

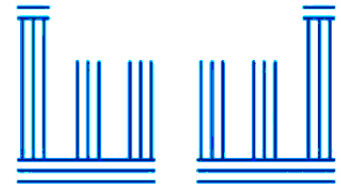


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FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS  
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## CONFERENCE ATHENS 8 - 10 MAY 2024

### **The Constant Participant: Constructing and Affirming Identity through Material Culture in Ancient Greek Sanctuaries and Modern Museums.**



*Votives from the Athana Lindia Sanctuary in Rhodes at the National Museum of Denmark. Photo: John Lee*

Material culture is a constant participant in the construction and affirmation of individual and collective history and identities through time. It has been utilized both in ancient and modern public settings, where objects may take center stage through intention and/or accumulation. This conference will focus on object agency and their *chaînes opératoires* by following specific groups of objects from their ancient modes of production to practical and performative use in ancient Greek sanctuaries and ritual places, through to their modern presentative state as they are held in museum exhibitions. Both ancient sanctuaries and modern museums represent revered, carefully guarded, civic and political spaces, that are central settings for creation and representation of identity.

Ancient Greek sanctuaries and ritual places were important platforms of communication. The dedications and rituals carried both direct and indirect messages for the deity and the cultic community that viewed them. Dedications conveyed what the dedicators explicitly desired to be known, but also what implicitly grew out of societal and cultic traditions established over time. Their accumulated presence in the sanctuary made them continuous reminders of shared rituals, culture, and history in the community. Such objects may have been created by a specific group of artisans which may or may not have been part of the society in which they were used for the

specific purpose of being dedicated. Moreover, the networks these objects were part of and the context they acted in, make them the ever active and constant participants in the construction and communication of both individual and societal identities through time. These purposefully made objects may thus also carry their artisans imprints within them as part of their own communicated identities (material or otherwise).

Modern-day national and local museums alike also work as communicators on several levels. As the hosts of display spaces for past and/or “other” cultures, they are generally considered to be used to communicate historical knowledge and interpretation, while also directing, creating, and enforcing notions of identities either as opposed to the displayed or as mirrors of the shared. In their individual past contexts, the utilization of and perspective on the objects was subject to constant change. In ancient times, the object that was initially a votive dedication with a primary function as a mediator towards the deity on behalf of the dedicator, grew into a testament of tradition, as well as the history and (possible) grandeur of the sites. As such, these objects became representations of the cultic community and society. This changed again, as objects were either actively discarded, deposited, or just left. These acts provide evidence about the perception both of the objects and the changing society around them. In museums, the history and intentions of displays are often reflections of different and changing perceptions of the collected objects’ purposes and messages, whether they be about education, history, the grand past, or, more recently, a critical view of colonialism.

By analysing and discussing the objects and their interaction in various settings in a diachronic perspective, we may achieve a new understanding of the construction and manipulation of multiple identities through material culture over time.

The conference aims to focus on the potential analyses of the *life cycles* of these objects, taking the different life stages into account with an intent to study and discuss the perception and agency in the stages of active usage of these objects: (1) their *birth* understood as the various stages of production; (2) their *use lives* in their ancient contexts; (3) their death as the point of discard and deposition and, (4) connecting these with the conceptual life stage of their *afterlives* in their modern settings.

The approach might provide a unique example-driven understanding of the agency of material culture in public spaces in relation to human identity and self-perceptions. The main research questions are:

1. How and where were sacred objects produced, used and presented to create, reflect, reshape, and affirm individual and collective identities in the public and political settings that the ancient Greek sanctuaries and ritual places were?
2. How are those ancient sacred objects presented and used to create, reflect, reshape, and affirm individual and collective identity in the public and political settings that today's national and local museums are?
3. How has the revering and manipulation of chosen objects in guarded public settings been used to construct and affirm cultural identities in ancient and modern times?

The chosen timeframe allows for objects found in sacred contexts dating from prehistory until late antiquity. The purpose of the planned conference is to facilitate better understanding of the cultural value and use of objects as identity shapers, markers and enforcers in society, especially in sacred contexts. As iconography, symbolism, and setting are all created and used according to both practical and ideological desires, human interaction with objects has the potential to reveal the diverse perceptions and ideas that are at play in both ancient and modern societies. What can they tell us about human mindsets and societal structures in sacred settings? How and why do we manipulate our material reality to achieve what we desire? And can a better understanding of these questions inform future engagements with objects – including objects of once sacred significance – in public and civic settings such as museums? The conference aims to further future diachronic research on the way material culture is entangled with our self-perception and the creation of status and identity. As each human being goes through a life cycle of our own, the objects we interact with do so as well and cross our paths at various stages. It is these crossing-of-paths we aim for in presenting and discussing our research during this conference.

#### Organizing committee:

Dr. Sanne Hoffmann, Assistant Director at the Danish Institute at Athens.

Prof. Dr. Ann Brysbaert, Director of Netherlands Institute Athens, Prof. of Ancient Technologies, Materials and Crafts, Leiden University (The Netherlands).

Dr. Petra Pakkanen, Director at the Finnish Institute at Athens.

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