzer Affair of the 1820s, Classics in Germany experienced a “philological narrowing.”\textsuperscript{195}

Another 19\textsuperscript{th} century scandal likewise involved the appropriate methodologies for studying antiquity. We have already observed that Aby Warburg championed the Romantic notion of the symbol in similar terms to that of Creuzer, i.e., associating symbols with immediacy. Warburg also spotlighted the irrational side of religion, a direction he likely derived from his professor Classicist Hermann Usener, who stressed the psychological aspects of Greek religion. Indeed, we have explored Warburg’s anthropological approach (Chapter 1) and in this he was also influenced by Usener, who

\textsuperscript{191} Marchand, \textit{Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970}, 45.
\textsuperscript{192} Peter Davies, \textit{Myth, matriarchy and modernity: Johann Jakob Bachofen in German culture. 1860-1945} (de Gruyter, 2010), 22.
\textsuperscript{194} Williamson, \textit{The longing for myth in Germany: religion and aesthetic culture from romanticism to Nietzsche}, 129.
\textsuperscript{195} Marchand, \textit{Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970}, 47.
was an early practitioner of the anthropology of religion. Yet another student of
Usener’s, Ulrich Wilamowitz, criticized his teacher’s focus on ‘superstition’ and the
irrational. Similarly, Wilamowitz loathed everything about Friedrich Nietzsche’s research;
in 1872’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche emphasized the irrational and ‘Dionysian’
aspects of ancient Greek culture. Moreover, Wilamowitz felt that Nietzsche’s work was
unscientific because his interest in metaphysics caused him to investigate the ancient
world with “non-scholarly, intuitive means.” Wilamowitz was also critical of Erwin Rohde, who was a close friend of Nietzsche. Rohde combined the ideas of Usener and
Nietzsche in his massively popular *Psyche* (1890-1894), which explored the darker sides
of Greek religion. Ultimately, the positivist Wilamowitz directed invectives at any
scholars unscientifically stressing ‘superstition’ and the irrational.

Jane Ellen Harrison was another scholar working in the German tradition,
proceeding in an ‘anthropological’ direction and advocating for the irrational and
Dionysian elements in Greek religion. She greatly admired Rohde’s *Psyche* and her work
likewise raised the ire of Wilamowitz. After reading Harrison’s *Themis* (1912) he
objected, in his letters to Gilbert Murray (a close friend of Harrison’s), that “the whole
modern tendency seems to me to try to explain the adult man from the life of the embryo.
It does not interest me much how Hecuba’s grandmother felt; nor Plato’s for that matter.
She was only an old woman and her faith was a hag’s.” He later complained, “I can’t

---

get along with historians of religion; not with those who really dispose of everything with magic and superstition and in the end have a more intimate relation with old women of both sexes than to Plato, Spinoza, and Goethe.” As we will see below, Wilamowitz’s objections about superstition directly related to Harrison’s interpretations of art and divinity.

Jane Ellen Harrison: archaeologist and historian of religion

Harrison’s greatest academic fame stems from her association with the Cambridge Ritualists and her anthropologically inspired approach to Greek myth’s origins in ritual. Recent discussion has focused attention on the importance of art and archaeology in Harrison’s academic life. As Mary Beard argues, “Harrison never ceased to be a historian of images…all her major writing on Greek subjects was founded on the analysis of sculpture and (vase) painting… [she was] constantly interrogating the visual remains of the ancient religious world, always at work as an iconographer, an interpreter of what she could see.”

Harrison and England

After graduating from Cambridge’s women’s’ college (Newnham) in 1879, where she received training in archaeology, Harrison became affiliated with the British Museum. It was there that she began to more seriously study the artifacts of antiquity.

---

200 Ibid., 5.
under the guidance of Charles Newton, Keeper of the Greek and Roman Antiquities. Well before the age of the grand archaeological discoveries in Greece, Newton had successfully dug in Asia Minor. In 1856 he uncovered the remains of the Mausoleum of Halikarnassus and ensured that the sculptures would be given to the British Museum.

Newton retired in 1885 but continued to be active in the discipline; he helped found the British School of Archaeology at Athens in 1886. During the few years that Harrison and Newton both worked at the British Museum, he supported her professionally in a number of ways, encouraging her to give lectures in London and writing letters of introduction that enabled her to access significant collections in other nations, for example, Italy. Beyond the professional mentoring, Newton trained Harrison in his methodology. He gave equal importance to visual sources and textual evidence, a notion that he expounded in 1850 when he presented a methodological exegesis on sources for the study of antiquity (it was published in 1880, a year after Harrison arrived in London). The first sentence of the essay reads as a manifesto: “the record of the Human past is not all contained in printed books.”\(^{202}\) Beard has called this groundbreaking presentation “one of the inaugural moments for the academic discipline of archaeology in England.”\(^{203}\)

Harrison’s archaeological expertise initially covered vase-painting; her intimate knowledge of the subject, based on 20 years at the British Museum, combined with numerous trips to both Italy and Greece, would become one of the mainstays of her historical method. Newton had organized the British Museum’ collection with the

\(^{203}\) Beard, *The invention of Jane Ellen Harrison*, 128.
understanding that, by arranging vases chronologically, one could trace artistic change
over time. Since Attic vases were so richly endowed with figural decoration, changes in
the subject matter and mythic depictions on vases could also be studied in terms of their
chronological development. Annabel Robinson argues that “Newton’s chronological
approach to the study of mythology in Greek art became the foundation of [Harrison’s]
life’s work.”204

It is likely that he taught Harrison more than simply the practicalities and
techniques of artifact research. Already in 1850 Newton championed the ‘cultural’
approach to antiquity; for him, historical sources included not only the physical objects
recovered by archaeology, but also distinctly anthropological and ethnographic ones:
customs, traditions, ceremonies, and oral histories preserved among the ‘peasantry.’ He
too felt that religion, in the form of mythology, was intimately tied to the arts; he worked
under the Hegelian assumption that only Greek and Medieval art truly reached perfection,
because the art of both cultures was best able to articulate theological and religious ideas
and symbolism. The study of visual religion and myth was what he called ‘mythography.’

Harrison and German archaeology in Greece

Later in her life Harrison claimed that she learned all her archaeology from the
Germans, and the German impact on her archaeological education was profound.205

Newton had been instrumental in some Harrison’s travels abroad, yet while in Athens she

205 C. Barnard-Cogno, “Jane Harrison (1850–1928), between German and English scholarship,” European
was more closely affiliated with the projects of the German Institute rather than the
British School. It is unclear how much the British School’s position on women and
archaeology may have affected this. In 1910, British women were still not permitted to
excavate in the School’s projects, no surprise given that the former director David
Hogarth condescended in a public lecture about archaeology that it was “not too nice a
trade, you see, dear lady. Best let it be!” 206

Additionally, Harrison’s connections to the German Institute clearly stemmed
from personal relationships. She had traveled extensively throughout Germany in the
1880s and met the country’s leading archaeologists and classicists. The Athens branch of
the German Archaeological Institute was founded in 1872207 and three years later Ernst
Curtius began the massive exploration of the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. Harrison
befriended Curtius in 1881 during a trip to Berlin; Robinson suggests that his works and
methodology also influenced Harrison.208 As we have already seen, Curtius’s professors
had studied the relationship between art and religion: Böckh, who emphasized the

206 D.W.J. Gill, "'The passion of hazard': women at the British School at Athens before the First World
207 In 1829 the German Archaeological Institute in Rome was founded, then called the Institut für
archäologische Korrespondenz (IFAK). While its initial goals were not expressly related to excavation,
within just a few years the Institute was involved in major digs. Due to their very nature, many of the early
excavations dealt with religious considerations, since cemeteries and sanctuaries were favorite sites given
that they tended to be more abundantly stocked with artifacts and works. Indeed, J. Uhlenbrock notes the
impact the IFAK exerted on the study of religious artifacts: because the graves that were scoured for
Greek vases contained so many terracotta figurines, in the IFAKs publication “one can trace the
development of an interpretive bias that began to stress the funerary context of terracottas to the
exclusion of any other,” especially concerning ideas about the Underworld and fertility. For IFAK and the
religious treatments of terracottas, see J.P. Uhlenbrock, "The study of ancient Greek terracottas: a
historiography of the discipline," Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin 1, no. 3 (1993): 9. For the
foundation of IFAK, see Marchand, Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-
208 Robinson, The life and work of Jane Ellen Harrison, 61.

99
‘shadowy side’ of Greek religion,\textsuperscript{209} and also Müller, whose work on religion and mythology Harrison admired greatly. Moreover, Curtius’ Olympia excavation not only produced an enormous number of statues, bronzes, terracottas, coins, and other artifacts, it also proved to be the training ground for two superstars of the next archaeological generation, Wilhelm Dörpfeld and Adolf Furtwängler, both of whom were intimates of Harrison.\textsuperscript{210} She was therefore both professionally and socially aligned with German archaeologists and religious historians. Barnard-Cogno states that she followed the path “pursued by August Böckh and after him Karl Otfried Müller, who widely publicized German methods regarding Classics, especially the use of archaeology in providing essential material information.”\textsuperscript{211}

The importance of her relationship with archaeologist Dörpfeld should not be underestimated; their professional relationship, I would argue, was one of the most important of her career. He supported her professional projects and encouraged her towards new ones. Dörpfeld began work in Greece at Olympia, where he served under Ernst Curtius, then worked at Tiryns, Pergamon, and the Athenian Acropolis. By that point, in Athens he had attained the status of an archaeological celebrity. His weekly lectures, held every Saturday, were consistently attended by the members of the British and American Schools. More importantly, he led groups to ancient sites throughout Greece. The trips, called the Peloponnesian Reise, introduced a considerable number of

\textsuperscript{209} Barnard-Cogno, ”Jane Harrison (1850–1928), between German and English scholarship,” 666.
\textsuperscript{210} Marchand, \textit{Down from Olympus: archaeology and philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970}, 87.
\textsuperscript{211} Barnard-Cogno, ”Jane Harrison (1850–1928), between German and English scholarship,” 671.
scholars to the archaeological remains in Greece. Dörpfeld acted as a nexus around which scholars and socialites from the ex-pat communities revolved.

As with Newton, Dörpfeld became a mentor to Harrison. He personally gave her tours of the ancient sites in Athens and she seems to have loved his lectures; in 1901 she followed him on the Peloponnesian Reise, visiting Corinth, Mycenae, and Epidaurus. The academic connection was especially strong, especially given that on more than one occasion Dörpfeld petitioned Harrison to publish his ideas because they were not well known outside of German literature. In _Primitive Athens as described by Thucydides_ (1906), she provided a topographical and archaeological sketch of Athens based on Dörpfeld’s research; she augmented the discussion of the sites and monuments with her own ideas about the history of Greek cults.

Harrison’s mentors, then, were two of the most important men working in both the British and German archaeological traditions. She acquired art historical training from Newton, who, like his German counterparts, pushed the boundaries of acceptable historical sources beyond philology. Whereas Newton’s training took place in the rarefied halls of the British Museum, Dörpfeld instructed her in archaeological and topographical matters in the field. Her interest in religion was inspired by many German historians and archaeologists and the irrational, unconscious, and dark side of Greek religion came to dominate her work.

---

213 Ibid., 134-136.
Ritualism

As much as German classics inspired her understanding of the Greek past, England provided another powerful influence on her view of religion. Harrison and a group of colleagues, dubbed the myth-ritual school,\(^{215}\) claimed that myths and dramatic performances were stories originating in the most ancient of rituals. Harrison emphasized the ‘things done’ (ritual) and the materiality of practice. Her approach has been connected to two major intellectual trends, first, the Oxford Movement’s theology and the ritual aesthetics of 19\(^{th}\) c. England and, second, developments in anthropological thought.

First, Harrison followed in the ritualist tradition discussed in Chapter 2. According to Armstrong, when she was only 17 she became fascinated with the Catholic-influenced Anglican High Church and throughout her life she attended several such churches.\(^{216}\) At Newnham she became obsessed with the Pre-Raphaelite painters who had so evocatively represented ritualist ideas,\(^{217}\) pagan themes, and archaeological objects. She even attended the same ritualist church as Christina Rossetti (the Pre-Raphaelite poet and model). Armstrong argues that references and allusions to Anglican High Church ritualism appear throughout her academic work, including *Prolegomena to the study of Greek religion*.\(^{218}\)

\(^{215}\) Beard challenges this designation: Beard, *The invention of Jane Ellen Harrison*, 118.

\(^{216}\) Margaret Armstrong, "Sacraments, sacrifice, and ritual: High Church mysticism in the letters of Jane Ellen Harrison and *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*" (Florida State University, 2007).

\(^{217}\) Rita Wright, "Jane Ellen Harrison's "Handmaiden No More": Victorian ritualism and the fine arts" (Dissertation, The University of Utah, 2009).

\(^{218}\) Armstrong, "Sacraments, sacrifice, and ritual: High Church mysticism in the letters of Jane Ellen Harrison and *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*".
Second, Harrison and the Cambridge Ritualists were influenced by the collectivist and sociological interpretations of ritual championed by scholars such as William Robertson Smith. For Robertson Smith, religion was made up of a “series of acts and observances,” which were the very basis of religion itself. He believed that ritual reinforced the bonds of a community, declaring that it “did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society.”\(^{219}\) His work would also influence the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who approached religion from a functionalist perspective. That is, he explored the function of ritual in society and his sociological approach became extraordinarily influential. His and Harrison’s frameworks still dominate classical studies, however. As Julia Kindt recently lamented, “classical scholars are still under the spell of functionalism as an interpretative tool…”\(^{220}\) In Chapter 4, I will explore how Harrison’s emphasis on ritual continues to appear in models of ancient religion.

**Harrison and the iconography of religion**

Harrison’s earliest methods were art historical, concerned with style, artist attribution, and dating. Moreover, she was at heart an iconographer, probably a result of her experience with the vases in the British Museum. During her first ten years in London, she published several articles that carefully scrutinized iconographic details on individual vases in order to identify myths. Later she incorporated more anthropological

\(^{220}\) Kindt, "On tyrant property turned ritual object: political power and sacred symbols in ancient Greece and in social anthropology."
components into her investigations of ancient images. A representative example can be observed in her studies of the winnowing fan and its relation to the Greek Mysteries. Harrison looked to images to help explain an aspect that was unclear in the ancient sources, that is, the exact nature and purpose of the vannus and liknon. Her first published article on the topic included 12 ancient images, which she used to document the symbolic, social, mystic, and ritual significance of the material object. Moreover, the article attests to her use of experimental archaeology and folk-lore, given that she documented modern examples of the basket and winnowing fan and famously attempted to replicate their use herself.221

In Prolegomena to the study of Greek religion (1903), art served as evidence for her theories when texts failed. Her discussion of Zeus Meilichios is a powerful example of the use of images to develop religious theories (Figure 1).222 The sculpted reliefs from Attica which show Zeus Meilichios worshipped in the form of a snake gave Harrison a strong piece of evidence in her larger discussion about chthonian deities and the superposition of cult. She claimed “art sets plainly forth what has been dimly shadowed in ritual and mythology.”223

Figure 1. Marble reliefs showing Zeus Meilichios in the form of a snake. Right: Dedicated by Herakleides, from the Piraeus Asklepeion, 4th century BCE. Left: Dedicated by Aristomenes, from Varrachonis, Athens, 4th century BCE. Photo: Author.

Her knowledge and application of images were particularly significant because she used art and archaeology to argue against the beautiful, anthropomorphic Olympian gods so cherished by Hellenism. Indeed, Wilamowitz believed that Classical art, which so perfectly represented the triumph of reason, proved historians of religion wrong: “against the physical representation [of the god] the iconoclasts of reason make the least headway.”\(^{224}\) Bierl notes that Wilamowitz had “only contempt for Sophocles who thinks god is a snake that can spend the night in his home.”\(^{225}\) So much for Wilamowitz’ opinion of iconography and the snake-form of Zeus Meilichios.

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 4.
Lewis Farnell, who had a famous feud with Harrison, is similar in this sense. His massive *Cults of the Greek city-states* gave a fair amount of attention to the arts. Nevertheless, for each god, Farnell provided a chapter on the cult of the deity which included no images, but then separated out the artistic evidence in chapters covering the ‘cult-monuments’ (i.e., art monuments) and the ‘ideal type.’ These latter two chapters mostly describe major artistic representations of the deity and iconographic attributes.

Invariably, in example after example, the ‘ideal type’ of the god was most brilliantly achieved in the Classical period. Farnell ended his chapter on Hermes with the statue by Praxiteles: “as physical beauty and intellectual power were divine qualities in the Hellenic imagination of godhead, we must call the Hermes of Olympia a pre-eminent work of religious sculpture, the most perfect embodiment of the athletic and intellectual god.”

Harrison’s feelings on the relationship between art and religion varied over her lifetime, but in 1913’s *Ancient art and ritual*, she declared that “ancient art and ritual are not only closely connected, not only do they mutually explain and illustrate each other but…they actually arise out of a common human impulse.”

Beard has noted that the celebrated Roman archaeologist and historian of religion Eugenie Sellers Strong was extremely close with Harrison and the German archaeologists in her circle, working as her pupil for over a decade. Beard suggests that Strong “was doing for Rome what Harrison had done for Greece: linking the visual arts and archaeology to a cultural

---

anthropology of the ancient world.” 228 Beard notes that, like Harrison, Strong’s work made the “inextricable connection between visuality and religion: visual representations, she argued, must be central not only to our own understanding of Roman religion but also to Roman religion itself; art, in other words, does not merely illustrate religious claims, it is religion.” 229

Wright has argued that the theoretical connections made between religion and the visual arts in the work of Harrison (and Strong) “did not create an abrupt break with Victorian thought and practice; it manifested continuities with it.” 230 As we will see in Chapter 4, in order to find another academic conception of religion that places equal emphasis on visual and material culture, we must employ comparative analysis and look beyond studies of the ancient world. Indeed, Wright also noted that interest in Harrison’s work “waned considerably from its initial impact. Classical scholars were still ambivalent about her contributions but continued to debate the more academically focused writings of Harrison and her Cambridge associates.” 231 Despite the vitality of archaeological research at the turn of the century and the iconographically-based work of Harrison, the study of Greek religion remained a predominately text-based affair. Strangely enough, the use of art and archaeology in other areas of Mediterranean religion matured, but not so in Greece. Martin Nilsson, writing in the 1930s and after, was familiar with archaeological material and used it extensively in his Homer and Mycenae (1933), as would be expected in a discussion of a Bronze Age culture. His Geschichte der

228 Beard, The invention of Jane Ellen Harrison, 28.
229 Ibid.
230 Wright, "Jane Ellen Harrison's "Handmaiden No More": Victorian ritualism and the fine arts", 200.
231 Ibid., 204.
griechischen Religion (1941-1950) contained plates depicting figural imagery on items such as hero reliefs and pottery. His Greek folk religion (1940), however, used only a small number of images and those mostly as illustrations. Arthur Darby Nock occasionally dealt with religious symbolism in the arts and archaeology, but he did so in neighboring fields (Roman burial and sarcophagi, Jewish images). \(^{232}\) Archaeological material and imagery would not become a frequent source of data until the 1970s and after. Bernard Dietrich, for example, used archaeological material extensively in his 1986 Tradition in Greek religion. \(^{233}\) My suspicion is that this state of affairs resulted not simply from the methodological split between philology and archaeology, but was based on national divisions as well. Further historiographic research on 20\textsuperscript{th} century British, French, and American approaches to religion and archaeology are much needed.

Problems in iconographic analysis in classical archaeology

Although the momentous strides taken by classical archaeology in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century transformed the discipline, many of its methods derive from antiquarian roots. The collection and organization of objects that so fascinated antiquarians still proves useful in the archaeological collection of data. Indeed, the management and arrangement of ancient objects is an essential step for any archaeological study to progress, and such methods have likewise affected iconographic studies. In what follows, I will outline the

practical considerations that concern classical archaeologists, before then addressing some common approaches to the iconographic analysis of religious images.

*Reconstruction*

In the study of classical antiquity, one of the primary hurdles related to the interpretation of visual content from the past is the most basic: the incomplete nature of the historical record. The vast lacuna in the ancient literary record is problematic enough, but for those studying ancient art the incomplete nature of the visual material itself is a monumental problem. By this I mean the incomplete preservation of individual works themselves, which in the majority of cases are not intact. Time, site formation, and later human activity are frequent culprits in the breaking, scattering, pulverizing, and fragmentation of ancient imagery. Decorated vases survive as sherds, identifying inscriptions have rubbed away, painted plaster walls partially crumble to dust, and sculptures are reduced to disembodied limbs. While part of an image may be preserved, the scenes and individuals are often made unidentifiable by absent and missing pieces.

One of the most troublesome and time-consuming aspects for all historians of classical imagery, then, is the basic task of identifying figures and motifs. An enormous amount of scholarship contains exhaustive deliberations on the identity of unknown, fragmentary, or entirely absent individuals. This predicament is especially common in studies of architectural sculpture, for example; the sculpture is often fragmentary and broken, making it difficult not only to discern identities but also to determine the correct placement, composition and ordering of figures, metopes, and frieze fragments. Before
interpretation can even begin, reconstruction must occur, an aspect so central to the study of ancient art that the pencil-sketched or computer-generated reconstruction image is one of the most common features of academic visual culture.

Reconstruction and identification of incomplete images is a process which requires its own sets of skills as well as having its own methodological dangers. To reconstruct incomplete images, people use several methods. Although it is often passed over, the most accurate method for doing so relies on the technical clues provided by archaeological inquiry: archaeological context and location, architectural features (cuttings, block positions, tooling, etc), ceramic considerations (thickness of fabric, vessel shape, etc), sculptural details (figure size, ghost images, etc) and so on. Another approach bases reconstructions on formal and compositional details. Researchers look for visual comparanda: they consider stock poses, similar image types in other preserved artifacts, and oft-repeated compositions and motifs. Subject matter often determines the direction of searches for visual comparanda, since analogous material might be found through reference to genre, narrative, and mythological story.

The danger of reconstruction, of course, comes from the assumption that the end point of reconstruction is the iconographic decoding of images. This sometimes leads to spurious reconstructions, as scholars attempt to make sense of the imagery and symbols. Unidentified figures are extrapolated from the known based on what seems to be logical or to make the most sense, so that images are constructed anew to fit the expectations of scholars.
Typologies

One of the more common and entrenched methods is the collection of images into typologies by subject matter. This method derived from serialization techniques developed by antiquarians and archaeologists. Many of the earliest archaeological typologies were based on formal considerations and were especially used in the analysis of pottery chronologies. Flinders Petrie is famous for doing so with Egyptian pottery; in the study of Greek antiquity, Fürtwängler was the first to serialize the formal elements of Greek pottery by shape and decoration.

Classical archaeologists have traditionally grouped images based on considerations of both form and content. Many collections focus on the type of object bearing the images: pottery, terracottas, votive reliefs, etc. The Corpus vasorum antiquorum (CVA), for example, photographically documents Greek pottery from museum collections all over the world. It was organized in 1919 by Edmond Pottier, who insisted that, when it came to deciding which images to include in each volume, the finest illustrated vessels be given priority over lesser quality examples or vessels without figural decoration. From the beginning, the merit of the CVA for research purposes was mitigated by the exclusion of iconographic representations that did not meet the value judgments of the organizers.234

Mythological Typologies

Conversely, ancient images were organized according to their subject matter. In the late 1960s, classicist Lily Kahil spearheaded one of the most significant and exhaustive typological collections of Greek images yet compiled, the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*. Kahil was a French classicist who was a traditional iconographer with a particular interest in mythological subjects; she wrote the definitive study of the iconography of Helen. She envisioned a project that would collect the vast number of mythological images from the Classical world into one lexicon. As an undertaking the project was massive because it required drawing on the enormous number of ancient images scattered in different national museums, private collections, and archaeological storerooms. Through the force of sheer personality, Kahil was able to create a vast network of people and institutions to transform her plan into a reality, solidified into the Foundation for the LIMC in 1972. The first volume of *LIMC* was released in 1981 and the last in 1999. All in all, *LIMC* made up 20 volumes and tens of thousands of images.

Kahil’s project was essentially meant to replace Roscher’s *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, published in 1886 and including articles written by some 35 scholars. Each entry addressed the history of a mythological figure, included textual references, and listed the monuments and images associated with the worship of the particular deity. In Roscher’s encyclopedia, images were extremely rare, although line drawings were occasionally included. By the 1970s, of course, Roscher’s

---

235 The following discussion of *LIMC* and *ThesCra* is based on an interview with Fritz Graf on May 6, 2011.
236 The last volume was published in 1937. L. R. Farnell, "Review: Greek mythology," *The Classical Review* 2, no. 5 (1888).
encyclopedia was incredibly obsolete. Since Kahil’s project was meant to replace Roscher’s, it was organized in a similar fashion with the articles centered on individual mythological figures rather than on, for example, types of myths (theogony, hero story, underworld, etc). The mythical individuals were identified by their recognizable attributes, by the events depicted around them, by their relationships to other depicted figures, and, when possible, by inscriptions. The vast majority of scenes and figures are previously known from preserved textual evidence, and those that are not can often be extrapolated based on identifiable figures, similarities to other iconographic types, and the recognizability of mythological tropes. Each volume is made up of alphabetic entries based on the names of mythological characters and divided by cultures and regions, when necessary. These divisions are then further subdivided by story.

While *LIMC* made available a truly astounding amount material, it was also open to a fair amount of criticisms. Some reviewers pointed out that because of its emphasis on figural depictions, it could not entirely replace Roscher, but served as a supplement to it.\(^{237}\) Along the same lines, *LIMC* followed in the iconographer’s tradition of using images to supplement texts. Because of its organizational structure, it also left many images out; scenes that could not be clearly identified with a known mythological figure, for example, were excluded, which consequently forced researchers to also rely primarily on the images that could be identified with texts.

Kahil died in 2002 but the Foundation for the *LIMC* continued. Because Kahil’s efforts during the *LIMC* project had resulted in such an effective network and

photographic archive, a group of participants formulated a new project that would draw on the same network. Nevertheless, the *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (*ThesCra*) was a very different project. First, while the moving force behind *LIMC* had been a single charismatic figure, *ThesCra* was the brainchild of a small group of like-minded scholars: Fritz Graf, Erika Simon, Tonio Hölscher, John Boardman, and Walter Burkert. Most importantly, *ThesCra* represented a methodological shift. *LIMC* organized figural images illustrating known mythological tales. *ThesCra*, however, conspired to document Greek, Roman, and Etruscan religion through material culture and imagery. Several decades had passed since the *LIMC* archive and network had been first conceived and classics as a discipline had naturally changed as well; this was particularly true regarding approaches to archaeological data and iconographic analysis.

Figural images were a major part of the thesaurus, but so too were the *Realien*, the elements of material culture. The thesaurus was structured around themes rather than alphabetically organized, and the themes were divided into two-tiers: static elements (e.g., temples, altars) and dynamic elements (e.g., rituals) thus combining objects used in religious practice and images of those practices themselves. Images had held the central place in *LIMC*, but not so in *ThesCra*. The thesaurus documented and reconstructed ancient religious practices using a wide variety of sources, including texts, inscriptions, and archaeological data. Images made up only one type of source material, albeit a large one, while *LIMC* presented a more traditional iconographic approach.

**Documentary images: art as historical evidence**
The collection of images and data manifested in typologies such as *ThesCra* brings together empirical data for use in the reconstruction of ancient religious practices. Such images act as historical sources, much like texts. The information carried in the images helps to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about particular topics relating to ancient religion.

In iconographical investigations of ancient religion, emphasis on recognizable action, liturgical objects, and the presence of divinities has propped up the dominant, modern conceptions of ancient ritual practice. Documentary approaches assume that images refer back to a real and accurately depicted event, with, for example, votive reliefs closely replicating actual processions. For many years, religious scenes were largely analyzed under the assumption that they depicted specific and identifiable festivals and ritual occasions. This is especially true of Attic vase painting; extensive analyses predominately attempt to link the visual material with the enormous number of festivals named in the literary and epigraphic traditions, such as the Panathenaia.238

A major proponent of this method has been Folkert van Straten. His most well-known work is the 1995 *Hiera kala*, which collected and unraveled images of animal sacrifice in Greek art.239 Van Straten has tirelessly promoted the importance of votive material as an essential component of Greek religion and the usefulness of images in source material.240 His first such efforts appeared in the 1970s.241 At that time, very few

---

historians of religions employed images, symbols, or votives, which remained the purview of archaeologists and art historians. Walter Burkert’s *Greek Religion* (originally published in 1977), for example, contained almost no images at all, and he very rarely referred to archaeological material.\(^{242}\) Van Straten’s approach most fully represents the documentary approach to Greek religion. He refers to his method as “What You See Is What It Is.” On this way of seeing the pictures, Van Straten states, “if you see a picture of a sheep, I take it as a reference to a sheep, not as a recondite clue to some hidden deeper truth.”\(^{243}\)

In the vast majority of projects that employ images as documentary evidence for ancient religion, the documentary mode manifests itself in many ways. First, iconography is used to reconstruct and verify the historical realities of ancient ritual. The images reveal such details as who participated in the activities, the physical motions of the process, which gods were involved, and what sorts of implements were employed. Studies of this sort have been deeply concerned with the identification of the figures, objects, and activities, as this information serves to connect the image to the actions known from texts, whether in order to confirm them or to contradict them.

Another example of the documentary method can be observed in the work of historian of religion Kimberley Patton, whose study provides an opportunity to observe standard iconographic approaches but also some of their dangers. For Patton, Athenian vase-painting provides evidence for the reconstruction of Greek cosmology and

---


particular, the ‘religion of the gods.’ She considers Greek religion to be a “closed semiotic system,” which in her description remains divorced from average human needs and religious imaginations. Patton discusses iconographic representations on Attic vases and observes deities engaged in activities that appear to be ritual actions, especially libation, which, she argues, has baffled scholars who conceptualize ritual as an activity directed towards divinities in a hierarchical system. Patton equates libation, an activity with a vast array of purposes and meanings, with sacrifice, which she likewise simplifies into an activity done hierarchically for a god. Patton employs visual culture as an alternative to texts, arguing that Attic vase-painting reveals an aspect of Greek religion not present in the ancient literature. She provides an extensive catalogue of images and, in keeping with the art historical tendency discussed above, describes them in great detail. She also employs comparative iconographic analysis, considering the images in Attic vase-painting alongside images from other cultures, historical periods, and contexts.

Patton suggests that the popularity of the libating-god motif in Attic vase-painting occurred in the 5th century because, as Athens moved from an aristocratic to a democratic society, “the highly conservative social institution of sacrifice was reinforced and upheld by the images of sacrificing gods.” Strangely, although she very briefly mentions that the motif also appeared in the archaic period and includes some items in the catalogue, she mostly neglects the chronological outliers in her Athenian-centered explanation.

---

244 Kimberley Patton, Religion of the gods: ritual, paradox, and reflexivity (Oxford University Press, 2009), 179.
245 Ibid., 121.
246 Ibid., 178.
Another danger that haunts iconographic analysis, well recognized by Panofsky, is the misidentification of what an image represents, which then leads to specious interpretations as one moves up Panofsky’s levels. Patton, when she equates libation with sacrifice, also refers to other instances of gods engaging in ritual activity. Many of her examples, however, would hardly be considered ritual by other historians of Greek religion. For example, she describes an image of a wild Dionysos, standing near an altar and holding the corpse of an animal which has been ripped apart, as ritual. Finally, Patton does not view Attic vase-paintings as a system of related images, a semiotic method (addressed further below) that she otherwise applies to the Greek religious system.

Critics of the documentary method, however, note that other factors affect religious imagery and its subjects, such as the constraints, options and motives of ancient craftsmen.247 As Jean Claude Schmitt has also pointed out, “the problem with this ‘positivist’ approach is that it gives the illusion that all art…has a referential function, quite distinct from its other possible functions, and is thus capable of being isolated by the historian.” He goes on, “to be sure, an image is always the image of something; but it is this fact that may delude us into thinking that we merely have to state what the image represents in order to say everything about its representation.”248 Moreover, Timothy McNiven notes that the desire to see ancient images as authentic documents is exacerbated by Greek art itself, which aspired to naturalism and idealism. He reminds us

that “in the end, we want to believe that Greek art shows us reality because almost everything about it was designed to encourage that belief.”

Milette Gaifman argues that figural scenes on votive reliefs attest to the conscious selection and exclusion of visible elements. She describes the scenes as “visual constructs that are related to cultic realities, but are not direct reflections of actual rituals.” Her emphasis on the rhetorical, constructed nature of images echoes the choices that Kress finds so central to multimodal representation (Chapter 1). Rather than direct illustrations of reality, “all representation is always partial. What the sign-maker takes as criterial determines what she or he will represent about that entity.”

**Iconographic methods**

Patton argued that the common motif of gods libating reflected a wider religious system. She described Athenian vase-painters “creat[ing] on the basis of religious traditions and out of the vortices of religious thought.” Another approach, in contrast, places more emphasis on the intention of the artist or patron of ancient images. Such an approach often appears in studies of dedications and large scale monuments, with the Parthenon being a prime example. Emphasis on authorial intent leads to an emphasis on the original ‘message’ meant to be conveyed. A recent example of this approach attempts

251 Kress, *Multimodality: a social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, 70.
to identify a victor among the horsemen on the Parthenon frieze in order to explicate the original message of the frieze’s designers.\(^{253}\)

When it comes to classical imagery, scholars usually identify the depictions, draw on them to reconstruct the past, or explain them with references to their cultural and historical context. Most iconographic analysis involves identification and explanation, two acts that we can connect to Panofsky’s first two levels, pre-iconographic and iconographic. Panofsky considered the first two levels to be “descriptive and classificatory.” According to Hassenmueller, he emphasized the distinction between “meaning which was articulate, conscious, and decodable through literary keys” and that of the third level, iconology, the meaning of which was “essential, unconscious, and accessible only to subjective understanding.”\(^{254}\)

John Boardman, however, felt that the methods of classical art and archaeology were much more advanced than what was found in other disciplines, claiming that “other art historians are barely approaching in the last generation the position achieved in classical art history nearly a century ago. Panofsky’s iconology was not, to most classical art historians, a new concept at all.”\(^{255}\)

Jeremy Tanner notes “iconography has largely been content to stop the analysis at the point where it becomes possible to recognize the particular textual narrative or actor lying behind the visual image. As codified in Panofsky’s programme, iconographic


\(^{254}\) Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, iconography, and semiotics."

analysis, referring images to texts, is a largely philological discipline.”256 Tanner argues that because the study of classics has been “fused as a single field,” those studies of art and figural imagery have not been exposed to the methodological advances of other disciplines. Once again stressing the philological dominance in iconographic studies, he says “Hellenism and the transfer of philological orientations into archaeology and art history took the place of an engagement with the new theoretical perspectives and methodologies being developed in neighboring, more disciplinarily specific, social and cultural sciences.”257

Semiotics

Van Straten’s notion that a ‘sheep is a sheep’ stands in opposition to the iconological approach that considers images to have deeper meanings: semantic and symbolic values that can be teased out though nuanced reading. Amongst classical archaeologists, it is the network of scholars often called the Paris-Lausanne School that best illustrates this approach. They generally follow in the steps of Claude Bérard, who in the 1980s began applying structuralist interpretations to Greek images. They approach Greek vase-painting as a language and system of symbols; in this vein, Sarah Peirce calls images ‘lexical items.’258

Steeped in Peircian semiotics, several of its members of the Paris-Lausanne School have been involved in the academic inquiry into sacrificial ritual. Jean-Louis

256 Tanner, The invention of art history in ancient Greece: religion, society and artistic rationalization, 71.
257 Ibid.
Durand is the most obvious example; his work exhibits the art historical attention given to the semiotics of ‘non-mimetic elements of the image-sign;’ in normal English, the parts of the picture that are not figurative.\(^{259}\) For example, for some historians of Greek religion, the fact that the actual moment of the victim’s death was so rarely depicted in both literary and visual representations of sacrifice reflected the taboo nature of the scene. It was the missing death-blow, the lacuna, the absence of what was believed to be the central moment of the ritual which appeared especially significant to them. Durand crystallized that conceptual empty-space in his consideration of the sacrifice scene on the Etruscan vessel known as the Ricci hydria. The vase showed a procession to an altar and the dismantling of the animal’s body but not the actual moment of killing. Given the arrangement on the vase, the spot where the death ‘would have been’ illustrated by the artist remained black (and blank). Durand declared, “here between the last and first scenes of the sequence there is a gap, a blackout in the form of the dark glaze. There is nothing…The black glazed section…of the Ricci vase both reveals and conceals the moment of truth: the blood of animals is outside the human realm.”\(^{260}\)

Tanner has praised the semiotic approach, saying “the application of structuralist methodology has greatly enhanced the sophistication of iconographic studies of Greek vase-painting.”\(^{261}\) He applies the debate about arbitrary signs established by convention with natural signs: in the Archaic period viewers recognized a statue of a goddess

\(^{259}\) Shapiro, "On some problems in the semiotics of visual art: field and vehicle in image-signs," 223.


\(^{261}\) Tanner, The invention of art history in ancient Greece: religion, society and artistic rationalization, 15.
cognitively “depending on conventional knowledge of arbitrary iconographic codes or symbols that associated particular attributes with particular deities.” But later in the classical period, the greater naturalism of Greek sculpture allows viewers to distinguish statues of goddesses based on “physiological and physiognomic differences.”

Response and Performance

Another trend in interpretation considers votive iconography as an element in wider ritual activity, rather than viewing the images simply as containers of internal data that must be mined and decoded. Richard Gordon, as a pioneering example, effectively rendered the typographical analysis of Mithraic reliefs moot by suggesting that the images were meant to coincide with the activities physically performed around and in the vicinity of the artwork; the iconography was actually part of the liturgy. In other words, the iconography was not a closed narrative to be read only within the confines of the monument, but rather an element to be incorporated into the wider ritual narrative enacted by worshippers. Although Gordon’s study was published in 1980, classical studies has rarely engaged in his interesting line of approach since.

Other scholars have been more interested in the interaction between viewers and images. In 1994, Joseph Day argued that epigrams on votive objects purposefully activated human interaction with images and texts. He posited “that one function of the archaic dedication was to cause viewers to interact with the object in such a way as to

---

262 Ibid., 74.
produce, in their eyes, their mouths and ears, and their minds, a representation of the original ritual act of dedication."

The interest in vision and the power of seeing that I addressed in Chapter 2 has also entered classical discourse. There have been many studies about ‘seeing’ the divine and experiencing the holy through vision but, once again, most research about vision and religion in antiquity centers on other regions of the ancient Mediterranean.

Vision, of course, is only one part of the experience that one had when engaging holy figures in a shrine. The other senses come into play, especially touch, the feeling of movement in space, and smell. The bodily interaction between a person and the image, whether it be a three-dimensional statue or a mass-produced picture placed in the modern home, is equally a major part of the experience of images. Readings in this vein have become more sophisticated as reception and performance theories spilled over from other disciplines; they have enriched interpretations of the function and agency of the objects and their iconography. Thus Robin Osborne described the relationship between viewers and the sculptures of the Parthenon frieze; the viewer never saw the entire frieze at once.

---


265 One of the more prolific writers in this vein is Jaś Elsner, who predominately addresses Roman art. He has argued that two modes of visuality existed in a constant dialectic in the ancient world. The objectification, identification and voyeurism of an aesthetically-driven examination of art predominates as a viewer looks at a narrative or mythological picture; in antiquity (he argues) there was no visual reciprocity between the viewer and the world of the narrative. That contact, however, is found in the frontality so frequently identified in religious sculpture. He posits that “the confrontation with the direct gaze of the deity, a kind of gaze that is one of the most striking formal elements of medieval icons as well as pre-Christian cult statues, is a key aspect of ancient ritual-centered visuality.” (J. Elsner, "Between mimesis and divine power: visuality in the Greco-Roman world," in Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance, ed. Robert Nelson (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60.) Elsner’s division between ritual-centered vision and aesthetically-driven vision follows the more traditional Kantian approach to images discussed in Chapter 2. See also J. Elsner, "Image and ritual: reflections on the religious appreciation of classical art," The Classical Quarterly 46(1996).
and the viewing process was actually one of walking and stopping, being lead around the building by the frieze. He says “The case of the Parthenon frieze brings out into the open the ever-present discourse between object and viewer which is set up by any work of art. This is a discourse in which the sculpture plays an active part: the form of the sculptural presentation frames the form of question posed to the viewer and frames the viewer’s response.”

Tanner explains the importance of response-theory because “as ritual action engaged kinaesthetic sensitivities in the construction of the viewing experience, the manipulation of light, smell, and sound engaged other sensory modes in orchestrating a multisensory viewing experience which goes far beyond the narrowly cognitive evocations of iconographic analysis.” Tanner’s consideration of the multisensory experience of religious images is laudable. For Tanner, the experience of iconography is purely intellectual and interpretive, a different sort of experience from the embodied, phenomenological kinaesthetics he otherwise describes. His description is reminiscent of Freedberg’s pre-iconographic neurological analysis from Chapter 1, in which intellectual understandings were contrasted with unconscious, physical responses so that “phenomenology trumps iconography.”

The value and danger of interpretation

---

267 Tanner, The invention of art history in ancient Greece: religion, society and artistic rationalization, 47.
The methods of archaeology developed out of antiquarianism, which gave particular attention to collection, documentation, and typology. In the 19th century archaeology developed into a science, taking up empiricism and the objective analysis of data. Surprisingly, even the ‘new archaeology’ developed in the 1960s and 70s also turned to positivism (another form of empiricism). Michael Shanks lamented that “positivist doctrines were transferred to archaeology at a time when many philosophers were rejecting virtually every major tenet on which positivism was based. The unfortunate spectacle is one of archaeology embracing thoroughly discredited and outmoded ideas as the framework for its own advance. Curiously enough this trend has continued…”

Given its roots in scientific methodology, classical archaeology insists that any statement about the past be testable. It is fully expected that any archaeologists examining antiquity will do so from a purely objective stance. This markedly empiricist expectation contends that archaeology as a discipline requires the collection and description of data, with very little interpretation needed. The emphasis on the observable and provable over explanation and synthesis reflects the basic, perceived theoretical gap separating phenomenology from interpretation that I addressed in the previous two chapters.

Panofsky, it turns out, was intensely aware of this problem. In his three-part framework, the first stage, the pre-iconographic, featured description and basic identification, while the second stage, iconography, drew on textual and symbolic discourse. Both stages were based on fundamental perception and description but the

third level, iconology, required the interpretation of the researcher or viewer. As Hasenmeuller describes, Panofsky “alluded to the ‘danger’ that iconology would behave like astrology, i.e., become hopelessly unscientific, and [he] apologetically remarked that the faculty needed for iconological insight might best be described by ‘the rather discredited term ‘synthetic in-tuition.’”

Iconographic analysis, then, generally features a rigid emphasis on objective explanation and the identification of the ‘real’ meaning of images and symbols, mixed with the dangerous possibility of intuitive synthesis. Scholars such as Renato Rosaldo, of course, have challenged the very possibility of objectivity. The notion of ‘meaning’ is itself tendentious. As feminist author Toril Moi has said “the attempt to fix meaning is always in part doomed to failure, for it is of the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere.”

271 Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual politics: feminist literary theory (Routledge, 1985), 160.
Greek images and objects need to be contextualized, in keeping with the cultural studies that we saw in Warburg’s and Panofsky’s work. Moreover, in order to comprehend the images, the religious experience of the Greeks needs to be better understood. Many of the most common reconstructions of Greek practice, however, do not adequately account for personal response or the pervasiveness of material and visual culture in the experience of Greek people. Therefore, in the following two chapters I will propose a new reconstruction of Greek religious life. First, I will critique the most common arguments about Greek religion, including the fact that public, civic cult has been privileged over more personal concerns. As an alternative, I present the phenomenon of devotionalism and provide comparative examples. In the next chapter, I will discuss Greek religion in terms of devotionalism.

Models of Greek religion

Animal sacrifice has been called the central act of Greek religion. According to Marcel Detienne, “for nearly ten centuries, guided by immutable cultic statutes, the Greeks never failed to maintain relations with the divine powers through the highly ritualized killing of animal victims, whose flesh was consumed collectively according to
precise stricures." Yet the longevity and coherence that Detienne saw in animal sacrifice can likewise be found in the individual practice of dedicating votive objects. Some archaeologists, faced with thousands upon thousands of physical offerings (a number that dramatically increases with every excavation), have instead characterized Greek practice as “votive religion.” Given the long history of classical scholarship and its international character, many different approaches to votives have been proposed, but the simple fact that votive objects overwhelmingly attest to individual religious activity needs greater theorization.

Greek votive offerings and the personal stories behind them were explored in magisterial detail already in 1902 by William Rouse. The significance of objects dedicated in sanctuaries cannot be properly understood, however, unless we step back further and find a religious framework that successfully accounts for material culture and the experience of that material culture by individuals. Most models of Greek religion, however, do not adequately meet these criteria.

In 1990 Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood’s posited that “the polis anchored, legitimated, and mediated all religious activity.” The concept of polis religion, while Durkheimian in its emphasis on the social body and the collective experience of worship, likewise emphasizes the institutional nature of Greek religion and the civic structures that it embodies. As Julia Kindt has rightly noted, “for a religion that lacked the

---

organizational structures characteristic of most modern religions, such as church, a creed and a dogma, [the polis-religion model] offers an alternative concept of religious administrations and signification.\footnote{276} From a practical standpoint, identifying the structures of polis-religion has proven difficult; Susan Aleshire, in an attempt to deal with the vague label ‘state-cult,’ finally concluded that in Athens a state-cult “regulates the form and the finances of cult – the externals, if you will – but not the content, which is governed in large part by tradition and interpreted by the priests, \textit{exegetai}, and \textit{manteis}.\footnote{277}"

In 1985, Walter Burkert commented that “Greek religion, bound to the polis, is public religion to an extreme degree.”\footnote{278} His statement attests to one of the major tenets behind the polis religion model, namely, that Greek religious practice was inherently communal. This assumption has been so deeply rooted in scholarship that ‘private’ religious practices are oftentimes marginalized as the aberrant contrast to normative ‘public’ ritual activity, a feature particularly evident in structuralist accounts. As Kindt explains, “religious beliefs and practices that do not conform to the polis model, that is those practices that are not administered by the polis and that do not represent the socio-

\footnote{276}J. Kindt, "Polis religion—a critical appreciation," \textit{Kernos}, no. 22 (2009): 29.\footnote{277} Sara B. Aleshire, "Towards a definition of ‘state cult’ for ancient Athens," in \textit{Greek cult practice from the epigraphical evidence: proceedings of the second international seminar on ancient Greek cult, organized by the Swedish Institute at Athens, 22–24 November 1991}, ed. Robin Hägg (Paul Åströms Förlag, 1994), 14.\footnote{278} Granted, I would argue that this definition is too narrow, since the \textit{demos} regulated a fair number of other religious details, even if not in a standardized manner. Civic bodies were certainly concerned with prosecuting impiety of various sorts and were the official arm that identified which people and activities posed a threat: the Athenian Boule condemned Socrates to death for allegedly introducing new gods; at certain historical moments specific groups and practices, such as \textit{thiasoi}, were outlawed. In addition, the \textit{demos} had a hand in controlling and regulating the religious participation of non-dominant social groups, evident in the much discussed case of the \textit{orgeone} of the Thracian goddess Bendis: (R. Garland, "Religious authority in Archaic and Classical Athens," \textit{The Annual of the British School at Athens} 79(1984): 94-95.)\footnote{278} Burkert, \textit{Greek religion}, 276.
political order of the polis, are frequently seen as being by definition not religion proper.”

I contend that a major reason the importance of individual religious activity has been neglected is because historians of Greek religion have overwhelmingly focused on ritual practices. Interest in ritual as an object of academic inquiry has grown dramatically over the last century and has been cross-disciplinary in nature. Classical studies has generally explored ritual as a phenomenon of ‘public’ religion that can be observed in, for example, the essential idioms of procession, sacrifice and prayer. The repeated characterization of animal sacrifice as the central act of Greek religion has implicitly reiterated the identification of ‘religion’ with ‘ritual’; if the greatest religious significance is to be connected with sacrifice and the attendant processions, than the most important things to be said about Greek religion must therefore be derived from ritual.

More recently, a growing interest in the ‘archaeology of ritual’ has led scholars addressing material culture to consider objects as ‘religious’ or ‘sacred’ only if they can be connected to ritual activity. The academic conceptual boundary between what-is-religious and what-isn’t can be exemplified in Scott Scullion’s description of cult activities: “The topography of the Greek sanctuary is thus a very concrete manifestation of the distinction between sacred ritual events on the one hand and non-sacred or at most very vaguely sacred cultural and athletic events on the other.” In other words, even within the sanctuary itself, some activities are seen as sacred (ritual) while others are not.

---

280 E. Kyriakidis, Archaeology of ritual (Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2007).
(cultural, athletic events). The prominence given to ritual as the most important part of Greek religion has been detrimental to the serious consideration of votive objects, since few textual references to any rituals associated with making offerings survive; by default, because of the sparse literary evidence, the significance of giving votives is lessened in scholarly analysis. As much as the Athenians loved to illustrate scenes of sacrifice at the altar, elaborate processions, and other forms of prayer in their figurative art, scenes of dedicators with their votives are rare. At any rate, if true Greek religion lies in ritual and ritual is by its nature public, then votive activity mostly falls to the wayside.

Traditionally, the structural opposite of ‘ritual’ and ‘practice’ has been ‘belief.’ H. Versnel was particularly interested in “religious mentality” and the affective, or emotional, quality of Greek interactions with their gods, but the discipline as a whole shifted its interest away from ‘belief’ towards ‘ritual’ and its sociological and symbolic underpinnings. Nevertheless, Versnel’s work emphasized prayers as “highly personal, frequently ingenuous, but always disarming proofs of individual devotion,” so that public and civic rituals remained the preeminent topics of study, especially festivals, processions, sacrifice and sacred/ritual objects like cult-statues. As Kindt relates, “in an attempt to distinguish one’s own work as much as possible from the earlier associative

---

282 Van den Heever describes “the subtle ideology [informing the notion] that Greeks and Romans of the early era have ‘religion/religious life’ while Jews and Christians have ‘faiths/beliefs…” Van den Heever, "Redescribing Graeco-Roman antiquity: on religion and history of religion," 212.
284 Ibid., 1.
studies of Greek religious beliefs, it became desirable to draw a somewhat artificial line between religious beliefs on the one hand and polis-oriented religious practice on the other."

More recently, however, attempts have been made to legitimize the experience of the individual and to explore private or ‘personal’ religion. T. Harrison exemplifies the move in his 2009 *Greek religion: belief and experience*. Stephen Instone, who gathered a small number of texts for his brief *Greek personal religion: a reader*, speculated that “generally the Greeks believed the divide between man and god was unbridgeable…but there were areas of life where close contact with the divine could be made and was actively encouraged…” An important point in the discussion was the publication of Andrea Purvis’ 2003 *Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in Classical Greece*. Her study explored individuals who had, for various reasons and through various means, founded ‘private’ cults. Purvis, noting that “piety and personal devotion could be expressed in various ways that did not entail the efforts and obligations of a cult foundation,” identifies several other arenas for religious ‘individualism’: domestic/household cult, religious associations like *oregeones* and *thiasoi*, mysteries, and other activities of *idiotai* (private individuals) such as the dedication of votives.288 As for the establishment of shrines, Purvis made several important observations: there was no particular pattern in the type of god honored, since the decision seems to have been specific to the founder’s needs while simultaneously incorporating the local religious

---

circumstances; there was an informality in the way the founder and future worshippers were expected to engage the spirits, marked by open invitations to all passersby and a conspicuous lack of institutionalizing decrees and rules; immigrants were very prominent in private foundations and social status/wealth did not lessen an individual’s consequence in the shrine, as it did in more publicly-recognized cults.\textsuperscript{289}

The question remains: where do the objects left in sanctuaries fit in these considerations? ‘Votive religion,’ like polis-religion and ritual-centered interpretations, probably moves too far in one direction. Votive practice \textit{does} emphasize the \textit{interaction} between the person presenting the object and the recipient, however. In this vein, the archaeologist’s emphasis on the object as a gift remains particularly resilient, a designation which serves to neatly place votive gifts in the wider Mediterranean culture of ‘gift-giving’ and exchange, thought to be at the heart of Greek social interaction from at least the time of Homer.\textsuperscript{290} The argument posits that the exchange of gifts was an activity that strengthened the relationships between ‘elites;’ the act, the item and the individuals made up a web of social interaction, things, and bodies that covered the Greek world, both geographically and chronologically, since the gifts moved across both distances and generations. Robert Parker is adamant: “almost the whole of Greek cultic practice is in fact founded…on the belief or hope that reciprocity of this kind is a

\textsuperscript{289} Ibid., 121-126.
\textsuperscript{290} Donlan argues, “the rule of reciprocity, that one gives of one’s own accord, with the expectation that a suitable return will follow, was a powerful regulator of social behavior at every stage in Greece’s history. The Homeric epics provide our earliest observation of its observation.” Walter Donlan, “Political reciprocity in Dark Age Greece: Odysseus and his hetairoi,” in \textit{Reciprocity in Ancient Greece} ed. Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite, and Richard Seaford (Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.
References to a perceived association of exchange can be identified in many ancient texts mentioning sacrifice, the offering of objects, hymns, prayers, and paeans.\textsuperscript{292}

**Popular piety and lived religion**

Whereas gift-giving amongst aristocratic individuals has been viewed in a generally positive light, the same reciprocal relationship between people and divinities has been viewed with considerably less enthusiasm, a criticism symptomatic of a much larger and chronologically diverse trend that views such ‘self-interested’ religious practices as crass and infantile. Robert Orsi, for example, found that in 20\textsuperscript{th} century America members of the Catholic Church hierarchy directed especially vehement criticism at devotees of the saints. One father advised against entreating the saints “solely to obtain favors of a material nature” when instead one should be hoping for a “greater intensity of spiritual life,” summarized as “deeper religious and psychological maturity.”\textsuperscript{293} Particularly odious was the idea that desperate, lucky, or grateful people would turn to holy figures for help with the day-to-day problems of their lives and, worse, that they would attempt to bargain for that help. The bargaining that went on as hopeless or hopeful people engaged divine figures have often been grouped with other practices under the dismissive heading ‘popular religion.’

\textsuperscript{293} R.A. Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude: women’s devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes (Yale University Press, 1998), 194.
The debate about what constitutes ‘proper’ religion has permeated academic, religious, political, and social discourses, modern and ancient; as chronologically removed as they may seem to be, the criticisms by the American Catholic hierarchy are relevant to the consideration of ancient votives. Greek writers described the ancient activities now usually grouped under the ‘popular religion’ designation as less-mature, vulgar and materialist. The danger of the label’s use in modern studies of Greece comes from the fact “that popular for some scholars has come to connote rural as opposed to urban, primitive as opposed to civilized, traditional as opposed to modern, and proletarian as opposed to capitalist (not to mention better as opposed to worse, or the reverse).”

Peter Brown describes the rhetorical dichotomy between ‘mature,’ ‘enlightened’ forms of religion and their opposite ‘vulgar’ popular practices, calling it the ‘two-tiered model’ of religion. Researching saints and martyrs in late antiquity, Brown found in early Christian literature an ancient predecessor of the modern rhetoric, almost exclusively present in the works of ‘elite’ writers who derided the ‘vulgar’ practices of the poor, the uneducated, and women. Brown emphasizes the class and social tension evidenced by the two-tiered dichotomy. Fundamental to this tension was a dynamic of power that, it has been argued, suffuses many modern theological and secular analyses of religion as well. Orsi comments, “these are issues of power – the power of our theories of

295 Brown, The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity, 17-22. Orsi says(xviii): “the term popular religion identified and cordoned off forms of religious expression that subverted or transgressed boundaries fundamental to the construction of modern religiosity and of modern society – for example, religious forms that blur distinctions between matter and spirit...between the sacred and the profane...between public spaces defined as free of religious presence and private religious
“religion” to constitute some ideas and practices as religious and others not, some practices and perspectives as essential to a particular religious and cultural world and others marginal.”

Much of this criticism overlaps with a common idea that proper devotion to holy figures should be marked by ‘disinterestedness,’ pure spirituality, and a lack of earthly concerns and desires. T. Ludwig imagines Hindu devotion featuring the goal “to love and devote oneself to one’s god, fully and completely. By such self-abandonment, all desires and wants and needs are turned to God rather than to the self.” For theologian Evelyn Underhill, “such disinterested delight is the perfection of worship.” Like many others, she felt that approaching god for specific help was a feature of less-advanced religious thinking: “fear and anxiety…expressed in propitiation and demand, are inevitable elements of the primitive response;…but as the genuine religious impulse becomes dominant, adoration more and more takes charge.”

In studies of Greek religion, the process of seeking out divinities in order to get help on specific issues has also been viewed with some ambivalence. The act of approaching holy figures to acquire help with ‘materialist’ concerns, embodied in the oft-quoted Latin formulation do ut des and the Greek kharis (on which more below), is frequently described as ‘transactional.’ André Festugiere condemned its “sordid quality of a business transaction.” The tradition of asking spirits for specific help has so
often been derided, condemned as primitive and considered unworthy of proper religious sentiment, that many scholars have attempted to whitewash the perceived commercial nature of the relationship between men and gods. Some authors explain away the materialistic side of Greek religious reciprocity or otherwise vaguely indicate that it is in fact not a bad thing. Versnel uses the term ‘egoism’ (self-interest) to describe “the request for health, happiness and wealth” and, although he says it is “not necessarily negative or damaging” he immediately proceeds to enumerate its “truly aggressive forms,” i.e., cursing.301

Readers of ancient Greek literature should also recognize the contours of the argument. As Richard Seaford comments, “in certain texts of the classical period (including Plato) reciprocity between humans and deities comes to seem problematic because it to some extant has been reconceived in terms of the (more mechanical and impersonal) process of commercial exchange.”302 For example, some authors criticized the notion that one could ‘buy’ favors from the gods; Plato condemned the idea that sins could be wiped away through animal sacrifice. His Socrates asserts, “for it is not, I imagine, the way of the gods to be seduced with gifts, like a base insurer… for it would be a strange thing if the gods had regard to our gifts and sacrifices instead of our souls, and the piety and justice that may be found in any of us… But the gods are not to be won by bribes…”303

In addition to the unseemly self-interest associated with personal concerns, other elements criticized in modern descriptions of the popular religion similarly appear in Greek sources. One of Plato’s greatest concerns, of course, was the unmonitored religious activity of individuals; he firmly supported institutional jurisdiction. Ostensibly this was because it was not possible to scrutinize para-institutional activity for religious incorrectness and it was thus a potential danger to the surrounding population. He proposed laws to curtail individual religious autonomy, since he deeply distrusted personal religious activities of the type he thus describes:

yet it is customary for all women especially, and for sick folk everywhere, and those in peril or in distress (whatever the nature of the distress), and conversely for those who have had a slice of good fortune, to dedicate whatever happens to be at hand at the moment, and to vow sacrifices and promise the founding of shrines to gods and demi-gods and children of gods; and through terrors caused by waking visions or by dreams, and in like manner as they recall many visions and try to provide remedies for each of them, they are wont to found altars and shrines, and to fill with them every house and every village, and open places too, and every spot which was the scene of such experiences. (Laws 10.909e-910a)

Discourse in antiquity, just as in modern literature, wondered what constituted proper religious behavior and debated the proper relationship between men and gods. Plato criticized the private shrine foundations studied by Purvis distinctly connecting these foundations to the personal interests and life experiences of the founders, such as illness or other distresses. Moreover, he described gifts – presumably dedications in sanctuaries – as bribes and forms of seduction. Plato was not the voice of the majority, of course. Despite his criticisms of bribery and discomfort with ‘commercial transactions’ on the part of ancient and modern commentators, votive tendencies – leaving behind little
objects at the statues of gods, attached to trees, dropped into pits – was obviously a powerful, compelling and expected part of interacting with the divine in ancient Greece.

**Votive-votum-devotio-devotionalism**

Objects left at sanctuaries are most frequently labeled “votive,” but the term is imprecise because it inherently suggests that the object was given in fulfillment of a vow. Osborne is right to note “the absence of a single agreed term by which to refer to objects intentionally deposited to mark or establish an exchange with transcendent powers. On different occasions such objects may be called dedications, offerings, votives, hoards or simply ‘deposits.’” The term ‘votive’ seems to be the most popularly employed, but, instead of deriving from specific Greek terms (e.g., anathema, “something set up”), it relates to the Latin *votum* (vow). Moreover, the idea of vowing one’s own person to holy figures, an idea essential to modern Western concepts of religion, stems from the Latin *devotio*, which originally referred to the action of a general in vowing his troops to the gods of the underworld.

*Devotio* would eventually transform into ‘devotion’ and, in the context of modern religions, the term ‘devotion’ grew to entail a wide variety of connotations and maintained a varied and flexible nature. Not only has its meaning differed according to the personal creeds of individual scholars, but also in keeping with wider trends within the discipline of the history of religion. The imprecision of the term was already noted in James Hastings’ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, first inaugurated in 1908, with its

---

entry on ‘devotion.’ W. Major Scott, the author of the entry, complained that “‘devotion’ and ‘religion’ have often been used as synonymous terms.”\textsuperscript{305} By the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, ‘devotion’ would come to replace the term ‘cult’ in academic usage. In many disciplines, including classics, ‘cult’ had been used to indicate “a body of religious beliefs and practices associated with a particular god or set of gods, or even an individual saint or spiritually enlightened person, that constitutes a specialized part of the religious institutions of a society.”\textsuperscript{306} In response to the increasingly negative and deviant connotations associated with the term ‘cult’ in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, it was thought that ‘devotion’ provided a more neutral alternative for drawing boundaries between sets of practices and related holy figures. This elision between the two terms is best exemplified in the more recent Encyclopedia of Religion; in order to account for the change in academic (and popular) usage, many of the elements originally listed under the heading ‘cult’ in Eliade’s first edition were moved to the section on ‘devotion’ in the second edition.\textsuperscript{307} Understandably, this process further confused the definition of the ‘devotion,’ making the Encyclopedia entry so broad as to be ultimately unhelpful. A review of the literature, however, generally suggests three major uses of the term: to signify the feeling and act of devotion, the wider category of ‘cult,’ and a particular religious form called devotionalism.

\textsuperscript{305} W. Major Scott, "Devotion and devotional literature," in Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics, ed. J. Hastings (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), 693.
\textsuperscript{307} Lindsay Jones, personal communication, December 2010.
Of course, as the *Encyclopedia of Religion* notes, “there is a lack of books on devotion as a religious phenomenon,” with most discussions focused on particular historical and cultural circumstances. Yet even among the three major applications of the term (feeling, cult, religious phenomenon) the meanings that individual scholars have applied to the term are likewise diverse. For scholars categorizing the complicated array of practices grouped under Hinduism, ‘devotion’ pertains to the part of Hinduism that involves gods and thus represents only one of three methods comprising the tradition: the Path of Knowledge emphasizes meditation and self-realization; the Path of Action involves right action and the ethical order of *karma* and *dharma*; the Path of Devotion (*bhakti*, also translated as ‘participation’) is the only path that entails worshipping gods.

Despite the wide variety of devotional models, there are a number of elements common in most descriptions of the phenomenon. For Major Scott, individuality and deep feelings of affection were vital; devotion is “the inner, intimate, essential side of worship” and “involves the deliberate movement of the will towards the object of worship” as well as “ardent attachment.” ‘Theistic devotion,’ the more recent *Encyclopedia of Religion* claims, involves the formation of a relationship with a figure who “is imagined and approached as a person and is expected to respond to… devotees

---

310 The inclusion or exclusion of gods in devotional practices has resulted in enough uneasiness that the encyclopedia entries make sure to specify ‘theistic devotion.’
311 Major Scott, "Devotion and devotional literature," 693.
accordingly.”\textsuperscript{312} There is a strong bond of love between both parties, although the worshipper’s devotion is usually “characterized by expressions or feelings of praise and submission” in varying degrees. For S. Huyler, Hindu devotion is marked by “individuality”\textsuperscript{313} and involves a “feeling of personal contact”\textsuperscript{314} with a Divine that is “personal and approachable,”\textsuperscript{315} this interaction is facilitated by \textit{puja}, communion “through invocation, prayer, song, and ritual.”\textsuperscript{316}

As I will show in the next chapter, many of these features are observable in Greek interactions with the divine, together with features otherwise grouped as ‘popular religion.’ Indeed. Orsi often uses ‘devotionalism’ interchangeably with ‘lived religion’ and ‘popular piety’; he is uneasy developing stricter categorizations because “these are high-stakes matters that go well beyond issues of scholarly definition, or – put another way – scholarly definitions of religion are implicated in much broader social and cultural agendas.”\textsuperscript{317} Before exploring these features in Greek religious life I would like to more closely observe one specific devotional context as a means of providing comparative material.

\textit{Orsi’s devotionalism: strategies for engaging and imagining religious worlds}

Orsi has been particularly interested in the phenomenon of devotionalism, having repeatedly explored what he calls ‘devotional culture’ in American Catholicism of the

\textsuperscript{312} Kinsley and Narayanan, “Devotion,” 2318.
\textsuperscript{313} Stephen P. Huyler, \textit{Meeting god: elements of Hindu devotion} (Yale University Press, 1999), 28.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{317} Orsi, \textit{The Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950}, xv.
20\textsuperscript{th} century. His method and model are particularly relevant to my interest in ancient religion for three reasons. First, as I just discussed, he collapses devotionalism, lived religion and popular religion into the same general shape. Second, like Jane Ellen Harrison (p. 106-107), he emphasizes the physicality of the religious experience and especially the role of material culture in devotional practice. Third, he highlights everyday life as the site of devotionalism; for him, religion exists in daily life just as it does in ritual and sacred space. I will address the relevance of each of these three elements in further detail below.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Orsi defines religion “not as a web of meanings but of relationships between heaven and earth.”\textsuperscript{318} This approach is in keeping with phenomenological interests. Already in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the theologian Wilhelm Herrman drew on the work of phenomenologist Albrecht Ritschl to formulate a similar model, “defining religion as relational, that is, founded on a personal experience between humans and supersensible realities.”\textsuperscript{319} Orsi’s work has centered on devotional culture among immigrant communities in 20\textsuperscript{th} century America and examines the way religious thinking suffuses and molds the lives of devotees. In his study, devotionalism is “that array of practices, objects, liquids, images, ceremonies, and gestures by which Catholics engaged the presence of God and the saints in the spaces and times of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{320} This ‘array’ is formed by and reflected in historical and social circumstances; as such,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{318} Orsi, \emph{Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{319} Cox, \emph{A guide to the phenomenology of religion: key figures, formative influences and subsequent debates}, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{320} Orsi, \emph{Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them}, 5 or 55.
\end{itemize}
devotional practices and culture constantly change as individuals react to and act upon the world around them.

There are several elements that Orsi sees as characteristic of devotionalism. He agrees with some of the essential characteristics noted by the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, since he emphasizes the close personal relationship formed between people and the saints they worshipped, often of an intensely emotional and intimate nature. That feeling of closeness is aided by the human-like qualities of holy figures, who were frequently depicted in anthropomorphic terms and thus as beings to whom people of all types could relate on a human level. Orsi qualifies the affective quality of the relationship in a way different than most formulations, however. While the divine figures were immensely more powerful than the men and women who loved them, the relationship between them was nevertheless one of mutual need; the holy figures benefited from the devotion of humans even if they supposedly did not need it. In other words, the power relationship between heaven and earth was not entirely one-sided. He especially articulates that the relationship was not always a source of comfort; in fact, the interactions between humans and holy figures could be extremely complex, fraught with tension, strain and friction. The emotionally charged place of that meeting could be painful and bitter.

Although both the saints and Mary were powerful and dangerous beings, they were still mostly knowable. They were anthropomorphic; they looked like people and dressed like people; devotees could meet the eyes of the saint they loved and feel like the saint was looking back. Beyond the physical resemblance, the saints reflected the social lives of the devout. Many of them had experienced the same sorts of emotional and
physical pains as their worshippers. While such affinities could be sources of comfort, “the saints could be dangerous enforcers of cultural structures, norms, and expectations…”\textsuperscript{321} The divine realm, Orsi argues, mirrored the human realm and particularly family structures, together with all the social tension they embodied.\textsuperscript{322}

In addition to the emotional character of the relationship between heaven and earth and the human-like nature of the divine, Orsi emphasizes the sure presence of the divine in the ‘spaces and times’ of everyday life. A feature of the experiences that people had with the divine, he argues, is the essential fact that “…the realness of sacred presence in the imaginations and experiences of religious practitioners…” was fundamental and certain.\textsuperscript{323} Divine figures were \textit{really there}, not just at Church and in ritual occasions like Communion, but in streets, homes, hospitals, cars and offices, in all the places that the devout travelled in everyday life. Devotional culture existed not just in ‘religious’ activities like processions and rituals, but also in the myriad activities that might physically and chronologically surround the procession, such as the preparation of foods, the washing of festival clothes, the cleaning of the house, the decoration of the streets, the

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{322} This mirroring of heaven and earth, the ‘diptych,’ as he calls it, was a structure in which “the inner dynamics of one family [could find] expression and sanction on the level of [a] culturally shared religious story and that this religious story [could be] so clearly grounded in the most subtle and elusive movements of family culture in a particular time and place (\textit{Heaven}, 142-143)…” Men and women could find and make meaning in the lives and stories of saints while also recognizing themselves and their experiences in the ‘diptych’. This was particularly clear in the relationship between the divine mother and son that Mary and Jesus represented and which, in Italian immigrant families at least, echoed the close relationship between human mother and son (\textit{Madonna}, 119-20). Orsi notes, “the pairing of old woman/young man, in the form mother/son, was at the center of American Catholic devotional culture and piety, which made the relationship between Jesus and his mother the model of the spiritual life, the clearest expression of the encounter between human and the divine, and the pivot of Catholic cosmology (\textit{Jude}, 81).” Meanwhile, Mary’s role as mother extended beyond her own child; to the inhabitants of Harlem she was nostra mama, with her church being “mamma’s house (\textit{Madonna}, 164).”
\textsuperscript{323} Orsi, \textit{Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them}, 10.
gathering of various family members, or the preservation of cherished souvenirs after the event.\textsuperscript{324} He finds that an emphasis on ritual encounters and sacred space fails to account for the way that practitioners take the gods \textit{with them}; in the immigrant communities he studied, religion did not occur only in the ‘sacred space’ of the Church but in all the places that practitioners went, particularly those locations that witnessed emotional distress. Devotional activities included not just prayer and Mass attendance, but all the many other activities that allowed people to engage and imagine the divine.

Orsi’s emphasis on daily life and presence stands in contrast to the traditional view of popular piety as a geographically limited phenomenon, wherein the holy power was thought to concentrate in particular sanctuaries, shrines, or sacred places. Devotees would travel to these places in order to commune with the spirits, but could bring back holy objects so that “a latent tension between the stationary and motile has always run through devotionalism.”\textsuperscript{325} For Orsi, devotional media complicates the idea of the local and the notion of sacred space. “Devotional images are media of presence and they are used to act upon the world, upon others and upon oneself. Such media include holy cards, prayer beads, relics, statues and images, blessed oils and waters, and the many different things pilgrims bring home…These objects are believed to hold the power of the holy figure…and to make it present.”\textsuperscript{326}

Devotional practice and culture, Orsi argues, exist not just in the relationship between the god and the worshipper, but in the relationships between humans on earth in

\textsuperscript{324} Orsi, \textit{The Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950}, xlv.
\textsuperscript{325} Orsi, \textit{Thank you, St. Jude: women’s devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes}, 26.
\textsuperscript{326} Orsi, \textit{Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them}, 49.
a network that usually links a person to the divine through another person. He particularly stresses the importance of family relationships as the site of religious devotion, since not only was the family unit a site of the most basic religious learning, but the social and cultural struggles, worries and anxieties that were part of the religious experience were intimately felt in the home.

When he proposed that religious worlds existed in the relationships between individuals, Orsi reveals the importance of narrative as a means for people to imagine their places in the world. Rather than being tied to ritual and the liturgy, he finds that devotional culture and practice live in the stories people tell – to their family members, to their friends, and to strangers.\textsuperscript{327} He particularly explored this phenomenon in the popular piety of women’s worship of Saint Jude. Narrative was central to the way hopeless women communicated with the saint, to whom, in keeping with the ‘idiom of the devotion,’ they wrote long letters detailing their problems and specific requests for help. But women also told their stories to other women; the most frequent scenario Orsi came across involved a desperate woman being approached by a nurse or co-worker or a friend or stranger, who then told their own story of hopelessness and explained how St. Jude had come to their aid. This narrative pattern not only spread the worship of St. Jude across the American landscape by word of mouth, it became a place where women could openly talk about things in spite of a Catholic culture that otherwise silenced them. The uncomplaining Catholic woman, suffering piously and \textit{quietly}, was able, in the space of her relationship with Jude and other women, to give voice to her own experience.

\textsuperscript{327} Ibid., 112-113.
Devotional narrative provided a place for people to tell stories that were unacceptable to tell in other contexts; religious life was composed of an array of different narratives that were allowed in certain venues but not others.\footnote{Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude: women's devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes, 119-141.}

As such, devotional practices could be subversive, providing outlets for practitioners constrained by religious and cultural structures and hierarchies. While at times devotionalism might stand in direct opposition to institutional authority (such as the conflict between Marian devotion and Church dogma following the Second Vatican Council), it more frequently served as a method for people to circumvent the boundaries enforced by institutions in order to more actively engage the presence of the divinity on their own terms. Orsi gives the example of his own crippled uncle, who devoutly and stubbornly worshipped the crippled Margaret of Castello as a saint, despite the fact that she has (still) never been canonized. The hierarchy “did not understand that there were enough ruptures, fissures, and contradictions in this world for [his] uncle and the others to find ways within it of living against it…This world afforded many guises and voices, some of them (at least) at odds with the narrative of the [cheerful, uncomplaining] holy cripple promulgated elsewhere in the same devotional culture.”\footnote{Orsi, Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them, 45.}

Because Orsi found that devotionalism allowed people, especially those outside the dominant social groups, to engage holy figures on their own terms, I will describe it henceforth as para-institutional.
What are devotional practices?

If devotionalism is first and foremost located in the way people engage powerful beings, then it might be useful to look more closely at what sorts of activities and expectations Orsi identified in these interactions. Most frequently, people approached holy figures in search of help, favor and protection. Invisible benefactors were sought out during times of great uncertainty and fear, not just in the lives of the community, but in the lives of women and men. In their communications with Mary and the saints, a number of concerns cropped up commonly and reflected the real-life problems and desires of families and individuals. Women and men sought economic stability and prosperity. One of the greatest areas of concern and distress was the health and success of the family. Women asked to become mothers, seeking healthy babies, ease with breast-feeding, and safe labors. Parents were particularly concerned for their children and often petitioned the divine on their behalf, to keep them safe or to keep them well-behaved and safely in line with social norms. As such, fear for the continuity of tradition and the protection of the Catholic way of life is distinctly visible in the interactions between humans and the divine. Help was also needed at moments of great fear, such as when sons were away at war and especially in hospitals during times of illness and death.

In their interactions with the divine, men and women promised many things to Mary and the saints, such as monetary donations, publicly delivered praise, the spread of the saint’s fame, and physical gifts. They also performed other sorts of pious acts, often in an effort to express their affection and their hope of pleasing or honoring the holy figure. These devotions were part of the “on-going relationship” that humans and holy
figures made together. For example, people donated their physical labor and time, helping to build and maintain neighborhood shrines, to perform acts of charity, and to volunteer assistance at church events and activities. They donated money, oftentimes when they could very little afford it. They attempted to shape their behavior itself as a devotional act, in order to meet the expectations of the inhabitants of heaven as much as those on earth. These activities usually looked both forward and backward to other moments in an individual’s experience with the same saint, attesting to repeated interactions with benefactors. The relationships were not onetime events, but instead were long term and could continue for the length of a person’s life.

To quickly review, according to Orsi devotionalism made the divine present in the every-day lives of individuals. The on-going relationship people and saints formed with one another was emotionally charged and personal, aided by the ability of men and women to identify with the inhabitants of heaven based on shared appearance and experiences. People approached these powerful figures on issues of great emotional importance and at moments of distress, seeking direct and tangible aid. The idioms of devotion might shift with historical circumstances, but narrative often played an important role. Because of the individualized nature of the way people engaged divine presence, it was frequently outside the direct control of religious institutions and hierarchies. While formed and constructed through interaction with friends and family, devotionalism allowed individuals to dispute social expectations and pressures while it also helped to reinforce them.
Devotional media and the problem of textual evidence

Orsi found that people desired not just emotional closeness with the divine, but also physical closeness. Devotional media physically manifested the presences of holy figures in daily life. Individuals touched statues of the Virgin, they carried amulets of saints on their dashboards, they kept prayer cards at their bedside table, and they even requested that the devotional letters sent to shrines all over the country be placed as close to the shrine’s altar as possible. As I will discuss in the next chapter, it is my belief that the ancient Athenians likewise employed mobile media of presence.

Before doing so, however, I would briefly like to touch on a methodological issue related to the consideration of devotional media in ancient Greek frameworks. Orsi’s model of devotionalism originated in ethnographic and historical research, drawn from personal interviews and archival documents. We possess a fair number of literary texts from Classical Athens, but not from all chronological periods. Given the ‘personal’ and intimate nature of devotionalism and the first-person perspective of phenomenology, can we only recognize devotionalism through texts? Can objects and images alone testify to the creation of personal, affective relationships with invisible figures?

This has important implications for the history of Greek religion. Traditionally, historians have argued that at the end of the 5th century and into the 4th century, normative Greek religion was unable to meet the needs of worshippers, causing large numbers to seek out greater religious satisfaction in mystery cults.330 The difference is commonly

described as a shift from the “formal, slightly distant relationship marked by respect rather than intimate knowledge. In contrast, the relationship between gods and participants in mystery cults was intimate, personal and not necessarily easy to talk about.”331 The standard narrative describes the closeness between devotee and holy beings, evident in, for example, the Hellenistic cult of Isis. This historical reconstruction almost entirely disregards archaeological evidence and derives almost exclusively from textual sources; inevitably, historical periods lacking comparable sources are not imagined in similar terms.

One of the greatest problems with this argument is that it fails to take into consideration the changing nature of our evidence over the many centuries these events took place. The massive literary resources from the Hellenistic period that provide such intimate views into the inner realm of contemporary religious traditions do not exist from earlier periods. Likewise, the epigraphical data that helps us define the kharis relationship in 5th century Athens was not present in the 8th century. Individuals of the 8th century did, however, mark their personal religious encounters with thousands upon thousands of (votive) objects. These anonymous items rarely explicitly record the hopes, fears, and expectations in the manner so well documented from later text-heavy periods; nevertheless, our lack of preserved texts does not mean that the personal concerns affiliated with votives did not exist.

331 Bowden, Mystery cults of the ancient world, 22.
Chapter 5 Devotional elements in Greek encounters with divine powers

This chapter presents evidence that Greek religion exhibits many of the characteristics observed in other devotional traditions. Several problems confront attempts to consider experiences of ancient Greeks in the context of the devotional model described by Orsi. The most obvious issue is one of sources: the bulk of Orsi’s research stemmed from ethnographic methods such as personal interviews, the use of archival material, and access to popular literature such as devotional magazines. None of these are available to historians of archaic and classical Greece; the preserved literary tradition is incomplete and predominantly written for and by the upper classes. Also, fierce methodological debates still occupy analyses of religion through archaeological means. As I mentioned in the introduction, another danger lies in the possibility of inadvertently applying Christianizing assumptions and frameworks to the very different cultural and historical circumstances of antiquity.

My hope is that these problems can be avoided by breaking down Orsi’s model to its component parts and using those criteria to reconsider our evidence for Greek experiences. To this end, I propose to examine Greek data in response to the following skeletal formulation of Orsi’s web of “relationships between heaven and earth.” In particular, 1) ancient Greek religion was characterized by relational encounters between humans and holy figures involving both positive and negative emotional experiences, 2)

332 I draw on material from throughout the Greek mainland, while the case-studies in the following two chapters limit their material to Athens.
the anthropomorphic qualities of deities aided identification with divine beings, 3) intimate reciprocal relationships originated in the personal concerns of individuals and their responses to life’s events, and 4) para-institutional, individualized methods of engagement might subvert dominant ideologies or provide alternative religious opportunities for otherwise excluded individuals. In addition, a major theme in the chapter supports the location of devotional experiences in the ‘spaces and times’ of everyday life, or more specifically, spaces outside shrines and ritual occasions.

**Relationships in Greek religion**

I think it would be fair to operate under the assumption that Orsi’s description of religion as a web “of relationships between heaven and earth” is applicable in ancient Greece. This understanding is already implicit, for example, in the way sacrificial ritual is described as a “sharing” between men and gods, other rituals are described as vertical “communication” between the two parties, and altars are conceived as the places the two worlds come together. Nevertheless, since so many models of Greek religion emphasize its public and communal nature and since the role of ‘individualism’ is debated in scholarly circles, it is necessary to begin by considering the range of private engagement with the gods. 333

333 At many ritual occasions and in many sanctuaries, activities were monitored and controlled by the priest and priestess and the local civic body; a telling example survives in a 4th century decree from the Piraeus stipulating that at the local Thesmophorion several activities were not allowed – setting up dedications, gathering of thiasoi, approaching the altar without the priestess – except on festival days, when such activities seem to have been acceptable and expected: E. Lupu, Greek sacred law: a collection of new documents (Brill, 2005), 11. From these examples, we might infer that on many occasions either the establishment generated when and how individuals interacted with the divine (e.g., through the institution of sacrifices or by supporting organizational bodies) or institutional hierarchies played
As I briefly discussed in the previous chapter, votive objects attest to the private devotional activities of individuals. Gaifman calls them “the material expression of individual piety.” These items point to individuals seeking out gods and heroes for specific help, such as the anatomical votives in the context of illness or injury. Others act as testimonials of divine grace, such as the first fruits and tithes dedicated following economic success. Other votives show what we might consider upkeep or maintenance of the relationship, such as the deposition of wreaths at shrines (see Chapter 6).

mediating roles between average men and women and the spirits (e.g., in the person of priests and priestesses). As is well documented, the gods developed formal relationships with cities and civic organizations. A number of different groups and corporations provided a network through which people could participate in festivals and maintain sanctuaries. The shape of some of these groups were enforced by the state through methods of institutional organization – the Attic demes were a prime example, each deme in charge of maintaining its own yearly calendar of sacrificial festivals. People were born into phratries, which were hereditary through the male line, and there were certain festivals specifically linked to the phratry and membership within it, such as the Athenian Apatouria. Other public bodies seem to have been more voluntary in nature, such as the orgeones that honored local heroes and the rather poorly understood thiasoi. In many ways these groups were administrative in nature, but the orgeones, thiasoi and other koina (communities) effectively created informal occasions for people to gather under the gaze of their favorite divinities. The spirits that they worshipped were often locally significant rather than pan-Hellenic. See Mikalson, "Religion in the Attic demes."); S.D. Lambert, The phratries of Attica (University of Michigan Press, 1999); W.S. Ferguson and A.D. Nock, "The Attic orgeones and the cult of heroes," The Harvard Theological Review 37(1944); Y. Ustinova, "Orgeones in phratries: a mechanism of social integration in Attica," Kernos 6(1996).

Of course, civic and kinship relationships were not the only social networks that interacted with divinities. A surprisingly understudied aspect of Greek religion is profession-based communities. As we will see below, people brought the gods into the stories of their economic prosperity, asking them for help and dedicating first fruits and more long lasting symbols of success. Multiple individuals also came together to dedicate objects in a manner equivalent to family groups and civic bodies. For example, a marble relief was dedicated to Apollo by the hebdomaistai, a religious association in the deme Ikaria [Emmanuel Voutiras, "A dedication of the Hebdomaistai to the Pythian Apollo," American Journal of Archaeology 86, no. 2 (1982.)] This played a similar devotional role to the marble relief dedicated to the Nymphs by 10 washer men and 2 washer women: Rouse, Greek votive offerings, 88. In the former case it was the deme institution that united the dedicators with the gods, while in the latter, it was the shared experience of being an Athenian washer of clothes. In other cases, specific professions were taxed in order to facilitate the proper honoring of the gods. At the Amphiareion of Oropos, money from the shops was collected together with that from the treasury box to pay for an inscription (LSCG 75).

334 Gaifman, "Visualized rituals and dedicatory inscriptions on votive offerings to the Nymphs," 86.
335 See, for example, Bronwen Wickkiser, "Corinth in context: comparative studies on religion and society," in Corinth in context, ed. S.J. Friesen, D.N. Schowalter, and James C. Walters (Brill, 2010), 43-45.
A decree from the Amphiareion at Oropos indicates that private individuals were perfectly capable of sacrificing to the hero god on their own, without a mediating priest or other civic institution.\textsuperscript{337} As Parker has stressed, “all these private sacrifices, some conducted in the house, some in public shrines, some on the occasion of festivals, some at the pleasure of the host, some inspired by specific religious motives such as rescue from danger, many held chiefly for the pleasure of the feast, are a largely unobservable but very important face of ancient religion.”\textsuperscript{338} Purvis postulates that if the activities were “not demanded by cult regulations of the polis or local political organization such as the Attic deme”\textsuperscript{339} then they were ‘personal.’ We can find examples of this division in the religious experience of two different sorts of pilgrims, the \textit{theoros} and the \textit{hikete}. The \textit{theoros}, functioning as a delegate from a home city, visited important shrines to observe festivals as a representative of a political entity. It is argued that the \textit{hikete} (supplicant), in contrast, was an individual who visited powerful sites in order to get some sort of aid or help; he was “the protagonist, acting on his own behalf.”\textsuperscript{340}

Families and the \textit{oikos} (household) obviously had their own close and intimate interactions with deities. Bakkhylikes described this intergenerational aspect in the late 6\textsuperscript{th} century BC when he mentioned Pantheides, who was blessed by Apollo and was the father of five sons. Bakkhylikes tells us that Zeus made one of the sons victorious in the

\textsuperscript{337} E. Lupu, "Sacrifice at the Amphiareion and a fragmentary sacred law from Oropos," \textit{Hesperia} (2003).
\textsuperscript{338} Robert Parker, \textit{Polytheism and society at Athens} (Oxford University Press, 2005), 44.
\textsuperscript{339} Purvis, \textit{Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece}, 7.
Isthmian games in recompense for both the son and the father’s benefactions.\textsuperscript{341} The relationship, then, could stretch across generations and so simultaneously link family members across time. The dedication of objects on the Athenian Acropolis by children in fulfillment of a vow made by their parents is often mentioned in this context.\textsuperscript{342} Moreover, parents and their children performed devotional acts not just on behalf of one another, but together: in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century, Eudeine and her father Chairigenes set up an altar together on Euboia;\textsuperscript{343} the priestess Menekrateia and her son Archinos dedicated the 4\textsuperscript{th} century Athenian shrine to Aphrodite Pandemos.\textsuperscript{344}

Humans formed connections with networks of more than one divinity in a way that reverses the network of relationships that developed between individuals, families, and the gods they worshipped. Shrines ostensibly dedicated to one deity tended in fact to be where people came together with multiple deities; the carved relief in the Cave of the Nymphs at Paros, dedicated by Adamas the Odrysian of Thrace, depicted an astonishing array of holy figures.\textsuperscript{345} At other times, the power of individual holy figures was specifically rooted in their link to another: for example, at Eleusis, Demeter was worshipped jointly with Persephone.

\textit{Kharis and the nature of human-divine relationships}

Having introduced some of the evidence that individual humans and their families formed relationships with the gods, I would like to consider the nature of the interactions.

\textsuperscript{341} Bakkhylides 1.157; R. Parker, \textit{Athenian religion: a history} (Clarendon Press, 1997), 113-114.
\textsuperscript{342} Keesling, \textit{The votive statues of the Athenian acropolis}, 91-92.
\textsuperscript{343} IG xii.9.124; Matthew Dillon, \textit{Girls and women in classical Greek religion} (Routledge, 2003), 23.
\textsuperscript{344} IG ii.2 659 (LSCG 39); Ibid.
\textsuperscript{345} Jennifer Larson, \textit{Greek nymphs myth, cult, lore} (Oxford University Press, 2001), 179-181.
First, for example, is the manner in which gods and people imagined their relationships. A second-century decree from Delos exemplifies the proper relationship between a city’s people and its gods.\footnote{SEG XLVIII, 1037.} Providing a list of activities that one should not do in a sanctuary – act disorderly, camp out in the stoas, take pigs past the lustral basins – it calls for rules “in order that the disposition of the Delians toward the gods may always be [pious] and especially just (dikaio[ta]).”\footnote{Lupu, \textit{Greek sacred law: a collection of new documents}, 23-24.} Through appropriate behavior and proper respect for the sanctuary’s grounds, the population “maintained good working relations between the Delians and the gods.”\footnote{Ibid., 24.} The health of the relationship was important to all the inhabitants of the island and one of the ways it was maintained was by proper behavior. According to the philosophical tradition, Mikalson argues, the way to keep one’s disposition towards the gods appropriately ‘just’ (\textit{dikaios}) was through ‘service to the gods’ via ‘religious correctness’ (\textit{hosiotetis}) and ‘proper respect’ (\textit{eusebeia}).\footnote{Jon D. Mikalson, \textit{Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy} (Oxford University Press, 2010), 29-30.  
Parker, "Pleasing thighs: reciprocity in Greek religion." Bremmer, "The reciprocity of giving and thanksgiving in Greek worship."; Mikalson, \textit{Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy}, 178-180.}

The mutual relationship between mortals and the holy beings with whom they interacted is probably best characterized by the concept of \textit{kharis}.\footnote{Parker, "Pleasing thighs: reciprocity in Greek religion." Bremmer, "The reciprocity of giving and thanksgiving in Greek worship."; Mikalson, \textit{Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy}, 178-180.} \textit{Kharis} translates roughly as ‘delight, a pleasing thing’ and has the sense of ‘favor’ or, more precisely, ‘good turn.’ It lies at the heart of what scholars view as Greek religious reciprocity. The term frequently appears in the formulaic language of dedicatory inscriptions and in prayers of direct address to the gods. Not only does the concept already appear in Homer, but it can be found in one of our earliest known Greek votive inscriptions. The famous
Mantiklos Apollo, dating to the 7th century bears the inscription: “Mantiklos has dedicated me from the tithe, to Apollo who hits from afar with his silver bow. Phoibos, give him a pleasant gift in return.”351 The idea of recompense and good turns suggests a world in which people and invisible figures entered into a relationship which might include the assumption of a long future of interaction.

In addition to the sense of reciprocity so evident in literature and epigraphical sources, on many occasions holy figures seem to have formed especially intimate, sentimental relationships with worshippers. The idea of a protective divinity personally concerned with a human worshipper was already apparent in the Homeric poems, Athena’s interest in Odysseus being a prime example. In the 6th century, the tyrant Peisistratus dressed a particularly tall woman in the outfit of Athena and rode with her in a chariot to the city acropolis, a bit of dramatic pageantry intended to show Athena’s personal approval and affection for him. Even if Herodotus scoffed at the event,352 it testifies to the general understanding that a god might stand in support of a human devotee. The exceedingly intimate (and ultimately doomed) relationship Euripides describes between Artemis and her follower Hippolytus is illustrative, even if it served as a warning of sorts. Plato too imagines the possibility of a close link between a person and a powerful invisible being; he remarks that every person is allotted a protective spirit in life who stays with them even into the underworld.353 Previously Hesiod’s 7th century Works and Days mentions daimones who were “good, present on earth, protectors of

351 CEG 326; Bremmer, ”The reciprocity of giving and thanksgiving in Greek worship,” 131.
352 Herodotus, Histories 1.60.
353 Plato, Phaedo 107d5-e4.
mortals and givers of good crops.”

Gods who came in dreams were described hovering at the shoulders of the dreamers with gentle smiles; in inscriptions, they were parastatai, gods who ‘stood beside.’ Not only was such interaction marked by emotional affection, but there could be a physical aspect as well. On a votive relief from the end of the 5th century, Asklepios lays both hands on the shoulder of his dreaming female suppliant. On the famous 5th century votive relief dedicated by Xenokrateia (discussed further below), Xenokrateia’s tiny son reaches up and touches the robe of the spirit (Figure 2).

Meanwhile, powerful beings themselves actively chose their worshippers. While there has been some debate about what exactly a nympholept was, most are comfortable translating the term ‘seized by the nymphs’ and applying it to the Nymphs’ devoted worshippers. Archedemus called himself a ‘nympholept’ when he established a shrine in Vari, Attica, implying special favored status. Sometimes the connection between humans and gods was imagined as familial in nature. In Hesiod’s 7th century poem Zeus is repeatedly referred to as the “father of gods and men.” Athens of the 5th century dedicated a council building to the ‘Mother’; it bore her name, the Metron. A number of goddesses were characterized as kourotrophos (kouros = child, trophos = nurse).

---

Mikalson, Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy, 24.
Van Straten, "Daikrates' dream: a votive relief from Kos, and some other kat' onar dedications," 5.
Athens, National Archaeological Museum 2756.
Purvis, Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece, 33-63.
Hesiod, Theogony 48.
Parker, Athenian religion: a history, 188-191.
Divine figures, however, were also dangerous presences, to be feared.\textsuperscript{363} A great anxiety about maintaining divine approval is evident in ancient sources. The gods who had been so protective and smiling, standing beside dreamers, could turn their faces away. It was possible to deeply offend holy figures by not living up to one’s duty in the culture of \textit{kharis}.\textsuperscript{364} While humans looked to the gods for good turns, they also well knew them to be the source of misfortune; the Hippocratic corpus indicates that spirits were thought to be directly responsible for certain ailments and those responsible could be identified based on the particular symptoms: “if they roar, or if they have convulsions on the right side, they say the Mother of the Gods is the cause…if he [defecates] more thinly and frequently like birds do, it is Apollo Nomios; if he emits foam from the mouth and kicks with his feet, Ares is the cause.”\textsuperscript{365} Likewise, violations of the laws of purity and pollution could greatly anger the invisible powers, who then required elaborate rituals of cleansing to be appeased. Moreover, it was thought that damaging or misusing property that belonged to a divinity was a quick way to ensure their wrath; temple thieves, for example, were punished by death\textsuperscript{366} while the mutilation of sacred statues in Athens

\textsuperscript{363} In Hesiod, men and women interacted with holy figures in the context of ‘service.’ ‘Service to the gods’ was by the 5\textsuperscript{th} century conceived, according to Mikalson, in terms of “three analogies: that...of slaves to masters; that...of subjects to kings; and, most commonly, that of children to parents.” Mikalson 2009, Jon D. Mikalson, \textit{Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy} (Oxford University Press, 2009), 33. The gods were called \textit{despotai} (masters) (\textit{Phaedo} 62b6-8). It seems, then, that by the 5\textsuperscript{th} century the bonds between men and women and divinities were conceived in terms that reflected power relationships on earth, with all their positive and negative emotional connotations.

\textsuperscript{364} One of the inscriptions from Epidaurus (\textit{iama}) states that the god rejected the suppliant’s request for help because he had committed the sin of \textit{hybris} (IG iv.2 1.121-2; no. 36).

\textsuperscript{365} Hippocrates, \textit{On the Sacred Disease} 3.15-25.

(herms) brought the affairs of the city to a screeching halt. At the heart of this apprehension was the fact that the sins of one individual could bring disaster and punishment upon everyone else. Plague and famine were punishments that could be exacted upon an entire population as recompense for the impiety or pollution of one single individual; it could take a significant amount of work to actually figure out who had wronged the gods and to rectify the situation.

As much as there existed direct communication between people and gods – through oracles, in dreams and epiphanies, via divination – there was also a precipitous gulf between them. The anxiety about this lack of understanding was very real; there were frequent efforts to discern which unknown god needed to be propitiated as well as the use of the catch-all, umbrella phrase “all other gods”, just in case one was forgotten: the Athenians covered their bases by referring in inscriptions to “all other gods and goddesses” (kai allous theous pantas kai pasas).

Of course, because men and women participated in relationships with holy figures, hopefully to their mutual benefit, the perception that the gods failed to act properly towards their human devotees could be the cause of great distress and anger on the part of men and women. Versnel has been particularly interested in human anger towards gods, commenting that “hope and disappointment are the two poles between which religious life…oscillated.” Evidence for bitterness towards the gods is more difficult to come by, although there are some references in literary sources that describe

---

369 Ibid., 37.
370 Ibid., 41.
such. In fact, the genre of tragedy often dealt with the perceived unfairness of divine behavior. Thucydides notes that during the plague in Athens many people gave up worshipping the gods altogether, since the gods did not seem to be answering Athenian prayers; yet, simultaneously, the plague-ridden desperately sought divine help, even camping in sanctuaries.\textsuperscript{371} Anger at perceived divine unfairness particularly irked Plato, since he and his mentor Socrates believed that the gods were only good and never evil.\textsuperscript{372} Generally speaking, however, it seems that it was understood that, for humans, interaction with invisible beings could be stained by disappointment and bitterness just as much as adoration.

\textit{The behavior of the gods}

The gods obviously protected and cared for the humans that worshipped them; they blessed them and made them prosperous; they healed them. They also punished them with madness, sickness, or withdrew their protection. Whatever the outcome and tenor, the gods acted upon humans in invisible but nevertheless recognizable ways. Meanwhile, they were present in other, more physical and tangible modes. While uncertain men and women might need to access their benefactors through institutions such as oracle shrines, the answers the gods gave were still perceived as direct communication. We also hear that the gods advised and commanded their worshippers

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{371} Thucydides II.53.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{372} Parker notes that in general, Athenian oratory consistently articulated the view that the gods were always positively inclined towards the city, but that any harm befalling Athens was not caused by divine retribution but rather by the incompetence and faults of Athenian politicians. R. Parker, “Gods cruel and kind: tragic and civic theology,” in \textit{Greek tragedy and the historian}, ed. C.B.R. Pelling (Clarendon Press, 1997), 143-144.}
without the exact method of communication or form of encounter being specified. Explaining that a shrine or an offering was set up because of instructions from a deity seems to have been explanation enough.\textsuperscript{373}

Divine manifestation was a frequent reason for the establishment of new shrines. Physical epiphanies have been much studied and have explained the foundation of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Attic worship of Pan, the latter after the god personally appeared to Peidippides on the slopes of a mountain.\textsuperscript{374} Dreams were another imagined landscape wherein gods and men came together. A large number of inscriptions testify to the dedication of objects celebrating the fact that a holy figure spoke personally through dreams.\textsuperscript{375} Not only were dreams the places where gods made promises to the devout, but it was where they enjoined their devotees to establish shrines in their honor. Significantly, it was also in dreams that divine figures banished illness. Sickness and injury was a cause of intense desperation and hopelessness and was therefore one of the most frequent reasons that frightened people begged the gods for help. Dreams could thus become the site of answered prayers; they were imagined places where the god became especially close and where they sought out and interacted with their individual worshippers. In fact, dream interactions were certainly one of the most private and personal interactions with a holy figure that a person could have. Even if incubation occurred within an established shrine amongst doctors, priests and other sick people, only

\textsuperscript{373} Archedemus of Paros established his cave shrine on advice of the Nymphs; Purvis, \textit{Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece}, 55. For epiphanies, see Verity Platt, \textit{Facing the gods: epiphany and representation in Graeco-Roman art, literature and religion} (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{374} Herodotus, \textit{Histories} 6. 105. 1

\textsuperscript{375} Van Straten, "Daikrates' dream: a votive relief from Kos, and some other \textit{kat'onar} dedications."
the god and the devotee populated the dream. Personal encounters between people and holy figures in the presence of the sanctuary apparatus point to a tension between institutional and individual access to invisible powers.

While the debate about the needs and desires of the gods raged in philosophical discussions, there seems to have been a real belief that the reciprocal relationship between devotees and spirits was beneficial to both. Our evidence suggests that gods truly desired human worship. Many shrines were established at the express instigation of holy figures: a Phileratus established an altar and shrine on 4th century Kos for Basileus, at his command; so too did Chrysina of Cnidus, after Hermes told her to worship Demeter and Kore in a dream. As for sacrifice, gods famously enjoyed (and perhaps needed) the smoke from the altar. This idea was developed to an extreme by Aristophanes who, in his 414 BCE comedy, depicts the gods as hungry and starving for sacrifice, unable to maintain their decorum, their holy social order collapsing around them in the absence of burnt sacrifices sent by their worshippers.

Human behavior

The reasons individuals sought help from the gods most frequently related to personal concerns; the vast majority asked for help or advice on specific topics relating to their own lives and family. Sometimes what they sought was general prosperity and good fortune with no specific details provided for what they desired, instead asking for ta

---

376 Purvis, Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece, 58.
377 Ibid., 59.
378 Aristophanes, Birds 1515-1524.
agatha (‘good things’). Xenophon says that Socrates “used to pray to the gods simply to
give the good things ‘since the gods know best what kinds of things are good.’”  

In other circumstances, we have more explicit information about why men and women asked the gods for help. Often requests were of a financial nature or related to economic well-being and business prospects. At Dodona, questions were put before Zeus Naios and Dione of just such a nature: one man asked, should I take up sheep-farming? The answers to these questions had very real consequences for the people involved; the uncertainty and fear behind the questions is at times palpable, as financial and economic well-being was often directly tied to a family’s safety and survival. This is poignantly expressed on a leaden quiver dedicated at Delos because “these [arrows] saved us from starving.”  

People often approached the gods on behalf of family members. Diognetos the Athenian asked Zeus Naios and Dione for a ‘certain favor’ on behalf of himself, his ‘well-wishers,’ and his mother Clearete,  while one Amyntas asked about the prosperity of his son (see, for example, Fig. 14, p. 245).  It was common for Athenians to dedicate items of clothing to Artemis on behalf of women who died in childbirth or who had experienced their first menstrual period.  In other words, the relationships between people were tied to encounters with holy beings.

---

379 Xenophon Memorabilia 1.3.2; Mikalson, Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy, 47-49.
382 Roberts, "The oracle inscriptions discovered at Dodona," 238; Pl. xxxviii. 233.
383 Ibid.: 238; P231. xxxviii. 234.
384 Dillon, Girls and women in classical Greek religion, 21.
People asked the gods to intervene in their own relationships with other humans, which presumably were sources of great distress. The 4th century philosopher Epicurus is credited with saying, “if the god were complying with the prayers of men, then all men would be perishing more quickly because they are constantly praying for many harsh things against one another.”

Parents especially could ask the gods to punish their wayward children. Curses, often grouped under the heading ‘magic,’ were part of the same idiom as prayer and, in fact, “often take on a form that is indistinguishable from prayers.” ‘Curse tablets’ and ‘spells’ sought the interference of Hermes, Persephone, Hekate, and Demeter, among others. They reveal a real anger and fear of enemies and the helpless agony of unrequited love. The missives have been viewed as presumptuous and disreputable, but ultimately they indicate a world in which people employed a variety of means to draw powerful figures to them for aid.

It was also during times of crisis that men and women visited the gods, especially during sickness. Healing divinities and shrines were exceedingly popular, as a rich epigraphic and archaeological record attests. Not only were powers like Asklepios helpful, but in Athens there was even a nameless Heros Iatros (Hero Doctor) to whom the sick appealed. Anatomical votives, important in the interface of healing, are some of our most common and numerous terracotta figurines. The gods were also witness to the terrifying and deadly reality of war; they could be approached for protection, as when

---

385 Epicurus, frag. 388; Mikalson, *Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy*, 44.
a group of Corinthian women prayed to Aphrodite that their city might be protected from the Persians. Powerful beings were often present on the battlefield itself, intervening on behalf of one side or the other in the space of combat; the spoils of war were a common type of votive offering.

**Offerings**

Whereas Orsi stresses monetary donations, testimonials, and service as the recompense given to invisible benefactors, in ancient Greece physical evidence attesting to the relationship between people and their gods usually took the form of gifts presented by hopeful or grateful petitioners in sanctuaries. Animal sacrifice is often considered the prime manifestation of this idea, since through the gift of meat men and women relinquished an incredibly valuable asset. The dedication of objects in sanctuaries represented economic sacrifice as well. These items took on a wide variety of forms, ranging from generic figurines purchased for the occasion, or more personal items directly related to an individual’s life and symbolic of the deity’s benefaction (such as first fruit offerings). Sometimes they poignantly attest to a person’s pride in their own abilities and the belief that holy figures would similarly be pleased by them. This is probably the reason that a tablet bearing the alphabet was dedicated to Poseidon at Corinth. Diogenes Laertius recounts the story that of 6th century philosopher

---

390 Rouse, *Greek votive offerings*, 135, n.133.
391 Ibid., 75, n.74.
Heraclitus who dedicated his book in the Artemision at Ephesus.\textsuperscript{392} Lycinus the potter proudly offered Athena “his first piece of work.”\textsuperscript{393}

One could show one’s devotion not just with material objects, of course, even if they did represent the work of one’s own hand. Maintaining gardens in shrines was common; the dedication of one’s labor as a devotional act is strikingly illustrated by Archedamus, a Parian immigrant living in Attica, who set up a shrine to the Nymphs, carving his own portrait with other reliefs in a cave. As Purvis comments, “the carving of Archedamus and the repetition of his name beside it, together with the inscriptions claiming that he was responsible for the work, give the immediate impression that he was proud of the physical labor of his accomplishment…”\textsuperscript{394} Offerings were also of a more financial nature. The 5\textsuperscript{th} century Athenian Nikias, for example, gave Delian Apollo an estate worth 10,000 drachmas which provided an annual income of 7\% for the god in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{395} Not all donations were quite so grand, of course. In the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century, the women of Tanagra personally financed a temple for Demeter and Kore, but it had been decreed that the maximum donation was only 5 drachmas each.\textsuperscript{396} The 4\textsuperscript{th} century temple of Apollo at Delphi too was financed through individual donations, for which several people gave only 1 obol, a meager amount probably suggesting that people of all financial backgrounds were giving whatever they could afford.\textsuperscript{397}

\textsuperscript{392} Plutarch, \textit{Moralia}, “Quaestiones Convivales,” 5.2, 675B; Diogenes Laertius ix, 6. Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{393} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{394} Purvis, \textit{Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece}, 43.
\textsuperscript{395} Plutarch, \textit{Nikias} 3.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid.
Narrative

Narrative, too, was a way that men and women testified to their experiences with invisible beings. Unfortunately, we do not have access to the ethnographic resources available to Orsi, so it is difficult to really analyze the presence and role of devotional narratives in the daily experiences of Greek men and women. It does seem that stories were set up in sanctuaries in the form of texts. One of the more famous examples lies outside the chronological boundaries of this study, but is worth mentioning anyways: Pausanias (9.39.14) describes that after visiting the Oracle of Trophonius, visitors had to “dedicate a tablet on which is written all that each has heard or seen.” At Epidaurus, descriptions of successful healings were called *iamata*; a number survive from 4th century stone stelai, although these seem to be set up by the shrine itself rather than by individuals.

Orsi, noting the prevalence of narrative, described the prolific letter writing that connected needy devotees and the holy figures they enjoined. This sort of activity is for the most part unknown from archaic and classical Greece. One interesting exception is possible, however; several Attic ‘curse tablets’ refer to themselves as *epistole* (‘letter’ or ‘injunction’). There is debate about whether they were actually conceptualized as ‘letters’ to gods and ghosts, but it cannot be doubted that many of the curse tablets ask invisible figures to intervene in human affairs with detailed and explicit descriptions of the desired outcomes; several indicate the assumption that the powerful being will ‘read’ the

---

In any case, it might be useful to consider these leaden tablets as yet another idiom through which distressed humans, reacting to the events and people in their own lives, asked powerful divine figures to intercede on their behalf; the tablets provided a way for people to explicitly and verbally explain their desires and expectations in a way not possible with other votives.

A striking inscription from Thessaly records the story of Pantakles, who set up a shrine in the 5th or 4th century BC. The inscription serves as a narrative testimonial, describing Pantakles’ own interaction with the local holy figures and inviting others to enter a similarly happy relationship with the spirits. Like that of the nympholept Archedamus at Vari, the shrine he set up attests to his own personal connection to the divinities, while also serving as an invitation for other men and women to experience divine benevolence.

Good Fortune. Welcome all visitors, each female and male, men and women, alike boys and girls, to this place sacred to Nymphs, Pan and Hermes, to Lord Apollo and Herakles and followers. This is the cave of Chiron and Asklepios and Hygieia. To them belong this whole place, and the most sacred things within it, those that grow and the tablets and dedications and the numerous gifts. The nymphs made Pantakles a distinguished man. The nymphs who tread upon this land, they made him their overseer. He helped these plants grow and shaped things with his hands; they in turn gave him a generous living for all his days. Herakles gave him strength and arete and power, with which he struck these stones and built them up. Apollo and his son Hermes give health and a good living through all the age. Pan gives him laughter and fun and a justified hybris; Chiron granted him to be wise and a poet. Now go on up with

---

good fortune; sacrifice, all of you; say your prayers; enjoy yourself. For forgetfulness of all cares is here and your share of good things, and victory in strife.  

This inscription is a rare testimonial in which Pantakles explains the benefits and blessings that each of the honored powers provided him. Furthermore, the inscription wonderfully exhibits the idea of kharis and reciprocity. Pantakles’ description is part tit-for-tat, listing what he gave and what the gods returned:

Pantakles tended the shrine’s garden, so the Nymphs blessed him with good fortune; Herakles blessed Pantakles with strength, which in turn enabled Pantakles to establish the shrine. Both human success and divine benevolence are inextricably linked; one cannot exist without the other.

Through the telling of his story, Pantakles addressed not only his benefactors in the inscription, but also other worshippers. He called on all types of people to use the shrine as he had, and entreated others to equally enjoy communion with the divine. The inscription is a powerful expression of devotion and the link between people and the powers they adore.  

The sculpted votive reliefs that show sacrifice and other processions can be viewed as narratives, although they have most often been interpreted as records of actual

---

401 Translation from Connor, "Seized by the nymphs: nympholepsy and symbolic expression in Classical Greece," 163.
402 Many other dedications also functioned as testimonials encouraging other human devotees to join in the worship of a particular god; in the 4th century an Athenian woman named Philoumene set up an anatomical votive of a vulva in honor of Aphrodite, with the inscription 'Passersby, praise (the goddess).” Athens National Museum 1821 (IG ii.2 4575).
events or as stand in for sacrifices that never happened.\footnote{403} I would like to point out that in many of the reliefs, the definable elements of ritual are not there. No sacrificial animal, no altar, no liturgical items and baskets. Instead, the most essential element of the images is that humans interact with the holy beings, outside of ritual time.

A relief dedicated to Kephissos near Athens is a prime example (Figure 2).\footnote{404} The inscription says that it was dedicated by Xenokrateia on behalf of her son. The image shows Xenokrateia in the midst of the family of gods, her little son tugging at the robe of the river god, Kephissos. In the image, the two families are one. What is especially important is that this image shows human devotees and the beings that they worshipped together in the same space. They are not in different realms, nor are they separated by an altar, although they are of slightly different scale. Instead of replicating the formal, chronologically-defined performance of a ritual, the image instead documented a close relationship, both intimate and almost casual.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Relief dedicated by Xenokrateia to Kephissos at the sanctuary of Echelidai at New Phaleron, late 5th century BCE. Photo: After Ragghianti 1979, p. 118.}
\end{figure}

\footnote{403} Milette Gaifman describes them as ‘visualized rituals,’ cf., Gaifman, "Visualized rituals and dedicatory inscriptions on votive offerings to the Nymphs," 99.
These sorts of images reflect the importance of narrative in devotional images. Art historians tend to view these episodes as genre scenes rather than narrative, but as dedicated images that clearly document an interaction between the divine, they indeed told stories, and extremely important ones at that. It is in this context that iconographic and semiotic readings fail; the former calls such scenes generic because they do not record stories recognizable from texts, the later because it compares the relief to the wider system of images. For Xenokrateia, her son, Kephissos, and his family, the relief told the story of devotional encounters. Orsi stresses that individuals are “narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves.”\(^\text{405}\)

Subversion and inclusion of the excluded

As with Xenokrateia’s story, devotional activity often occurred outside institutional structures. Indeed, Carla Antonaccio argued that “votive behavior in particular is active in constituting cult, and may be used by practitioners so as to create as well as subvert categories.”\(^\text{406}\) People set their own terms of engagement with invisible powers in other ways as well. For example, while the Athenian civic body recognized women-only festivals, such as the Thesmophorion or the rowdy Bacchic celebrations of

\(^{405}\text{Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950, xx-xxi.}\)
\(^{406}\text{Carla Antonaccio, “Dedications and the character of cult,” in Greek sacrificial ritual, Olympian and Chthonian, ed. Robin Hägg and Brita Alroth (Paul Åströms Förlag, 2005), 100.}\)
Dionysus, other unmonitored events occurred in the city and allowed women to experience religious occasions on their own terms. The Adonia in particular was a private festival that women could perform on their own rooftops. Literature exhibits a vague sense that men ‘tolerated’ the event with its wailing and unsupervised females, but it seems to be a festival occasion, in the 5th century at least, popular with and organized by women by their own choice. Private initiations into Orphic and Bacchic communities have been the topic of much recent interest; the itinerant priests who administered these sorts of initiations and were thus outside of institutional control were scathingly attacked by Plato. As Purvis shows, many of our known private shrines were established by immigrants, outsiders who had little role in the public civic cults celebrating native-born identities. It is possible that the nameless shrines in the Athenian Agora or the stele shrines of Corinth were places utilized by the disenfranchised, the poor and the overlooked: these shrines were small areas enclosed by low walls that were filled with small votive objects and were accessible to any passerby.

Although we have very little information about the religious life of Athenian slaves, a few comments can be made. Many temples were sites of sanctuary for runaway slaves. While they would not be freed, they did have the option of being sold to a new owner or to become consecrated to a god and thereafter work in a sanctuary. Holy figures

---

407 Several comedies were known to have the Adonia in the title, while Aristophanes (Lysistrata 387-98) describes the tipsy women on the rooftops repeatedly interrupting the ekklesia. Menander’s Moschios (Samia) couldn’t fall asleep because of all the noise. Dillon stresses the element of choice in the Adonia, cf., Dillon, Girls and women in classical Greek religion, 162-169. See also Eva C. Keuls, The reign of the phallus: sexual politics in ancient Athens (University of California Press, 1993), 381-392.

408 Plato criticizes itinerant priests and ‘magicians’ in general: Laws 909b and Republic 364b.

409 Purvis, Singular dedications: founders and innovators of private cults in classical Greece, 35-36.

were thus protectors of slaves in a certain sense, and although the subversive nature of this relationship never in any way threatened the system, it did give slaves room of their own to move within it. Additionally, we have a few references to slaves worshipping foreign deities; Aristophanes mentions Sabazios in this context.\footnote{Aristophanes Wasps 9-10.} In any case, as much as the public, socially formative aspects of Greek traditions are emphasized in scholarship, they also provided some means for disenfranchised or discontented groups and individuals to engage divine power in their own ways.

The problem of sacred space

In Chapter 4, I noted that Orsi’s description of Catholic devotionalism postulates a change in the topography of lived religion, formerly “resolutely local” and focused on the “saint’s special place,” but now affected by the “ambivalent movement away from sacred-in-place…”\footnote{Orsi, Thank you, St. Jude: women’s devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes, 27.} He argues that the role and power of place was one of the elements of popular piety most altered by modern circumstances: “localism of popular devotions was undermined by a number of different factors in the emergence of modern Europe…industrialization and urbanization remapped the continent…revolutions in transportation and communication slowly redirected the focus of life outward from village and town to region and nation…the papacy…was – and gradually securing – a Rome-centered piety.”\footnote{Ibid.}
By emphasizing religious material culture outside of churches and shrines, Orsi supported both the para-institutional nature of popular experience and its ‘location’ in places and times of every-day life, rather than simply in specifically designated sacred areas. Scholarship on Greek religion has always stressed the local and geographical nature of divine presence, much like Eliade, who conceptualized sacred space as places where the sacred breaks through into the physical landscape.\textsuperscript{414} The Greek shrine, with its temenos boundary and strict behavioral rules, has provided a compelling model for the structural contrast between sacred space and secular life. Yet, if we instead consider the places and times of divine presence, we see that Greek holy figures also existed in many of the places that people went. Athena was on the Acropolis and in the chariot of Peisistratus, Apollo was in the cylindrical Agyeios outside each door, Hestia resided in the hearth flames tended by every family, the Nymphs populated hundreds of caves and springs both within and without the city, Hermes stood at every marker in the Street of Herms.

Zeus in Athens provides an evocative example. He was worshipped near the marshes at the large sanctuary of Olympian Zeus, with its monumental architectural features. He was the ‘father’ of the Olympian gods, a public, distant, and fearsome deity; yet, he also had a place in every Athenian home in the form of Zeus Ktesios and Zeus Herkeios. The Olympian Zeus and the domestic Zeus were the same god, despite the secondary literature that usually imagines them as separate. Scholarship tends to view epithets as indicators of the changing nature and character of the god, rather than as

\textsuperscript{414} Mircea Eliade and Willard R. Trask, \textit{The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion} (Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 20-67.
markers pointing to the needs of human worshippers. That Zeus exerted a powerful presence in the living rooms of Athenians is suggested by the oft-referenced ancient text suggesting that Zeus Herkeios was a major indicator of Athenian identity. As Parker notes, he was “associated with the social ties holding together the close family.”415 The fact that archons needed to prove the presence of Zeus Herkeios in their homes suggests, however, the importance of the deity in also tying families into the wider network of Athenian citizens.

The example of Zeus Herkeios demonstrates that ancient Athenians sought out Zeus in a wide variety of situations, spaces, and times, and that they called upon him and honored him not just in grand sanctuaries but even in their homes. But were the gods also mobile? Prayer seems to have occurred in all manner of locales, since “it was perfectly possible to pray on one’s own wherever one happened to be.”416 Besides shrines, there were other important ways that men and women could keep holy figures close and present, beyond the confines of sacred space. When they were afraid, they sang hymns in order to bolster their courage; Xenophon paints an evocative picture when he describes Cyrus’ frightened soldiers singing to remind themselves of the patron spirits who gave them strength.417

An interesting example can be found in the carved stones and gems that were worn as rings. By the classical period gems and finger rings acted as seals, used to secure

415 Parker, Polytheism and society at Athens, 17. If the domestic worship of the god was a symbolic identity marker, one must wonder if he was present in the homes of foreigners, such as the Thracians who set up their shrine to Bendis or Archilaus out in the hinterlands.
416 S. Pulleyn, Prayer in Greek religion (Oxford University Press, 1997), 165.
417 Xenophon, Cyropaedia 3.3.58
items, record intent, and mark identity. Despite their social significance, for decades carved gems and rings have been studied as luxury art items, discussed in terms of regional schools, artistic development, and craftsmanship. Divinities were common subjects to be illustrated, but their representations on rings have never been systematically explored as religious images in their own right, with religious functions. Traditionally, rings have been viewed mostly as art objects and items of adornment, with secular roles. We now know, of course, that gems and amulets also possessed enormous religious potential, since they were used in magical rites, they had protective powers, and they were agents that acted upon the world. Scholarship has particularly highlighted this fact with regard to Hellenistic, Roman, and Late antique examples, but less often for examples from Classical era and earlier.

But what about when they were not used in magical rites or rituals? There has been some debate about whether the images on rings and seals had any relation to the individual wearers or owners, but the iconography is generally considered decorative only. I would argue though, if nothing else, these miniscule images of gods were instruments of presence. And importantly, they were mobile instruments of presence (Figure 3).

---

418 John Boardman, Greek gems and finger rings: early Bronze Age to late Classical (Thames and Hudson, 2001).
In a world where topography and location have been considered the dominant paradigms, an individual’s ability to carry a favored god with them is something we should no longer overlook. Moreover, by the Hellenistic period, there is some evidence that rings could serve as love tokens. A number of sealings preserved in the Delos depict the god Eros, with an inscribed ‘Remember me!’

If rings could have emotional and commemorative meanings of this sort, then, is there not the possibility that sometimes that emotional significance could be devotional in nature?

In addition to their mobility, these tiny gods were carried in direct contact with the human body, which created a physical link with devotees. In a number of other cultural contexts, personal items of adornment did carry complex devotional significations, such as the protective Egyptian deity Bes, whose figure was tattooed onto

---

the thighs of women in the New Kingdom.\(^{421}\) As I have already argued, while art historians emphasize vision and the gaze, touch played an enormous role in the way humans interacted with the divine. Wearing a ring or gem united individuals with invisible powers in a phenomenologically concrete way.

Finally, we should not rule out the ability of these items to also serve as testimonials. In contrast to the family and civic Zeus, association with a particular god could be an important aspect in the declaration of a person’s individual identity. The worshippers of Cybele, Orphic followers, and the Pythagoreans are all good examples that we can trace to the 6\(^{th}\) and 5\(^{th}\) centuries BC. We possess ample evidence that followers of these particular devotions attempted to differentiate themselves from others through certain behaviors, such as food prohibitions and specific burial regulations. This happened in traditional cults as well, not just fringe ones, as when particular sanctuaries or festival occasions regulated dress or luxurious display. What are the possibilities, then, that images of certain divinities or devotional subject matters may have served as identity markers?

It is also worth considering the possibility that the chance to testify may have been even more important in a polytheistic society then we have so far considered. In other words, it may be a fruitful avenue of research to consider how images of divinities played roles in the day-to-day lives of Greek individuals, outside of ritual contexts. Academic emphasis on the cult statue, on sacrifice, and on sacred space may have overshadowed a lively aspect of individual interactions with divinities and the creation of

personal identity. Wearing an image of a particular holy figure may have been a meaningful part of a person’s religious life. A simple image of a god on a normal object may have had extraordinarily important religious significance, a topic I will return to in more detail in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

The 20th century concept of devotionalism does, I think, offer considerable insight into the religious life of ancient Greek men and women. It helps us avoid dichotomies such as rural/urban, rich/poor, educated/ignorant, native/foreign. It also allows us to recognize the dynamic, contradictory and flexible ways Greek people imagined holy powers. It forces us to acknowledge that Greek men and women used an array of practices and media to experience divine encounters. Greek religious experience was not located only in public rituals and animal sacrifice, but in all the ways individuals went about imagining their relationships with the gods. Devotionalism is clearly not the last word in Greek religion, but it is surely a helpful angle from which to reconsider our models. Especially important is its emphasis on material culture, not simply as documentary evidence and source material, but as a dynamic part of devotionalism itself.
Pre-modern European popular religion was defined by localism and place-centered piety. That is, in order to encounter divine presence, devotees had to visit the shrines or sanctuaries where the power of particular holy figures was concentrated. In many ways, Greek devotion coincides with the Pre-modern alignment, given that the earthly concentration of a divinity’s presence featured geographic permanence and terrestrial settings. Athens was densely littered with shrines of all sorts, from major sanctuaries to spontaneously-created offering places. The recognized spots of divine encounter in the local topography generated frames of reference that anchored worshippers within it. Personal spatial understandings of the Athenian religious landscape were layered into the minds and bodies of individuals when they visited shrines in times of need or during festivals, when they walked past them on their daily errands, or when they caught only fleeting glimpses of them from other locations in the city.

Most reconstructions of Greek practice have been implicitly place-centered, conceptualizing Greek religion in terms of sacred space and shrines. As I suggested in the last few chapters, however, the religious worlds of ancient Athenians did not always conform to the geographical boundaries of *temenoi* or to the chronological spans of rituals. Greek divinities lived in devotional worlds that were the worlds of the everyday.

---

422 Orsi, *Thank you, St. Jude: women’s devotion to the patron saint of hopeless causes*, 25.
One of the most everyday spaces of all was, of course, the home. Scholars have certainly pointed out the shrines and family-oriented rituals that took place in the home, but they usually articulate a clear distinction between domestic ritual occasions (such as the amfidromia) and secular ones, a distinction of sacred and profane time within the home.

Research in other fields indicates that the lines were not always so clear, both with respect to space and time. As McDannell has demonstrated, in 19th century American Protestantism there was a pervasive sacralization of domestic space.\textsuperscript{423} It was there that the family Bible resided and where both mothers and fathers were expected to condition and protect the pious souls of their household. Similarly, Orsi notes that at Catholic festivals, community members “did not make a distinction between the ‘religious’ aspects of the festa - the praying and penitential devotions, the religious sacrifice – and what outside observers felt were the inappropriate ‘profane’ characteristics of the celebrations - the food, noise, dancing and partying. All the many different moments of the celebration had an integrated meaning.”\textsuperscript{424}

In this chapter, I suggest that the material culture of devotionalism permeated the daily lives of ancient Athenians, fully outside of the geographic space of the shrine. In fact, iconographic evidence points to items and activities that were fundamental to Athenian religious experience, but which have been seriously neglected in many reconstructions. More specifically, Classical Attic vase-painting sheds some light on the small, undervalued activity of garlanding that truly seems to be a routine feature in the religious lives of women. In what follows, consideration of visual content will lead me to

\textsuperscript{423} McDannell, Material Christianity: religion and popular culture in America, 67-102.
\textsuperscript{424} Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950, xliv.
reconstruct an aspect of the phenomenological, embodied piety of Athenian women and girls that has otherwise been almost entirely unrecognized. Moreover, vase-painting indicates that as women manipulated movable devotional materials, they brought their domestic worlds to the more public realms of rituals and sanctuaries; of particular importance is that, through their routine obligations to the dead, women’s devotional media also incorporated the physical space of cemeteries, and the activities undertaken there, into the sphere of their religious experiences. Given this last point, Athenian vase-painting therefore suggests that Orsi’s devotional framework needs to be adapted to include funerary practices if it is to accurately represent ancient experience.

**Widening the scope of devotionalism: adjusting Orsi’s model for Classical Athens**

Before investigating garlanding, I must make an important distinction between the descriptions of devotionalism that we have observed in various modern examples and the situation in Athens. Evidence from figured vase painting and archaeology suggest that when we look at the actions and objects of devotionalism, we should include the funerary realm in our description. Although Orsi’s discussion pertains to ‘invisible figures’ and ‘heaven,’ his explicit formulation of Catholic devotionalism centers on Mary and the saints. This is not to say that deceased family members are not present throughout many of his discussions, but he never explicitly fits the spirits of the dead, whether they be family, friend, or prominent community member, into the devotional framework.

While McDannell gives a fascinating analysis of the way Protestant concepts, values, and beliefs about the afterlife appear in cemetery art, her analysis mostly
describes the role of graveyards in fitting the deceased into the cosmic structure of Christianity. More in keeping with the ancient situation, however, is her analysis of domestic shrines in family living rooms. There she found that family portraits and household shrines were usually grouped together and given equal prominence. Given these examples, I believe that many of the activities associated with devotional practice are also observable in the actions undertaken by family members in the vicinity of their dead loved ones. I suggest that Orsi’s description of devotionalism - “a web not of meanings, but of relationships between heaven and earth.” – be qualified to include the deceased. In actuality, some of Orsi’s language makes this adjustment fairly easy. He refers to ‘invisible powers’ and ‘holy figures,’ rather vague language that I purposefully adopted throughout Chapter 5 and 6, and which certainly seems transferable to the dearly or not-so dearly departed.

The applicability of this idea to antiquity may not seem obvious at first glance. The uncertainty has much to do with the history of scholarship on ancient religion, particularly visible in the Olympic and chthonic dichotomy. In this formulation, gods associated with the earth, the underworld, and the deceased, were categorized as chthonic, in contrast to the gods dwelling in the heavens, who fall into the Olympian category. The character of the gods – where they lived and what they oversaw – determined how they were treated by humans, who practiced burnt sacrifice for the gods

426 Orsi, *Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*, 5.
in the sky, but directed their offerings into the earth for the chthonic divinities.\textsuperscript{427} In 1992, Renata Schlesier argued forcefully that the division between the two groupings of gods was a product of modern discourse with little bearing on antiquity.\textsuperscript{428} The dichotomy continued to be applied to both gods and heroes, and it was not until Gunnel Ekroth in 2002 resoundingly proved otherwise that the matter was mostly put to rest. She argued, “the heroes cannot be understood as a category ritually isolated from the gods, as has often been done previously…even thought the heroes were dead, they must have in many ways been perceived as being similar to the gods...the heroes fulfilled the same role as the gods.”\textsuperscript{429}

I propose that for now we group the invisible beings with whom the Athenians interacted – both divinities and dead relatives – into the same group. Doing so allows us to look more dispassionately at the ways people went about interacting with invisible powers. Indeed, archaeological evidence indicates that a number of similarities existed between the practices that occurred at Athenian gravesides and those within shrines. I contend that approaching Greek religion from the standpoint of material cultures supports the overlap that I am positing; it encourages us to reframe the mortal/immortal debate and step away from the traditional emphasis on \textit{the nature and character} of gods, leading us instead to consider the actions and needs of human mortals.

\textsuperscript{427} For a fuller discussion of the issue, see the articles in R. Hägg and B. Alroth, \textit{Greek sacrificial ritual, Olympian and chthonian: proceedings of the Sixth International Seminar on Ancient Greek Cult, Göteborg University, 25-27 April 1997} (Paul Åströms Förlag, 2005).
\textsuperscript{429} G. Ekroth, \textit{The sacrificial rituals of Greek hero-cults in the Archaic to the early Hellenistic periods}, Kernos Supplement 12 (Centre international d’étude de la religion grecque antique, 2002), 341.
In Athens, the living had a very strong social obligation to the dead, which involved both performing the appropriate funerary rituals and tending the grave thereafter. At the same time, anxious men and women looked to the dead for help in a manner reminiscent of appeals to the divine. As they did with the gods, people conceived of their relationship with their dead as one characterized by *kharis*, that is, a mostly positive reciprocal relationship involving a back-and-forth of good turns. In Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, Electra wonders what to say at her father’s grave and contemplates using the language of *kharis* via the oft-utilized phrase “give back something noble to those who send these garland crowns.” The chorus, in fact, had just mentioned being sent by Clytemnestra on behalf of *kharis akhariton* (thankless). In the *Republic*, Plato describes the necessity of acting properly toward the dead, mentioning “the burial of the dead and the services we must render to the dwellers in the world beyond to keep them gracious.” In addition, the living made material offerings to the dead. A character in an Aristophanes fragment blatantly states, “we sacrifice to them with offerings, just as we do to the gods. We also make libations and ask them to send good things our way.” I do not mean to gloss over the differences that the Athenians believed separated the dead from the gods, a belief clearly evident in surviving texts. Undeniably, the separation of the immortal gods and the mortal dead emerges as one of the most deeply-seated binaries in Greek conceptions of the cosmos, with the distinction imagined as a

---

430 Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 93-4.
431 Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 43-4.
434 Aristophanes, *Tagenistae* (PCG 504.12ff): καὶ θύομεν αὐτοῖσι τοῖς ἐναγίσμασιν ὃσπερ θεοῖσιν καὶ χοᾶς γε ἱεῶμεν τοῖς ἐναγίσμασι χαλκῷ δευρ’ ἀνέναιι τάγαθα
vast and impassable gulf that repeatedly engrossed ancient poets and tragedians alike. The gods were *athanatos*, deathless, but all mortals were doomed to die. Death had a polluting force and, after coming into contact with a corpse, humans had to undergo many steps to become once again *katharos*, pure. The tarnish of death was even a danger to the gods; regardless of the love she bore her devotee Hippolytus, Euripides’ Artemis had to leave his death bed in order to avoid the stain of his last breath. Several of the Orphic gold tablets, on the other hand, describe dead souls joining the immortal gods only after clarifying to Persephone that they too were *katharos*, pure.

Yet, as I mentioned above, examination of material and visual culture reveals a significant overlap in the more obvious ways that humans managed their encounters with their dead loved ones. Excavations reveal that offerings were brought to the grave, including painted plaques, figurines, toys, and a wide variety of vessels, such as *pyxides*, *alabastra*, and *leythoi*. Sculpted images were erected beginning with the *kouroi* and *korai* statues found in cemeteries; it is difficult not to imagine the bereaved engaging with these images in a manner similar to cult statues, or to *kore* counterparts dedicated as offerings in sanctuaries. Likewise, people brought food and liquid items. In Attica, offering trenches at the Kerameikos, the necropoleis at Vari, and the tumuli at Vouvra and Marathon preserve burnt mammal and bird remains, eating and drinking vessels, and

---

435 For a full treatment of pollution and purity, see Parker, *Miasma: pollution and purification in early Greek religion*.
437 See, for example, the 4th century BCE Thurii tablets: Fritz Graf and Sarah I. Johnston, *Ritual texts for the afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (Routledge, 2007), #5, #6, and #7.
other debris such as egg shells.\textsuperscript{439} Libation rituals, we know, were ubiquitous at graves and a wide variety of such vessels have been found at Attic tombs. The physical remains of this activity could become quite conspicuous, in actuality. On the island of Kea inscriptions regulated the amount of wine and olive oil poured at the grave and all libation vessels had to be removed from the cemetery afterwards (as an example, see Figure 4 below).\textsuperscript{440}

There seems to be a fair amount of evidence, then, that ancient Athenians drew on the same devotional idioms when they interacted with their dead and with their various gods. This is not to say that the nature of the gods and ghosts was equivalent, or that they were imagined in the same manner. What I am arguing is that Athenians drew on a wider milieu of acceptable forms of interaction and behavior. It is here that we find devotionalism, in the shared behaviors and expectations exhibited by Athenians. Our model of devotionalism must be altered accordingly to reflect a world in which the personal relationships people fostered between themselves and their dead in many ways mirrored those established with divinities. I suggest, therefore, that devotional activity in ancient Athens does not sustain the boundaries otherwise assiduously built up between divine, deceased, and living.

Cemeteries, women’s devotion, and the role of \textit{tainiai}


\textsuperscript{440} LSCG no.97, side A, II.8-10. K.J. Hame, \textit{Ta nomizomena: private Greek death-ritual in the historical sources and tragedy} (UMI Dissertation Services, 2000), 85.
Having widened the span of devotional behaviors, we can turn to the evidence from Athenian vase-painting, which provides valuable information about the sorts of activities and objects that were used at tombs, as well as an invaluable glimpse at the religious worlds of Athenian women. Illustrated white-ground lekythoi (oil vessels) from Attica will be my primary focus. Lekythoi (sg. lekythos) primarily served as grave gifts, starting around 560 BCE. Although illustrations attest to their deposition at grave monuments, they were also placed within the grave with the corpse; Walton argues that the bereaved also broke and burned them with the body during cremations. By 480 BCE, tomb monuments and visits to the grave appear as popular subjects on the lekythoi themselves.

Attic vase-painting as suitable source material for women’s devotion

Before I continue, it is necessary to evaluate the trustworthiness of these images as historical documents. From a social standpoint, the vessels depict women and girls, men and boys, servants and ghosts. The number of figures is small, usually ranging from one to three. Interestingly, adult women occasionally appear with men, but also appear with other women or children. Popular wisdom has it that respectable women were mostly accompanied by chaperones when they left the house, but the vases do not bear evidence of this social requirement; either women tended graves independently or the chaperones were purposefully not depicted.

441 Oakley, Picturing death in classical Athens, 9.
443 Oakley, Picturing death in classical Athens, 145.
Wealthy tombs in 6th century Athens were decorated with sculpture and were monumental in form. After 500 BCE, they decreased in size and elaboration, with figural sculpture ceasing. Large tomb sculpture eventually reappeared in the last quarter of the 5th century. As of yet the lacuna has not been adequately explained, although suggestions have been put forth and include the possibility of undocumented sumptuary laws or the impact of the Acropolis building project on workshop output. Throughout the 5th century, tomb monuments consisted of sparsely decorated stelai – usually an undecorated shaft surmounted by palmette finials. The excavated examples mostly coincide with their counterparts illustrated on vases. Interestingly, on vases the figures of the deceased were frequently drawn as if waiting by their grave monuments. Their size and anthropomorphic semblance was in keeping with memories from life, but also with the personhood of invisible beings so common in devotional imaginations. It is possible that, since tombs no longer featured figural sculpture, vase-painters depicted the dead as a way of marking their presence at otherwise undecorated monuments.

Several of the lekthyoi depict egg-shaped burial mounds behind the grave stelai. Wealthy Athenians built extremely large structures in the 6th century. Ian Morris notes that a number were also constructed in the 5th century and were located throughout the city’s environs in addition to the Kerameikos cemetery. The series of mounds located at the Kerameikos includes examples dating to the 490s (mound L), the 460s (mound M),

\[444\] For a typology of the monuments found on lekythoi, see N. Nakayama, *Untersuchung der auf weissgrundigen Lekythen Dargestellten Grabmaeler* (1984). For a fuller introduction to the archaeological evidence for burial customs, see Boardman and Kurtz, *Greek Burial Customs.*
the 440s (mound N), and the 420s (mound O).^445 Therefore, the illustrated mounds are consistent with contemporary burial practices.

Based on this discussion, my belief is that the scenes depicted on the Attic lekythoi amount, for the most part, to appropriate source material for the reconstruction of contemporary practice. Although certain social dynamics may not be faithfully depicted, archaeological evidence mostly corresponds to the artifacts and structures shown on the vases. Extant texts provide additional data about many of the illustrated objects and practices that further support the use of the painted artifacts.

**Tainiai in cemeteries and elsewhere**

Many of the vases under consideration show females tending graves and manipulating objects; as an example, around 440 BC the Thanatos Painter depicted a woman presenting an exaleiptron and writing-slates at a tomb.^446 More commonly, vases show alabastra and other oil vessels left at graves and on tomb steps. Small vessels and offerings were brought to the tomb in baskets (Figure 4).^447 Although sometimes born by males, lekythoi painters mostly depicted females preparing and transporting baskets.^448

---


^446 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 00.359; Oakley, *Picturing death in classical Athens*, fig. 158-159.


^448 For funerary basket-bearers, see Oakley, *Picturing death in classical Athens*, figs. 13, 25, 31, 85, 86, 133, 151, pl. 131, pl. 136.
The funerary basket ultimately proves critical for our understanding of women’s experience. After all, one of the most significant roles that an aristocratic woman could perform in public sacrificial processions, bearing the sacrificial basket (kanoun), was also carried out by any woman in the context of the cemetery. Instead of barley, first fruits, and sacrificial knives, these women bear long baskets full of the trappings of mourning: vessels to be used and left as offerings, gifts with more personal significance, wreaths, and garlands of various materials. These garlands took the form of sprigs from trees and the ever-present colored strips of fabric, stemmata and tainiai. When Euripides describes the barrenness of Agamemnon’s grave, he repeatedly emphasizes two things, the absence
of libations and the absence of garlands. It has been remarked that the ribbon was “the most common offering” to be left at the grave; this must be true with respect to frequency and to cost. These fabric strips were tied around or draped upon the grave markers. We see them repeatedly on the lekythoi from 5th century (Figure 6). We even find painted versions on grave stelai from the 4th century elsewhere in Greece. It is to the tainiai, perishable items not preserved archaeologically, that I would like to turn in more detail. While I believe my argument applies equally to wreaths and branches, I will mostly focus on fabric garlands.

Two words seem to be translated by the English word ‘fillet.’ The first, stemma (pl. stemmata), has the broader connotation of ‘garland,’ ‘wreath,’ or ‘crown.’ Tainia, however, is the Greek word that can perhaps more precisely be connected to the scarf-like strips of fabric seen on Attic vases. The word is used to indicate, among other related things, a headband, the breast band of girls, bandages, an abdominal strap, or a ship’s pennant. The variant tainidion means ‘strip of linen. The fabric sashes on vases are brightly colored and patterned.

While a large percentage of Greek women would have tied strips of fabric in the context of mourning acts, a smaller portion would be familiar with carrying fillets in the

449 Euripides, Electra 385-90.
451 See, for example, the painted stelai in the Volos Archaeological Museum. Additionally, Boardman and Kurtz, Greek Burial Customs, 235 and 236.
kaνoul of sacrificial processions. Part of this responsibility, in fact, included garlanding the sacrificial animal. The animal was not the only thing to be adorned with strips of fabric. On a red-figure pelike from the second half of the 5th century, a winged male drapes a fabric sash over a stele (Figure 5); that this was a frequent devotional act is indicated by the other sashes already present on the stone.453 They were likewise draped on columns, stelai, and altars. Euripides’ Ion mentions the stemmata iera – the sacred garlands – at Delphi.

Figure 5. Attic red-figure pelike, depicting a winged male placing a tainia on a stele, 450 BCE. Photo: After CVA, Munich 2, pl. 77.4

453 Munich, Antikensammlungen 2348; CVA Munich, Museum Antiker Kleinkunst 2, 17, Pls. 77.4, 80.3.5; Beazley #12527
The connection between fabric sashes and sanctuaries is further reiterated by a series of vases depicting winged figures flourishing strips of fabric at altars.454 As recorded in the *iamata* from the sanctuary at Epidaurus in the 4th century, Asklepios healed and punished two men, respectively, by transferring tattoos from one to the other via a *tainia* which Echedorus had been commanded to put on in the *abaton* and remove once he had left.455 *Tainiai* also filled the treasuries of Greek sanctuaries. At the Athenian Asklepeion they were part of the material culture of dedication; the 4th century treasury accounts note that the 60 drachmas dedicated by Hegemon were attached to a fabric strip (*tainidion*) and it is likely that in other cases ribbons were not just for the practical display of the object, but part of the dedication.456 Concerning a seal-stone also dedicated there, the treasury record states: “this was recorded as being bound with gold as was the ribbon belonging to it. But it is bound with silver and so is the ribbon.”457 From the much later author Pausanias, we learn that statues and pedestals could be totally engulfed in ribbons and Ovid describes fabric strips tied to trees and fences in shrines.458

Returning to the funerary realm, on a white-ground *lekythos* dating to around 460 BC, two figures mourn at a tomb (Figure 6).459 The woman on the left raises a strip of fabric to the grave marker. The frequency with which this small devotional act is shown

454 CVA Geneva, Musee d’Art et d’Histoire 1, 22-23 (Beazley #14817); Salonica, Archaeological Museum: 7758 (Beazley #15217); Athens, National Museum: 15093 (Beazley #15973).
455 *iamata* no. 6 and 7: Naiden, "Hiketai and theoroi at Epidaurus," 82-85.
457 Inventory IV, 123; Ibid., 203. For references to *tainidion* in other treasury inscriptions, see also Aleshire, *The Athenian Asklepieion: the people, their dedications, and the inventories*, 149.
in a funerary context, in contrast to non-funerary contexts, is dramatic. The two grave stelai on the lekythos are literally covered in fillets. The differences in fabric color, pattern and thickness create a visual narrative in which the tomb is visited over and over again; each scrap of fabric looks back to a singular devotional act – the tying of the tainia - repeated on multiple occasions. The adult female loops her fabric strip, effectively tying herself and her act to each of the other frayed fillets on the stelai, creating a continuum of identical acts, each one an acknowledgement of loss, obligation, and the permanence of memory.

The conscientious moments illustrated in Athenian funerary art offer a level of intimacy that we often do not see in other religious visual culture. The funerary images do not convey the same sense of ritualized and formal behavior that is evident in scenes of processions and sacrifices. The personal character of the funerary episodes is unmistakable, both because of the emotional atmosphere of the scenes and because the devotional acts of individuals, rather than groups, are center stage. While the activities immediately surrounding the death of a family member and the subsequent funeral had strong public and religious significance, and thus entailed a certain degree of risk, the threat of ritual correctness seems to have dissipated in the quieter activities of tending the grave. Ultimately, the images of cemetery practice give the sense that what we are looking at is routine and familiar.

Ibid., 78 pl. 73 (a Nike carries a ribbon). Fillets also drape the corpse and kline during prosthesis scenes (Ibid., fig. 48).
Figure 6. Attic white-ground lekythos showing visitors at tomb of athlete, 460 BCE. Photo: Left and Right: After Oakley 2004, Pl. VII A, B.
This expressive and private quality is bolstered if we rewind the ritual clock, as it were, to an earlier phase in the process: the *prothesis*, commonly depicted as on a 5th century lekythos by the Quadrate Painter (Figure 7).\(^{461}\)

![Figure 7. Drawing of an Attic white-ground lekythos showing a prothesis, 420 BCE. Photo: Oakley 2004, fig. 48.](image)

There, at the laying out of the body inside the home, we find in use the devotional media familiar from cemeteries. Moreover, the activities at the graveside are also connected back to the domestic sphere by scenes showing the preparation of the basket, as on a lekythos dating to ca. 470 BCE and another dating to 460 BCE (Figure 8).\(^{462}\) Mourning is brought into the other parts of a woman’s life through the devotional acts that we know occurred at the tomb, regardless of the chronological life span of specific rituals. Packing a basket itself becomes a devotional act; the bonds tying people to the invisible dead were reconstituted through devotional media even before crossing the threshold of the home.

\(^{461}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{462}\) Left: By the Timokrates Painter, Athens, National Museum 1929. Right: Attributed to Near the Timokrates Painter, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
The *tainiai* that played such an important part in the ways people interacted with their dead emphasize that ‘religious’ objects need not be ‘ritual’ objects. In images of devotional activities, the material culture of the everyday is a thread uniting the different spheres of ancient life. This is especially the case with *tainiai*, one of the most mundane, and consequently overlooked, of objects. In fact, *tainiai* (and wreaths) are some of the most prevalent objects depicted in Attic vase-painting of the 5th and 4th centuries. They are especially common in genre scenes of winged spirits, particularly the motif of the single winged figure with blank background. More narrative details can be included, of course, but the staple of the motif is generally the single long fabric sash draped in the
figure’s hand. The winged figures are male and female, clothed and nude, and the Beazley Archive usually identifies them as Nike and Eros.

More rarely, the sash is held by participants in symposium scenes. To be sure, the ribbon as a crown is usually considered an object heavy with the overtones of male victory, athletic competition, and social honors. It is occasionally shown in the context of athletic competitions, such as on a black-figure Panathenaic amphora illustrating an older man tying a sash around a young athlete’s head. Several images disclose that, rather than the sacrificial beast, the shrine, or the grave marker, it is the male body itself that is covered in fabric garlands (Figure 9).

![Figure 9. Attic red-figure vessels depicting tainiai tied around victorious athletes, dating to ca. 490 BCE. Photo: After Valavanis 2004, 377, fig. 543 and fig. 544.](image)

463 London, British Museum B138 (Beazley #13260).
Tainiai in the home

Female bodies are almost never the decorated object. Although it does seem that on a few wedding vessels the bride is presented with colorful sashes, as far as I am aware, the sashes are never shown tied or knotted onto their bodies in a manner similar to those in illustrations of victors. More important, though, is that tainiai seem to be versatile and symbolic items commonly used by women in a variety of different contexts. They are continuously associated with the domestic sphere, where a single tainia often hangs behind the human figures (Figure 10).465 This ‘suspended’ fillet, in fact, gives the impression of architectural space and helps to locate the action inside a structure or home; this assumption is not unreasonable, given the frequent combination of the suspended sash with other home furnishings, such as wreaths, alabastra, the kalathos basket (used for wool), or boxes.

Figure 10. Attic white-ground lekythos depicting woman and girl with tainiai and kalathos basket, 470-460 BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2004, fig. 15.

465 By the Timokrates Painter, Athens, National Museum 12770.
We cannot know whether the suspended *tainia* was a visual short-hand for past and future victories – a souvenir of sorts – but it seems likely that the fabric sash was a common sight for Athenians and one well-recognized. *Stemmata* were amongst the inconsequential items (e.g., lamp-wicks and spices) that Theophrastus claims the penurious man would not allow his wife to lend out to neighbors.⁴⁶⁶ In *Against Eubulides*, Demosthenes describes being criticized for coming from a family of ‘ribbon-sellers.’⁴⁶⁷ The orator counters by defending the trade and so describes his mother selling ribbons in the Agora. Not confined to ritual occasions and sacred spaces, sashes populated people’s homes, the gymnasia, and the stalls of the Agora. They were items with which many women were intimately familiar.

The fabric strip, then, was a ubiquitous piece of material culture. While it surely can be associated with success and good fortune, it had numerous meanings as an object encountered by men, women, and children as they went about their normal lives. Its frequency in domestic scenes is especially interesting, given that the women whom we see holding the draped fillet in their hands may also have been the very people to weave them. This connection is perhaps strengthened by the inclusion of the weaving basket, the *kalathos*, in many of the scenes (Figure 10). Several vase-paintings show what might be the weaving of *tainiai* on small hand-held looms (Figure 11).⁴⁶⁸ In fact, this conclusion

---

⁴⁶⁷ Demosthenes, *Against Eubulides* 34.
⁴⁶⁸ By the Barclay Painter. University of Durham Museum 3. Keuls, *The reign of the phallus: sexual politics in ancient Athens*. It has been suggested that the small hand-loom was used for sprang weaving, which would have produced flexible, lace-like fabric and may have been used to create women’s hair nets: Louise Clark, "Notes on small textile frames pictured on Greek vases," *American Journal of Archaeology* 87, no. 1
seems plausible when one considers that the small piece of fabric woven on the *kalathos*-shaped vessel bears the same striped design as the *tainiai* on both vases in Figure 6.

Figure 11. Attic red-figure kalathoid vase, showing a woman with a hand-loom, ca. 475-425 BCE. Photo: After Keuls 1993, fig. 100.

Indeed, for ancient devotees, the preparation of wool and the crossing of thread on a loom might itself constitute a form of personal piety, even if it was of the most minor, routine and banal nature. The preparation and fabrication of ordinary but crucial items was part of an entire process, so that the labor of women should be considered as part of their attempts to honor invisible beings. Furthermore, tying a strip of fabric in a sanctuary was presumably an activity open to everyone, regardless of class and social station. After all, in Menander’s 4th century *Dyskolos*, the gods rewarded Sostratos’ beloved for

‘crowning the Nymphs’ in their shrines, even though she was terribly poor and, in Menander’s mind, utterly nameless.\textsuperscript{469}

Even more accessible was the wreath, the elements of which could be freely acquired. Vases show many deposited at tombs, and the labor of their creation, like \textit{tainiai}, attests to pious activity undergone outside of prescribed rituals. The collection of leaves and branches and the meticulous braiding of stems and bark comprised another way that women engaged devotional media in the home (Figure 12).\textsuperscript{470}

![Figure 12. Attic white ground lekythos depicting a seated women constructing a wreath near a kalathos basket, found in Athens, 460 BCE. Photo: After CVA 15, pl. 5.8.]

\textsuperscript{469} Menander, \textit{Dyskolos} 51.
\textsuperscript{470} By the Villa Giulia Painter. Munich, Antikensammlungen SS 75. Despite how little we discuss it, the dedication of wreaths must have been one of the most common of votive actions at Greek shrines and festival occasions. During the Anthesteria, for example, Athenians donated the wreaths they wore during the festival together with their drinking cups. It is possible that we should imagine ancient sanctuaries littered with stacks of wreaths in various states of decay. For wreaths in religious practices, see Blech, \textit{Studien zum Kranz bei den Griechen}. 
Many of the smaller, common devotional moments that we know Greek men and women experienced were not popular motifs in Greek visual culture. Yet Athenian vase-painting does indicate that commonplace objects were at the center of the most simple and routine actions which people performed as they went about maintaining relationships with invisible beings. Garlanding was a frequent, simple, and egalitarian action that anyone could perform in both sanctuaries and cemeteries; in their interactions with lost loved ones, ancient Athenians used the same sorts of devotional methods that they employed when negotiating with other spirits.

Given the observations I have made on the basis of the visual content of Athenian vase-painting, material culture allows us to situate the devotional worlds of women in homes and domestic spaces. We should be looking for evidence of religious feeling and practice not only in sanctuaries and rituals, but in the domestic lives, interactions, and activities of women, for whom religious experience was not limited to the time span of rituals or the time spent in shrines. Their devotional activity did not comprise the one or two days of actual festivals. We need to remember that the cooking of food and cakes, the braiding of wreaths, the preparation of ceremonial clothing, - all of these were part of religious activity and had an ‘integrated meaning’ for the women who enacted them.

Implications and conclusions: the female hand as apprehender and creator

This discussion reveals several important points. First, it provides evidence for a phenomenological aspect of women’s devotional activity in ancient Athens. Second, it suggests that we need to articulate the importance of handmade devotional objects. In
chapter 2, I presented several elements of phenomenology, including the first person perspective as lived and embodied experience. Schrag describes the “the body as lived, as lodged in the world as a base of operations from which attitudes are assumed and projects deployed."\(^{471}\) It is the body that comprehends the world and in Schrag’s formulation, “the hand achieves a privileged role in this bodily comprehension."\(^{472}\) Iconographic studies of white-ground *lekythoi* in fact support this sort of phenomenological understanding, since in the imagination of the painters and viewers, the hand and the *tainiai* were inextricably linked. Vases indicate that presentation and tying of a simple fabric sash was a meaningful act, and in most visual culture, the strip of fabric and the human hand were conceptually linked. Not only was the *giving* of the strip important, but so was the *tying* of it. Vase-painters again and again picture the elaborate bows and knots into which they were formed.

On vase after vase, the swaths of fabric are clutched in hands and presented with hands. Women experienced devotional media in this tactile contexts: their hands and fingers were intimately familiar with fabric strips, with memories of stretching and carding the wool, with setting up the loom, draping the long swatches, and ultimately knotting up the fabric.

For women, visiting cemeteries was not simply a moment to gaze upon grave markers or statues, but to pour liquids, deposit *lekythoi*, and other gifts. Those visits, which recreated and continued relationships with lost friends and family, were encoded into the hands of women through the touching, carrying, and knotting of *tainiai*. The

\(^{471}\) Schrag, *Experience and being: prolegomena to a future ontology*, 130.

\(^{472}\) Ibid., 135.
hours spent carding the wool and weaving the sashes became combined in women’s memories with the solemn moments spent sitting beside *tainiai*-draped corpses, with the careful packing of the cemetery basket, and with the task of wrapping fillets around cold gravestones.

Furthermore, Athenian practice reveals another element of devotional media that has not received much attention in the analysis of ancient religion. In Orsi’s description, devotional media included prayer cards, rosaries, bones, liquids, candles, and images. While devotional activity may have allowed individuals to control their own encounters with Mary and the saints, many of the items were fully sanctioned by the Church, even if they were not always employed in perfect harmony with the Church’s ideals. In fact, rather than being a means for individuals to engage divine figures “on their own terms,” A. Steven-Arroyo describes devotional objects as vehicles for the dissemination of religious ideas and orthodoxy by the Church, what he calls ‘material theology.’

Other studies of modern devotional materials, however, underscore that people exerted control over the devotional media themselves and, in fact, home-made materials played a significant part in the physical experience of religion. There are a number of modern examples that show how individuals inserted themselves into the creation of material religion and how they actually managed and imagined the resulting iconography and ideology. For example, Daniel Wojcik documented an urban shrine at a Marian apparition site in New York, where ‘miraculous photography’ served as the main

---

473 Orsi, *Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*, 49.
devotional and divinatory idiom. Devotees used Polaroid cameras to reveal “allegorical and apocalyptic symbols [which] are interpreted as divine communications offering insights of prophetic and personal relevance.” As Wojcik recognizes, “miraculous photography also allows for a degree of religious autonomy, personalization, and creativity. Based in personal perception and confirmation, folk religious practices such as miraculous photography may be modified and creatively adapted to express specific needs and concerns.”

Sally Promey provides a similar example in the form of Shaker gift images, home-made drawings that illustrated the spiritual revelations given to visionaries by celestial beings, often in the mode of complex, intricate, and locally significant iconography.

Nevertheless, the Polaroid prophecies and the Shaker celestial gift-drawings are not adequate comparanda for the ancient examples I have presented. Both involve divinatory images created by individuals and imbued with powerful spiritual messages. The iconography, subject matter, and interpretation of the resulting images are key to the successful devotional endeavor. In contrast, other devotional contexts involve items created by worshippers which played no divinatory role nor inhabited a central place in the devotion. The making of these ancillary creations still served as heartfelt, sincere, and pious demonstrations of their affections for invisible beings. McDannell made an important observation when she described the handmade objects exchanged among Protestant community members and the Christian mottoes that were hung in living

---

476 Ibid.: 141.
rooms, having been hand-stitched in Berlin wool on cardboard.\textsuperscript{478} Moreover, while McDannell’s example displays the filling of domestic space with religious images, women’s devotion also provided homemade crafts to fill and shape favorite shrines. At St. Patrick Church in Columbus, Ohio, the Shrine of Blessed Margaret of Castello is decorated with homemade items made by devotees, such as embroidered pillows and wall quilts.

Handmade objects held vitality, emotional conviction, and pride. In this sense, the embroidered wall mottoes and decorative quilts seem to be passable comparisons for the fabric sashes and leafy crowns created by Athenian women and activated in their routine interactions with invisible powers. Moreover, the term ‘handmade’ is especially suitable, given Athenian women’s embodied, phenomenological religious worlds. As Schrag argues, the hand is a fundamental component in the bodily perception of the world.

\textit{Conclusion}

In this chapter, I have argued for the significance of the insignificant. In Classical Athens, one of the most commonly depicted and constantly discussed features of Greek religion was the act of garlanding. Vase-painting reminds us of the fabric sashes that were so integral to maintaining relationships with invisible powers. The deceased were included in this web of interactions, so that small devotional activities and objects can be observed in cemeteries and shrines. Moreover, garlands filled domestic spaces as well; not only were they routine and familiar sights, but the very creation of \textit{tainiai} served as

\textsuperscript{478} McDannell, \textit{Material Christianity: religion and popular culture in America}, 46-48.
devotional activity. The common, everyday fabric sash, I believe, is essential for recognizing that Greek religion happened in all the spaces of human life, not only shrines and rituals. The mundane ribbon reveals the physical experience of devotion in the daily lives of women.
Chapter 7: Ubiquitous and repetitive images in Greek devotional practice

In the last chapter, I used iconographic evidence to reconstruct the phenomenological experience of Athenian women. The visual content of Attic vessels revealed an array of devotional items, especially ribbons and strips of fabric presented and knotted at memorials and shrines. The repeated use of objects that were essentially identical, or for the most part equivalent, has interesting implications for devotional objects and iconography. Why continually employ repetitive and monotonous imagery?

**Concepts of continuity and change in the religious arts**

Historians of all disciplines grapple with the problem of documenting and explaining change over time, taking a wide variety of approaches from the long durée of the Annales School to the timeless view of ethnography. Art historians likewise attempt to trace and account for change, although an uneasy interplay exists between treatments of change in form and change in iconography. Meanwhile, popular tradition hardly associates change and innovation with the religious arts. Rather, they are seen as anti-innovative – traditional, conservative, and unchanging. This conceptualization of religious visual culture is so common-place, in fact, that it is rarely probed and evaluated from new perspectives. I would like to problematize, or at least, assess anew, the issue with respect to Greek devotional arts.
Change in Greek art

Evaluations of stylistic change in the Greek arts centers on the agency of the artist, i.e. the producer. Within the relative scales of agency that have been postulated, art historians, much like scholars from other disciplines as mentioned in Chapter 1, have struggled with evaluating the role of individual instrumentality in contrast to wider forces. ‘Great Man’ theories abound, altered to represent the ‘Great Artist,’ who past historians envisioned as a creative genius advancing artistic development. There is a litany of men who have been described in the glowing terms of Renaissance masters: Phidias, Zeuxis, Polygnotos, Lysippos, Praxiteles, Apelles, Polykleitos. In art historical narratives, these men are exceptional thanks to the unique qualities of their work and how their work single-handedly impacted the shape of artistic change by means of innovation.479

On the other end of the spectrum, artistic agency has been de-emphasized in preference for the realities of production. Marxist analysis plays down the role of individual innovation and instead accentuates gradual technical development within a workshop system, filled with artisans collectively creating regional styles, developing relevant technological advances, traveling to different cities, and operating within a network of usually nameless craftsmen. Brunilde Ridgway, for example, criticized slavish concentration on great innovators, instead focusing on craftsmen because “the

479 Our modern interest in the creative genius of these men stems from, above all, the ancient texts, with their aetiological stories about famous creators: Daedalus was ‘the first to represent the open eye’ (Diodorus 4.76.3), Boutades was the first to form a figure out of clay, based on a shadow outlined on the wall (Pliny 35.151). As Alice Donahue argues, in ancient descriptions of the arts “the focus of attention is the inspired invention of forms and techniques by individual craftsmen and artists.” Alice Donohue, Xoana and the origins of Greek sculpture (Scholars Press, 1988), 197.
‘discovery’ of the artist as a distinct and distinctive personality did not occur until the
fifteenth century.”

Both the ‘Great Artist’ theories and those based on the technical development of
workshops highlight the role of creators and producers, whether they are individuals or
collectives. Both approaches are frequently teleological and evolutionary, with artistic
development seen as marching along towards some ultimate goal. In the case of Classical
Greek art, that goal is usually considered increased ‘naturalism.’ It is true that more
recent studies have begun to complicate the issue of artistic development, addressing, for
example, various sociological, structuralist, and response-oriented concerns.

Artistic forms that are more permanent deserve additional attention, however.
What about art that does not change? As Fred Kleiner has said, “everywhere else in the
ancient Mediterranean world, stylistic change was the only common denominator”
whereas “the exceptional longevity of formal traditions in Egypt is one of the marvels of
the history of art.” How do we deal with the factor of continuity, conservatism, and
resistance to change? How has continuity in the arts been characterized? Let us consider
more closely the explanations developed to explain the absence of change and artistic
continuity. Four brief examples should suffice to provide a general overview, with the

---

480 Brunilde S. Ridgway, Prayers in stone: Greek architectural sculpture ca. 600-100 B.C.E. (University of
California Press, 1999), 186.
481 D. Buitron-Oliver and N. Gage, eds., The Greek miracle: classical sculpture from the dawn of democracy:
the fifth century BC (National Gallery of Art Washington, DC,1992).
482 For example, see Tanner, The invention of art history in ancient Greece: religion, society and artistic
rationalization.
483 Helen Gardner and Fred S. Kleiner, Gardner’s Art Through the Ages, The Western Perspective, HA 202,
2010-2011, The Ohio State University (Cengage Learning, 2010), 64.
caveat that I am presenting a simplified view of a much larger, complex, and contentious discourse.

Continuity in ancient art

First, a common reason given for continuity is the ‘Backwater Model:’ this is the argument that sophisticated visual arts arise at cultural centers (e.g., Athens or Sikyon), but tradition-bound, conservative arts are maintained in backwaters (e.g., Arcadia). Normally applied on a geographic basis, it similarly applies to chronological epochs. A prime example in Greek history are the Dark Ages, described as the aftermath of a civilization’s collapse, with an anemic culture and poor-quality arts.

A second explanation, the paradigm of mass production, features conceptions of good, unique art and bad, repetitive art. In classical archaeology, many workshops churned out repetitive objects of the same type, depicting the same iconography, in the same style. The coroplastic arts in particular provided mass-produced goods in the form of identical mold-made terracottas. Negative opinions of mass-produced arts have been especially articulated in 20th century, as in the criticisms of kitsch described in Chapter 2.

A third approach suggests that constancy in artistic traditions results from larger structures of society, politics and culture that reinforce and perpetuate specific norms. Such a paradigm is frequently applied to art in, for example, Egypt, where Pharaonic rule

lasted centuries, as did a hierarchical society, priestly class, and vast bureaucracy. In this highly controlled social context, traditionalism controlled artistic output.

The longevity of Egyptian style and iconography inevitably leads to the main issue of this chapter. The religious function of Egypt art tends to be the main explanation for perceived artistic continuity. As Kleiner says, “the solemn and ageless art of the Egyptians expresses the unchanging order that, for them, was divinely established.” In other words, mystical and spiritual concerns enforced tradition in the arts.

Explaining artistic continuity via simple reference to religious conservatism is an old trend that continues to have life. An representative expression of this view was put forth by E. Gardiner in 1912, who noted that Panathenaic amphorae (discussed below) “have a religious importance, and the notoriously conservative tendency of religious art tends to prevent development in such objects proceeding pari passu with that which we find in purely secular objects.” In 2012, Clement Marconi explained that terracottas in Sicily retained a Daedalic style “mainly for reasons of religious conservatism.”

In Greek archaeology classes, the conservatism of religious art is neatly exemplified in the dichotomy between the statue of the Athena Parthenos and the Athena Polias. The colossal gold and ivory Parthenos was immensely famous in antiquity and copied often. Its creator, Phidias, was an artistic superstar by the end of the 5th century. The ancient, wooden and crude Polias, in contrast, was the most sacred statue on the entire Acropolis, with a talismanic power derived not from a genius sculptor, but because

it fell ready-made from the sky.\footnote{Pausanias 1.26.6.} It has even been argued that the Parthenon was not a temple at all, but a treasury, and the Athena Parthenos not a cult-statue, but an enormous, anthropomorphic savings-account.\footnote{The Parthenon “looked like a temple without actually being one...In effect, the Parthenon was the central bank of Athens...” Hurwit, The Athenian Acropolis: history, mythology, and archaeology from the Neolithic era to the present, 164.} The antiquity and archaic quality of the Polias (and statues made in a similar vein) contrasts with the other more profane, secular, and commercial works because, as the argument usually goes, it was intended for ritual purposes.

The argument that religious art is conservative and traditional is omni-present. My aim here is not to dispute the fact, although I think most of us would agree that in practice art used in religious contexts is just as frequently up-to-date, even groundbreaking, as it is old-fashioned. For the purposes of this study, I am more interested in the objects that are left in sanctuaries by devotees rather than cult-images and xoana, which are more commonly the focus of debates about conservatism.\footnote{I.B. Romano, “Early Greek cult images,” (1980).} Certain types of offerings are preserved in very large numbers, such as anatomical votives, figurines, painted pinakes (plaques) and relief tupoi (relief tablets). The forms and iconographies of these objects are exceptionally long-lasting; in fact, some continue to be part of religious activity in the Mediterranean today.

**Iconographic conservatism**

The examples I have so far provided mostly concern style, so I would like to turn to iconographic continuity and change. Studies of visual content and symbols have
certainly addressed the issue, but more rarely than would be expected. Panofsky in particular warned that, given historical and cultural change over time, continuity of form and meaning in the arts should not be assumed. In this ‘principle of disjunction,’ a symbol that has one meaning in one context will not have the same meaning in a different historical context. The influential art historian George Kubler waved Panofsky’s ‘principle of disjunction’ like a flag. He worked with Mesoamerican arts and drew on Panofsky to fight the long-standing ethnographic habit of attributing the same meaning to the same symbol in periods sometimes stretching over a thousand years.\textsuperscript{491}

As Terence Grieder explains it, ethnographic approaches tend to argue “that forms may be assumed to retain their symbolic meanings if the culture can be shown to be essentially unchanged in other respects.”\textsuperscript{492} Such a timeless, continuous understanding of symbolic meaning finds frequent acceptance in classical studies, particularly with respect to religious imagery or divine attributes. For this reason, the principle of disjunction has particular relevance for studies of the classical world, with regard to cultural spans as well as to chronological ones. For example, in the classical tradition, the snake at the foot of the Athena Parthenos and the snakes depicted in Imperial Roman lararia are commonly interpreted in equivalent and generalizing terms, described allegorically as ‘fertility’ symbols.

Similarly, in the study of antiquity, meaning has been applied to stylistic and formal qualities. For example, Pollitt describes what he calls ‘emblematic archaism,’ an

\textsuperscript{492} Grieder, "The interpretation of ancient symbols," 849.
archaistic style resulting from “the desire to preserve an Archaic form because it is a badge or emblem of an object which one wishes to make recognizable, familiar, and traditional-looking in the eyes of later generations.” Yet, religious historians have also noted that religious symbols are often retained long after their meaning has become irrelevant or even entirely forgotten.

**Iconography and religious conservatism in ancient Athens**

We have to ask ourselves, what does religious conservatism and tradition even mean in the ancient context? The label ‘conservative,’ when applied to the arts, implies a conscious effort to resist innovation. First, we need to explore what Athenians thought about religious conservatism and if it applied to their arts. In Athens, attempts to make religious changes were sometimes rebuffed for contradicting ancestral tradition, whereas resistance to change served a positive outcome by preserving the ancestors’ way of doing things.

**Religious conservatism in Athens: ancestral tradition and ta patria**

For the Greeks, religion was above all a matter of ancestral traditions: *ta patria*. As Eusebius would write later, most people thought it best not to “break the laws, which require everyone to reverence ancestral custom and not to disturb what should be

---

inviolable, but to walk orderly in following the religion of our forefathers, and not to be meddlesome through love of innovation (*Praep. Ev. 4.1 (130C).*”

Coming to terms with exactly what *ta patria* entailed for the Athenians is central to the question of religious conservatism both in ritual practice and in the arts. On a practical level, *ta patria* was used to describe religious matters in Greek sacred laws. In preserved inscriptions, reference to *ta patria* occurs in a number of decrees of a procedural nature, usually in the form of the construction *kata ta patria.* The phrase appears in decrees involving the 1) foundations of cults, 2) the reinstitution of disrupted cults,\(^{495}\) and 3) the reorganization of cults among political entities.\(^{496}\) Most of the ‘sacred laws’ provide instructions for the proper implementation of specific practices; the vague quality of *ta patria* is often directly contrasted with more specific instructions that, for whatever reason, needed to be explicitly stated. A late 3\(^{rd}\) c. decree from Kos that describes the institution of the family-cult of Diomedon, for example, provides a list of sacrificial victims, portions, intended recipients, and additional provisions. This portion of the decree ends:\(^{497}\)

The sacrifice [for the Moirai], Heracles [and Hebe] is to be without wine, [and to be with wine] for the other goddesses [and ? Diomedon], Let them provide [sufficient] victims for the meat-eating and wine and honey for the libation, and wood for the sacrifice. Let him receive as portions the leg and hide of each victim: make the fish-sacrifice in accord with traditional practice (*kata ta patria*).
The conclusion of Diomedes’ sacrificial instruction is a vague summation that contrasts with the specific details of victim, portion, and action described immediately prior. The assumption is that everyone already knew what *ta patria* was, so it did not need to be specified. Why inscribe that final instruction at all, then? For one, it ensured that ‘fish-sacrifices’ could not be ignored and would not drop out of the cult practice. It may even be that the vagueness of *ta patria* references allowed for change and adaptation.

Although in the past there was a belief that *ta patria* was a historical form of Greek religious practice to which later periods aspired, it is now generally approached as a rhetorical concept. Since divine instructions or creeds did not strictly prescribe religious practices, Greeks looked to *ta patria* instead. Robert Parker posited, for example, that *ta patria* covered a range of ideas which “appear constantly in contexts of strong patriotic emotion or other charged appeal…” Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston call *ta patria* and *ta noumina* (‘the customary practices’) “the watchwords of authenticity” for “mainstream civic cults.” Essentially, in 5th and 4th century Athens ancestral tradition was a formidable notion, which allowed people to create a distinction between what was venerable and what was new, a distinction which exercised serious rhetorical significance by appealing to authority and propriety.

*Conservatism in the arts as a rhetorical device*

---

These examples show *ta patria* as a rhetorical idea expressed in words, but as a rhetorical device, I would argue, a similar phenomenon appears in the arts. Certain older forms and content, or at least contemporary impressions of older forms and content, appear to have been used rhetorically to evince authority and nostalgia.  

The most well-known example of this phenomenon is the distinctive Panathenaic amphorae. Our earliest examples of these vessels, which carried oil awarded to victors in the games at Athena’s major festival in Athens, date to 560 BCE. The latest examples date to the 4th century CE, giving the vessel type a lifespan of nearly a thousand years. By 530 BCE the decoration on the amphorae settled into a canonical form, depicting a striding, war-like Athena Promachos flanked by two columns on the obverse, with athletic scenes on the reverse. Panathenaic amphorae owe the traditional forms and iconography, not to simple religious conservatism, but also to political and social forces.

As Mark Fullerton has demonstrated, stylistic and formal features in sculpture at times served a similar function. He emphasizes the methodological need to carefully examine the historical context in which artistic references to past artistic styles appear. For example, the statue of Hekate Epipyrgidia, which stood within the Nike *temenos* on the Athenian Akropolis, acted as a symbolic component and represented the antiquarian interests at play in the late 5th-century reconstruction program of the Nike *temenos*.

---

502 Archaizing sculpture is frequently described in these terms. For a discussion of ‘archaizing’ sculpture as distinct from ‘classicizing’ and ‘severizing,’ see Mark Fullerton, *The archaistic style in Roman statuary* (Brill, 1990), 1-12.


Fullerton reiterates that “each archaistic monument should be considered in its own historical and formal context rather than forced to conform to more general, all-inclusive explanations.”

Additionally he suggested that archaism as a formal, stylistic feature of sculpture may have seemed appropriate for a certain type of affective object, the *apotropaion*. Noting that apotropaic images tend to represent unrealistic and unnatural subjects, such as sphinxes, griffins, and triple-bodied goddesses, he suggested that “they are objects which in order to function properly must be ever-lasting and absolutely immobile, without even the slightest suggestion that they are able to abandon their posts.” In this case, his explanation does not refer to ‘religious conservatism’ but to the specific function of apotropaic and guardian images.

*Conservative religious visual culture and emotional responses*

While reference to ancestral practice was an effective and compelling rhetorical device, clearly the collective longing and love for tradition was (and is) an extremely powerful force in the ways groups and individuals conceptualized their past. I think it is important to ask how we connect this prevailing belief about *ta patria* to devotional objects and their content. How does the idea ‘we have always done it this way’ relate to lived religion and personal experience? Rather than appealing to cultural, social or

---

506 Fullerton, *The archaistic style in Roman statuary*, 201.
structural forces, I believe that personal biography plays an essential part in the tradition in the devotional arts.

The first point I would like to make concerns the emotional power of familiar and ubiquitous material culture. Morgan provides an additional framework within which we might consider Greek votives. As discussed in previous chapters, he maintained that most art historians failed in their attempts to deal with religious material culture because their philosophical and academic treatments of art relied on the 18th century idea of ‘disinterestedness. Critics of this approach analyzed the feelings that images could arouse in individuals, such as sentimentality and familiarity.

Inspired by Solomon’s defense of sentimentality (Chapter 2), Morgan argued that above all ‘visual piety’ is marked by sentiment and desire. In fact, the aesthetic concerns of art criticism have virtually no place in religious contemplation of material culture. After investigating Protestant religious imagery, Morgan found that repetition and the pervasiveness of certain images made them particularly resonant. He says,

[Warner] Sallman's pictures [of Jesus] enjoyed a special power by virtue of [their] ubiquity…The image marked the sites of familial and communal life, transmitted institutional knowledge, and visually articulated the public rituals conducted at church or in the home…This ubiquity and sameness, this pervasive familiarity, will seem militantly boring to those for whom the imagery signifies an alien world, but it is deeply reassuring for the image’s adherents. Believers return to the same imagery over and over precisely because it reaffirms what they want to take for granted about the world. 507

Morgan’s conclusions are, of course, based on evidence from a time period divorced from the one under discussion. Can we apply the ideas of ubiquity, familiarity, sentiment, and reassurance to ancient votive objects?

**Continuity and conservatism in Athenian votives**

Ubiquitous devotional items populated the landscape of Athens. We have already discussed this with respect to *tainiai*, for one. Certain iconographic constructions were common in the visual landscape of Athenian shrines. The continuity of these forms and iconographies has sometimes been explained by workshop practices, because the more closely related the images were, the easier it would have been for artistis to churn out cheaper and faster products. Another example, however, this time from outside Athens, suggests that the mass-production paradigm is not always relevant, particularly when specific devotional forms were consciously maintained in a time-consuming, traditional format.

As we have already seen, terracotta figurines, whether they were anatomical votives or depictions of the divinities, were made in enormous quantities and were often identical because they were mass-produced. Not only were the same molds used to make many identical copies, but the molds were re-used continuously over subsequent decades. In fact, the shrinkage and degeneration that occurred due to recurrent casting allows archaeologists to create family trees documenting the sequences of figurines derived from
the same original mold; through them figurines can be given a relative chronology of casting sometimes stretching over hundreds of years.  

Studies of the Corinthian potters’ quarter show, however, that while mold-made figurines were mass-produced in great numbers, hand-made figurines continued to be manufactured over a coterminous time-span. Of the hand-made type, female figures were popular, but the horse-and-rider type, uncovered in significant numbers, remained especially pervasive and long-lasting. Another hand-made type, found in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Akrocorinth and produced from the 6th century to the 2nd century, was the liknon (a tiny model of a basket containing cakes, Figure 13). One cannot help but wonder why the Corinthians continued to produce and purchase these predominately hand-made types over such an extensive time-period, even when mold technologies were readily available.

![Figure 13. Handmade terracotta liknon with cakes, from the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, Akrokorinth, archaic to early 5th century. Photo: After Brumfield 1977, pl. 47, 29.](image)

---

**Sentiment, comfort, and memories of childhood religious experience**

It has been argued that childhood participation in festivals and rituals acted as a major vehicle for the creation of sentimental and nostalgic feelings. The role of childhood experience in the transmission of religious and social norms is a factor stressed by Robert Orsi, whose observations prove to be equally enlightening in our case. Orsi has studied the experience of children in mid-20th century Catholic churches and found that the adults in the community were intensely concerned with the religious formation of their children.

Participation in church services and other activities also provided an occasion when children’s religious lives were shaped in the figures of their own bodies. They were constantly admonished on how they should carry themselves in church, how to kneel, how not to fidget, the proper way to touch the Eucharist. They were scolded about restless behavior and other perceived corporeal transgressions. As Orsi says,

> whether children dreaded or resented this or were proud of their physical abilities in church – and many children not only did not find all this onerous but actually delighted in their capacity to maintain the discipline and posture demanded of them, and many children loved going to mass, their imaginations captured by its mystery and splendor and pleased to share in the community’s distinguishing sign of recognizing God’s real presence on the altar – it was in their bodies that children were made to know the realness of God.\(^{512}\)

In a somewhat analogous way ancient Greek adults learned what it meant to be religious and how to honor the gods from an early age and via their family members. The

\(^{512}\) Orsi, *Between heaven and earth: the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them*, 99.
recollections of childhood religious events could be fondly held and created a powerful aura of ‘rightness.’ The objects that populated those experiences and the memories that resulted were strongly resonant of family and tradition; rather than a matter of production, the value that they acquired may have been a significant reason for their repetitive quality. In order to support these claims, in what follows, I will provide evidence from Attica that illustrates three major points: 1) religious learning was a significant part of childhood and the shaping of future adults; 2) participation in religious events in the company of one’s family was remembered with a strong degree of affection, pride and gravity; and 3) the comportment of the body, an essential part of learning proper religious behavior, included the manipulation of objects by children.

_The religious experience of Attic children_

As I discussed above in Chapter 5, devotional practices often place a strong emphasis on family relations and the integration of multiple generations: “…the devotion remained the occasion for a joining of generations in a celebration of memory and place.”513 Greek children, too, were incorporated into the family’s religious life from infancy onwards; their religious education was provided by parents, siblings, nurses, servants and other relatives. The shaping of children’s religious lives through their physical participation and experience in Greek practice is well-documented both textually and visually. Several recent publications have emphasized the many ways children played

---

essential roles in the religious practice of Attic communities: they took part in sacrificial rituals, festival processions, and gender-specific coming-of-age ceremonies.514

The religious life of children in ancient Greece and especially the region of Attica seems to have been rich and varied; many of our sources indicate that parents and adults in the community felt that it was important for children to be actively included in religious events. In fact, several decrees inscribed in stone expressly mention children. A 4th century inscription from the Agora, for instance, ensured that children be released from school (and slaves from their labor) on the occasion of the Mysteries.515 Another decree from Eretria concerned a festival of Asklepios and explicitly addressed the role of children in the procession.516 That young people were recognized participants in the activities arranged by the orgeones of Ekhelos, for example, is clear from a decree stipulating that both sons and daughters of the orgeones were to receive a half-share during the feast.517 To be sure, many of the inscribed decrees are of a bureaucratic, financial and organizational nature; yet their attention to matters of social maintenance – situating different genders, ages, classes, and political standing – indicate that the shifting relationships between humans also had religious significance. As such, the numerous references to children in the decrees suggest that the inclusion of the youngest generation in devout activities was of serious public matter. Indeed, Graf and Johnston imply that

516 LSCG 93; Ibid., 96 n. 505.
children aid in the preservation of *ta patria*, since “people grew up witnessing the rituals that they would someday perform themselves.”

This reality is further strengthened by evidence from votive reliefs. Children appear in them in great numbers, visibly included as household members forming relationships with divinities. On some occasions, children are specifically singled out in images. For example, on a relief from northwestern Greece (Figure 14) a woman presents an infant to Artemis; when discussing this relief, Neils also points out that following childbirth, clothing was dedicated to the goddesses (which are shown hanging in the background); the relief, then, visually evoked the web of memory and interchange that links the divine figure, mother, child, and devotional items together.

Figure 14. Relief from Echinos, showing presentation of child and sacrificial procession to Artemis, 4th century BCE. Photo: After Dillon 2003, fig. 7.4.

---

521 Neils, "Children and Greek religion," 145.
Another relief, dedicated by Xenokrateia and discussed above, serves as another prime example (Figure 2). The image shows Xenokrateia in the midst of the family of gods, her son tugging at and gazing up at the river god. Such devotional arts specifically depict the incorporation and even centrality of children in ritual encounters.

“The spectacle of our parents, addressing the gods”: the oikos and religious education

The importance of the community at large in the creation of ancient religious experience has been explored in great depth elsewhere, as has the social role of rites-of-passage, so I will not dwell on them here at any length.522 Instead, I would like to stress the way children learned about religion from their parents.

Jan Bremmer, in particular, has emphasized the central role of the oikos (household) in the formation of children’s religious experiences. He argues that, through their family, “…Greek children were socialised into religious practice by participation and imitation.”523 As he notes, the 4th century oration by Isaeus is particularly revealing:

For, as was natural, seeing that we were the sons of his own daughter, Kiron never offered a sacrifice without our presence; whether he was performing a great or small sacrifice, we were always there and took part in the ceremony. And not only were we invited to such rites but he also always took us into the country for the festival of the Dionysia, and we always went with him to public spectacles and sat at his side, and we went to his house to keep all the festivals; and when he sacrificed to Zeus Ktesios – a festival to which he attached a special importance,

to which he admitted neither slaves nor free men outside his own family, at which he personally performed all the rites - we participated in this celebration and laid our hands with his upon the victims and placed our offerings side by side with his, and took part in all the other rites, and he prayed for our health and wealth, as he naturally would, being our grandfather. (Isaeus 8.15ff, trans. Foster, Loeb).

In the Isaeus passage, the speaker (the unnamed grandson of Kiron) especially stresses familial relationships, as to be expected given that an issue of inheritance was at stake in the court trial under discussion. The motive behind the recollection need not decrease the texts’ legitimacy as a source, however. Notably, Kiron’s grandson exhibits a distinct sense of approval and satisfaction in his religious upbringing – all was done properly and as it should be, particularly since his grandfather behaved appropriately, not just towards the gods, but also towards his own family members and descendants. The grandfather made sure that the boys were there with him at sacrifices, at festivals, on public occasions and within the home. The connection between grandfather and grandsons is in fact emphasized by the physical mirroring that Kiron’s grandson describes – the boys “placed our hands with his and placed our offerings side by side with his” and were verbally illustrated as smaller versions of their elder.524

524 Granted, the direct family was not the only place for religious inculcation. Of particular note at Athens were the gymnasia, populated with instructors and older boys who monitored the religious behavior of the younger set. The community of the ephesas was a similar location for the civic construction of religiously educated young adults. For young women, sites like Brauron provided distant places where they might share the companionship of older girls and adult women not of their own family. The girl’s chorus was a particularly recognized space for such learning, with Sappho being a well-known instructor with a gaggle of girls under her wing to whom she was not related. Sappho’s poems suggest the real depth of feeling that could be associated with these experiences. At the same time, many local festivals were divided on gender lines and provided spaces for girls to listen to and watch the actions of their female family members within a larger community of women; the Pnyx echoed with gregarious and raucous women during the Thesmophoria and during the Adonia rooftops suddenly became special sites of story-telling, laughter, and female authority.
As Bremmer notes, Kiron’s grandson gives a good idea of how boys were incorporated, but sheds little light on the experience of girls, who also attended family sacrifices.\textsuperscript{525} That there was a gendered element to the process of religious education is clear enough. Grandfathers and fathers taught their offspring by including them in public and private rituals, while Plato (\textit{Republic 377f}) tells us that old women were gregarious founts of mythic knowledge, which they often shared as nurses or passed from mother to daughter.\textsuperscript{526} Daughters participated with their mothers in several festivals that were free from direct male-supervision, such as the Adonia in Athens. At the same time, women also took up the role of Kiron, leading their children in sacrificial procedures: a number of votive reliefs dedicated by females show women in the more traditionally male role, at the head of the sacrificial procession and followed by children of both genders.\textsuperscript{527}

\textit{Sentiment and Athenian memory}

Kiron’s grandson, in Isaeus’ telling, reflects on his religious upbringing with approval; he stresses (no doubt because of the issue of inheritance) the familial concord that allowed him to learn the proper behavior expected of him at sacrifices and festivals. He seems grateful, and takes pride in the treatment he received from his grandfather. In Aristophanes’ \textit{Lysistrata}, the female chorus speaks with obvious pride about their own role in festivals as a child. In the \textit{Laws}, on the other hand, Plato vividly describes the way adults remember their experience as children. Myths and stories are

\textsuperscript{525} Bremmer, “The family and other centres of learning in antiquity,” 33.
\textsuperscript{527} I thank Carol Lawton for bring this to my attention in July, 2009.
Plato labels sacrifices and festivals an “intense delight to the eye and ear of children,” an observation echoed in Orsi’s study of Catholic children. In Plato’s portrayal, fundamental to the event was the familiar, but still thrilling, sight of one’s parents performing religious acts and communicating with the gods. As Plato describes it, the parents were the center around which children orbited at religious events, a larger than life presence dominating the events. Parents and their actions inhabited a focal point in adult recollections of their childhood religious upbringing.

“We laid our hands with his”: embodiment in children’s devotion

Devotionalism as it was practiced in Attica does not seem to have involved the rigorous, autocratic structuring and shaping of the human body that is apparent in devotionalism of other times and places. Our sources do not attest to strongly formalist approaches to men’s and women’s bodies; the performance of severely repetitive, distinct or unnatural actions has never been readily apparent in Classical sources, suggesting that the body itself occupied a more relaxed place in Attic devotionalism. This is not to say that specific symbolic and repeated movements were not practiced, of course. Visual culture attests to specific hand gestures associated with prayer. Still, we do not have evidence for the strict policing of children’s bodies that Orsi sees in 20th c. Catholicism.

528 Timothy J. McNiven, ”’Things to which we give service’: interactions with sacred images on Athenian pottery,” in Images and methodologies in Greek art ed. D. Yatromanolakis (2009).
There are no stories of ‘fidgeting’ Athenian boys and girls punished for perceived ‘bodily transgressions,’ nor is there evidence for extreme fasting or asceticism as a routine or admired devotional act outside of fringe groups. Nonetheless, our sources do indicate that from an early age children observed and learned the proper way to physically move and act when approaching religious figures.

Despite the regular depiction of gestures of prayer and devotion, children were usually not the main performers. Instead, they frequently stand and watch the adults enact the appropriate physical movements. Parents and other grown-ups were envisioned as the physical intercessor between holy figures and young children, a relationship clearly articulated on painted plaques and sculpted votive reliefs. Of course, the procession itself was an important way the body was manipulated and acted upon; the simple deed of walking (or being carried along) became significant as a form of worship. Adorned and wrapped in their best clothes, children could easily participate in the procession in a meaningful way – simply by being there. As they grew older, however, they became more involved and several festivals and sacrifices had specific roles for one or two privileged children. For example, the *pais amphithaleis* (“boy with both parents living”) participated in wedding ceremonies, awarded victors in the Olympic games, and lead processions to Delphi from Athens.\(^\text{529}\) During events of less public formality, the youngest generation also became more involved in the rites, often acting as ‘helpers.’\(^\text{530}\)

In some depictions, the young people are shown with more active roles; for example,

---

\(^{529}\) Gerhard Baudy, "Amphithaleis paides," in *Brill’s New Pauly*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Brill Online, April 2012).

\(^{530}\) Neils, "Children and Greek religion," 157. At times it is difficult to identify any difference between servants and the children of the family; both carry the implements and trappings needed by adults for the rituals.
youths assisting older men at the space of the altar is a common motif in vase painting (Figure 15) and echoes the experience of Kiron and his grandson, as described by Isaeus. Adult relatives and older siblings became models that children learned to copy.

Figure 15. Attic red-figure neck amphora showing youth assisting adult male during a sacrifice, from Vulci, 460 BCE. Photo: After Neils 2003, cat. 106.

Participation and imitation could take many forms, such as walking or watching sacrificial processions as they passed through the streets and around the fields of Attica. In this way, not only did one learn what interaction between the spirits and people should

---

531 By the Niobid Painter. Brooklyn Museum of Art 59.34.
look and feel like, but children also learned the sacred, civic, and natural topography of their home. They learned what it felt like to be in the monumental, structured sanctuaries of the Acropolis as well as the cool, slippery, and dark caves sacred to Nymphs. They learned the locations, meaning, and power of the countless shrines dotting the city. Pilgrimages to Eleusis, Brauron and Delphi involved extended hikes and camping trips – no doubt together with sore feet, exhausted limbs and strange countryside. It was through these walks and processions that children learned about the sacred landscape that they inhabited, at the same time that they absorbed the political and social symbolism of the landscape as well.

Dancing and singing were obvious activities that engaged the physical forms of young people. Whether it was the Spartan bibasis, Attic geranos (crane-dance) or the Ionian choruses at Delphi, physical movement, singing and performance were intimately tied to religious experiences. As with adults, some of the most visible, important and tactile roles that children preformed was that of ‘carrier.’ Visual representations especially emphasize the role of children as phoroi and ‘helpers.’ The position of kanephoros was of particular importance, since the kanoun (basket) contained the items most vital for sacrificial ritual. The honor attached to the role is reflected in the frequency of its visual representation and the political symbolism it acquired; after all, it was because of a kanephoros, so the Athenians believed, that their democratic government came into being.

532 Neils, "Children and Greek religion," 152-156.
533 Thucydides 656; Aristotle Ath. Pol. 18.
Carrying the secret objects on the Acropolis as an *arrephoros* was certainly worthy of honor, as the numerous honorary statues of young *arrephoroi* attest.534 Only girls could be *arrephoroi*, but boys did act as *kanephori*; they also carried *eiresione* – olive branches draped with wool and first fruits – to Apollo’s temple during the Pyanopsia and during the Thargelia.535 Most of these extremely visible roles, however, were not open to the vast majority of children in Attica, only to the upper class. As such, class and gender differences were reconstituted through the hands and arms of children, reflecting wider adult anxieties about appropriate behavior and the strategies for maintaining divine approval. A telling example involves the daughters of metics (wealthy non-citizens): they could aspire to a role in the Panathenaic processions, but never to the role of *kanephros*; instead, they were *diphrophoroi*, carrying the parasol and stool used by their more honored civilian counterparts.536

As a result of these experiences, children would no doubt have had many memories of votive-laden temple walls and *stelai*-filled sanctuaries. Most importantly, their religious knowledge would have been made up of memories marked by watching their parents and siblings hold small dedications in their hands and place them in shrines.

*Media for maintaining relationships with the dead*

Another group of objects, Attic *lekythoi*, provides evidence for the involvement of children in an activity that I argued in Chapter 6 was devotional in nature. These vessels,  

535 Ibid., 204.  
536 Dillon, *Girls and women in classical Greek religion*, 38.
especially the white-ground series from the 5th century, depict children engaged in a religious world no doubt as familiar to them as the festivals surrounding gods. As Oakley explains, death and the obligations owed to the dead were frequently experienced by Attic children, given the high mortality rate in antiquity and the total incorporation of young people into the funerary responsibilities shared by the entire family. Oakley notes the similarity between the depictions of grown-ups and the younger generation at grave monuments; not only were they shown engaged in the same types of movements, but they were “shown leaving the types of objects that are found in tombs or that adults are depicted as offering.” I think it is reasonable to say, in fact, that the mirroring of adult and child on the lekythoi serves as the clearest and most evocative representation in all of classical art of the ways that imitation can encode meaningful behaviors into the bodies, hands, and eyes of children.

There are several particular activities that were represented. On a white-ground lekythos, a boy and girl flank a grave marked by a stele and a raised mound (Figure 16). The younger girl offers a flower and an alabastron. Children, often servants, acted as ‘carriers’ and ‘helpers’ in this context as well; the movement of the young body towards the tomb, laden with vessels and utensils, is the same devotional act perpetrated in other festival processions.

---

537 Oakley, "Death and the child," 168.
Figure 16. A boy ties a *tainia* around a grave marker, while a girl presents a flower and *aryballos*. Attic white-ground *lekythos*, 460 BCE. Photo: After Neils and Oakley 2003, cat. 113, p. 168.

On another *lekythos*, discussed in Chapter 6 (Figure 6) at some length, a boy stands across from the adult woman and hangs a wreath around the stone marker; the visual mirroring of the two figures and their small identical actions demonstrate, in microcosm, the inter-generational nature of devotionalism. The visual echo on the *lekythos* seems much like the literary mirroring reported by Isaeus. Each time that the boy returns to hang a wreath or tie a fabric strip, he renews the connection between himself, his mother, and the spirit of the deceased.
It is here in the cemetery that we also see children handling small figurines and presenting them to the spirits much like adults must have in sanctuaries. This idea was articulated by the Thanatos Painter, who, on a white lekythos from about 440 BCE (Figure 17), \(^{539}\) painted an adult woman and a young girl at a grave monument. The adult woman carries the basket and gestures toward the girl, who holds up a female doll. Dead girls carry female dolls on a number of sculpted grave *stelai* and dolls have been found within graves. They too were dedicated at sanctuaries. Of this scene, Oakley comments, “the manner in which the Thanatos Painter shows a young girl moving toward a stele with a doll clasped before her in both hands indicates that she will leave it as an offering at the tomb.”\(^{540}\)

![Figure 17. Girl places figurine at grave. Attic white-ground lekythos, 420s BCE. Photo: After Oakley 2003, fig. 8.](image)

*Personal history as ta patria: the way I have always done things*

\(^{539}\) By the Thanatos Painter. Private Collection.  
\(^{540}\) Oakley, "Death and the child," 168.
Ultimately, we know that children were active members of Athenian ritual practice, both on a civic and domestic level. We can point to a number of phenomenologically significant moments: the physical experience of touching, holding, and dedicating objects, witnessing others dedicating objects, being instructed by one’s parents or siblings in the proper way to behave, visual contemplation of endless displays of figurines and reliefs in their limited types and motifs. We can imagine that all these encounters had a normative effect, encoding in children’s hands and eyes the way things ought to be done (Figure 18).\textsuperscript{541} It becomes important to do these things, not simply because it is how they have always been done, but because that is what an individual’s parents and aunts and uncles did, and because that is how things were done in the biographical experience of the individual.

Figure 18. Marble relief with family performing a sacrifice; the boy holds a spit of meat and the girl holds a wreath. Dedicated in the sanctuary of Pankrates in Athens, late 4\textsuperscript{th} century. Photo: After Lawton 2007, fig. 2.11.

\textsuperscript{541} Athens, Fetie Camii P 68 A.
*Ta patria* was a powerful and emotionally laden idea about local religious realities. In both inscriptions and discourse, ancestral tradition was authoritative and could be appealed to for rhetorical effect. Yet, the visual arts were a form of discourse as well, and certain forms seem to have been visually equivalent with *ta patria*. I would argue, however, that the appeal to the past became such an emotionally powerful strategy because it entailed more than just a reference to distant ancestors. Rather, the memories and lived experience within personal biographies was a powerful component.

Material objects and images played an important role within personal biography, while also serving as affective, nostalgic reminders of past occasions. The ubiquity of certain types of devotional objects was sure to have had a prescriptive impact on continued use. Artists and workshops were unlikely to have been the sole influence on the form and content of devotional images; the consumer must have had some bearing on the continuity of religious arts. Moreover, patronage of small, cheap items was not, I think, only about class or civic ideologies, but about the personal engagement of individuals with objects. Votives did not only satisfy divinities, but, I argue, provided sentimental pleasure, reassurance, and comfort to devotees.

**Repetition, ubiquity, and the aesthetics of accumulation**

I would like to make one final suggestion concerning feelings of reassurance associated with ubiquitous and repetitive images. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many art historical analyses privilege distinct and exceptional votive offerings over the cheaper, mass-produced variety, highlighting instead the way they
stand out from others objects or exemplify turning points or artistic revolution. I believe, however, that distinctiveness and unique qualities need not be the most preferred feature in votives. In fact, I would argue that uniformity or, more importantly, perceived uniformity is essential to understanding ancient devotional media.

_The satisfaction of uniformity and monuments of multitudes_

In many votive contexts huge numbers of similar objects were often displayed and grouped together. On the Athenian Pnyx, cuttings all along the exposed cliff-face marked the locations of _pinakes_ ("plaques"). Treasury records from the city’s sanctuaries, such as those from the Asklepeion, described cluttered storerooms in which objects were organized roughly by type.⁵⁴² Outside of Athens, in the Corinthia, excavators of the Sanctuary of Hera at Perachora uncovered a huge, piled mass of over 200 _phialai_ (libation bowls), which had been carefully stacked together.⁵⁴³ The ribbons wrapped around tombstones in Athenian cemeteries and the ribbons and _pinakes_ obscuring cult statues suggest that for some reason individuals desired to employ the same devotional media in the repeated devotional acts. It is the ‘sameness’ that seems to be valued, not difference.

I consider the collection of repeated objects and images in this manner to be an example of the ‘aesthetics of accumulation,’ a term I borrow from J. González, who

⁵⁴² Aleshire, *The Athenian Asklepieon: the people, their dedications, and the inventories*.
draws on it to in reference to cluttered and repetitive displays on Chicana home altars.\textsuperscript{544} The grouping and accumulation of recurring items has its own aesthetic power, and I think it is something especially apparent in religious situations and those in which memory plays an important role; González calls it ‘material memory.’ While she applies these concepts to the hand-made creations of individuals, I think it has relevance for the public material memory found in ancient shrines. The accumulated forms and iconography must have caused emotional responses that linked feelings of awe (at the accumulated remains of worship) with a sense of connection; the gaze directed towards such collected objects is often voracious, interested, and overwhelmed; it consumes and grasps. Ultimately, while the handling, tying, and displaying of ribbons and garlands has its own religious force, I think that the manner in which that activity is linked to identical moments in the past, and to the \textit{identical experiences of other people}, magnifies that significance.

Obviously the carefully-placed terracotta figurines or the striped and colored ribbons tied in knots were not in reality identical. By being grouped together, however, or by being set up in a sanctuary full of such items, a visual connection is created between the multiple objects which smoothes out differences. Simultaneously, slight disparities in iconography or type or color add interest and depth, so that the constantly moving eye periodically comes to rest. Indeed, if the objects highlight the way in which certain devotional acts tie together the experiences of individuals, then each of those items gains in significance as a marker of presence of devotees for other devotees. Votive objects

were not just markers of the presence to remind divinities or deceased relatives of their relationship with humans, but markers of other individuals who also came to the god for probably similar reasons. The accumulated numbers added significance to devotional acts as a testimony of the shared experiences of devotees.

Moreover, it seems to me that collecting together and forming clustered groups of objects, of accumulated multitudes, creates a larger, cohesive monument out of individual items. In the case of the ribbons or terracottas of Athens, they served as monuments and spectacles constructed by numerous makers. Built by time and repetition, the monument can incorporate – and swallow – space and topography. It ought to make us reassess intentionality and ideology, since these ‘monuments’ were built by multiple individuals. Ultimately, the devotional objects employed by Greeks when they engaged invisible forces seem to reveal certain unrecognized facets of Greek religious practice; at the same time, they encourage us to reframe and rethink Greek religious art.

**Conclusion**

Vague references to religious conservatism are not particularly useful when considering the repetitive and slowly changing nature of many votive items. The Athenians certainly possessed *ta patria*, an emotionally and rhetorically powerful conception of the past and the activities performed by those that came before them. I do not believe that *ta patria* serves as an adequate rationalization for the conservatism of religious material culture. Looking more closely at the visually and physically determined experiences of Attic individuals forces us to remember that continuity is based on the
repeated decisions of people. Those decisions, I think, were influenced by personal memories and the reassuring quality of dedicating the same sort of item as those from childhood.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beazley</td>
<td>Beazley Archive (<a href="http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/">www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVA</td>
<td><em>Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td><em>Inscriptiones Graecae</em> (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin): de Gruyter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td><em>Supplementum Epigraphicorum Graecorum</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Baudy, Gerhard. "Amphithaleis paides." In Brill's New Pauly, edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider: Brill Online, April 2012


Ekroth, G. *The sacrificial rituals of Greek hero-cults in the Archaic to the early Hellenistic periods*, Kernos Supplement 12: Centre international d'étude de la religion grecque antique, 2002.


Harrison, Jane E. *Ancient art and ritual*: Henry Holt, 1913.


James, D. *Art, myth and society in Hegel's Aesthetics*: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.


257
Ludwig, T.M. *The sacred paths: understanding the religions of the world*: Prentice Hall, 1996.
McNiven, Timothy J. "'Things to which we give service': interactions with sacred images on Athenian pottery." In *Images and methodologies in Greek art* edited by D. Yatromanolakis, 2009, 299-335.
Müller, Karl Otfried. *Ancient art and its remains; or, a manual of the archaeology of art*: B. Quaritch, 1852.


Shapiro, Meyer. "On some problems in the semiotics of visual art: field and vehicle in
359-407.
Sheingorn, Pamela. "Making the Cognitive Turn in Art History: A Case Study."
*Connexions* (June 11, 2010), ttp://cnx.org/content/m34254/1.4/
Sherwin-White, S.M. "Inscriptions from Cos." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und
Smith, Jonathan Z. "A pearl of great price and a cargo of yams: a study in situational
Smith, W. Robertson. *Lectures on the religion of the Semites*: Kessinger Publishing,
2000.
Sourvinou-Inwood, C. "What is polis religion?" In *The Greek City from Homer to
Steinberg, Michael, "Aby Warburg’s Kreuzlingen lecture: a reading." in Aby Warburg,
Stevens-Arroyo, A.M. "The evolution of Marian devotionalism within Christianity and
the Ibero-Mediterranean polity." *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 37
Stillwell, Agnes. *The potters' quarter: the terracottas*, Corinth XV: Part II: American
School of Classical Studies, 1952.
Sullivan, Lawrence E. "Body works: knowledge of the body in the study of religion."
Szönyi, G.E. *John Dee's occultism: magical exaltation through powerful signs*: State
Tanner, J. *The invention of art history in ancient Greece: religion, society and artistic
Thompson, D.B. "Three Centuries of Hellenistic Terracottas." *Hesperia* 21, no. 2 (1952):
116-164.
Tiverios, M. *Elliniki techni, archaia angaia* 1996.
Tiverios, M. "Panathenaic amphorases." In *The Panathenaic Games*, edited by Olga
Uhlenbrock, J.P. "The study of ancient Greek terracottas: a historiography of the


