

Objects within Ritual.
Interpreting Ancient Greek Religious Nomenclature and Practices
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1. Project goal

This project aims at examining material culture and its relation to ritual. While material culture as well as Greek religion and ritual have indeed received a fruitful attention in recent years, the uses of objects in ritual are still an underexplored topic. The category used to interpret them is that of “ritual objects”. This overall category is, however, absent from the Greek sources. In the light of ancient names and uses of categories of material objects it appears that this all-encompassing modern concept does not correspond to any ancient ones. Thus, I propose to develop a methodology that will allow, to the extent possible, to look at these “objects” from the eyes of the people to whom they were originally directed. Adopting an anthropological approach allows for a better reading of these objects not as “archaeological evidence” but as they might have actually been perceived and used.

2. Description of research

A close reading of the evidence, questioning both the ancient sources and their modern interpretations, will allow to nuance modern nomenclature and classifications. The project is interdisciplinary in the sense that it brings together literary, epigraphic and archaeological data. The comparison of these different bodies of evidence allows for the identification of discrepancies as to how each field approaches and interprets this data.

Examining the ancient categories as they appear in the ancient sources and confronting them to the modern ones, will allow us to closely consider the significance of material culture within ancient ritual practices. In order to establish these categories, we shall focus on the Athenian and the Delian inventories that are the most complete series of classical inscriptions (434/4-ca 300 BCE and 4th c.-166 BCE respectively) and give us the most comprehensive view of what is present in a sanctuary at a given moment. Both these corpora are related and allow, moreover, a comparison of the categories in two different places and also across time. Greek categories are indeed shaped according to material, possession status and usefulness with no link with specific gods or rituals. Literary sources that relate to the same categories and objects are also examined in this context. Another way to examine the role of objects in ritual is to focus on the naming strategy of festivals and rituals. When a name involves an object, the latter is not necessarily present in the actual ritual. After the classical sources, we need to follow the state of the available evidence. In some cases, the announced chronological and geographical frame needs to be extended in order to take into account the available data on specific questions. Festivals’ and officials’ names lead for instance to consider the Asia Minor inscriptions. Regulations concerning objects in sanctuaries, uses, treasuring and administration, lead to consider the entire epigraphic corpus independently of date or provenance. Moreover, extending the strictly classical frame allows to consider changes in the ritual naming mechanisms of specific categories of object as well as changes in the types of objects used in time and space. In the light of the ancient categories we are entitled to question function and functionality, special and every-day or plain objects, ritualization mechanisms, and the very pertinence of the category of ritual objects.

3. Reasons for attempting this particular research topic

The fashion of studies on material culture did not entail, until now, a systematic examination of nomenclature and categorization of objects in Greek sanctuaries. A systematic study of the role they play in ritual is missing. This will allow us to precisely reconsider ritual practices. The understanding of the ancient categories will help us solve questions raised by methodological issues at the intersection of several disciplines.

4. Substantial results expected

This work will consist in an analysis of ancient sources (literary, epigraphical, and archaeological) pertaining to the relationship between material culture and ritual. The various corpora show indeed discrepancies according to sources that we need to reconsider in order to avoid generalizations and projections from one type onto another. Thus we shall picture how Greek sources name and consider objects within ritual, nuancing our conception of material culture and ritual. The expression “ritual object” is here a mere heuristic tool rather than an operative expression. Its analysis will show the various ancient mechanisms and uses of naming of festivals and rituals, the variety of functions we can attribute to objects as supports of ritual practices, and the value of modern inferences regarding ritual objects as an all-encompassing and self-explanatory category.