‘Small things remembered’: the under-theorized domestic material culture of Hellenistic Greece

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Abstract

This paper argues that the material culture of Hellenistic Greece, particularly the domestic, small-scale material culture of ‘Old Greece’ (the Greek homeland), is urgent need of being viewed synoptically by archaeologists and historians in the light of developments in material culture theory that are being applied to other periods and places. Where the archaeological evidence permits, artefacts should be interpreted in the context of the assemblages of which they form part, in order to begin to understand the value and meaning they held for those who used them. Imaginative reconstruction, such as that attempted by Deetz, may also be of value.

Keywords: material culture, Hellenistic history, domestic assemblages, meaning, fictional reconstruction, Greek social history

Narratives

Samos, c. 275 BC

Zopyrion watched as his mother prepared the evening meal in the two-roomed mudbrick house that was their home, overlooking the harbour. The warships of Ptolemy had arrived that day, disgorging sailors from all over the Inner Sea. They had brought a mix of Egyptian gifts to smooth their way in the taverns of the waterfront. Zopyrion’s mother, perhaps against her better judgement, had bought a clay figurine of the god Sarapis, latterly so popular. Now it stood on a high shelf in the corner of the main room. Zopyrion wondered what the sailors would take back with them to Alexandria: perhaps pots of Samian honey for their girlfriends and wives, or pieces of the newfangled red-slipped pottery which his uncle Rhoikos had started making in his workshop at the back of the city.

Aï Khanum, c. 260 BC

Banabelos sighed as the horse slowed, sensing the stable was near. It had been a tiresome journey all the way from Babylon to this outpost of Antiochos’s realm. He couldn’t even remember the place’s Greek name. But the sight of the grand buildings woke him from his lethargy, and he turned to admire the theatre and colonnades, teeming with all manner of men engaged in their trades – here a copper-beater, there a shoemaker – offering the latest fashions direct from Alexandria, or so they said. Why do we have to have shoes from that sink of corruption, Ptolemy’s capital, thought Banabelos. But at least he would be in comfortable lodgings tonight and could spend time in the new gymnasium tomorrow.

Sparta, c. 240 BC

Hybrion watched as the new king rode past. He had little interest in who the king was, but recent events had made all the helots conscious that life was changing. Hadn’t the aristocrats even strung up one of the kings last year? He turned back to his lathe and resumed the tedious job of fashioning arrows for the army. The weather was unseasonably cold for October, so he called his niece to put more wood chips on the brazier. The girl picked up the brazier, protecting her hands with two of the cloth bags in which Hybrion kept his tools, and brought it closer to her uncle. ‘Get yourself a drink, my dear’, said his uncle, and the girl, tired from a long morning helping in the workshop, picked a leather beaker off the table and went to the great jar of water in the corner. She scooped a few mouthfuls up with the clay ladle and poured them into her beaker, removed a few stray basil leaves out, and dropped them back in the water.

Those familiar with the scholarship on material culture will recognize that I am paying tribute to the historical archaeologist James Deetz (1930–2000). The phrase ‘small things forgotten’, used in the title of his most famous
book\textsuperscript{2}, derives from a New England house inventory. My imaginative reconstructions imitate those with which he opens the work. They also find interesting resonance in a recent discussion of how ancient historians can liberate themselves from a Eurocentric view of Greece. Prompted by the gravestone of a metic woodcutter in fifth-century Athens, Vlassopoulos asks: How would our Phrygian converse with his Athenian mates, while serving in his Athenian regiment?\textsuperscript{3} What would a low-class Athenian think while he was reading this epigram, while passing by going to work in his workshop?\textsuperscript{9}

I often ask students, as a stimulus to imagination and a corrective to scholarly abstraction, what they think was actually happening in the Athenian agora (or some other place) on a wet Tuesday morning in a particular season of such-and-such a year. Who was selling what to whom? What sorts of background noises could be heard? Who was plotting his next political move with whom and trying not to be noticed? What goods for sale were lying about on temporary booths, or on the ground? And so on. These essays in reasoned picture-building relate strongly to the way in which we study material culture.\textsuperscript{4}

A gap in research

One of the most glaring gaps in scholarly literature on the hellenistic period, particularly from the point of view of a historian, is a book-length overview of its material culture. There are, in fact, very few publications on the hellenistic period in whose titles the phrase ‘material culture’ occurs\textsuperscript{5}. Rotroff’s seminal chapter being the most notable exception.\textsuperscript{6} By an overview I do not mean, of course, a comprehensive typological study of artefacts and chronology, but a synthetic treatment of part or parts of the hellenistic oikoumene addressing questions about social and ideological change.

Major handbooks exist, of course. They cover such classes of artefacts as terracottas\textsuperscript{7}, jewellery\textsuperscript{8}, coins\textsuperscript{9}, architecture\textsuperscript{10}, and above all (I mean in the largest numbers) sculpture\textsuperscript{11}—to mention but a few. It is perhaps symptomatic of traditional concerns that the standard handbook on what its title refers to as hellenistic ‘art’ is in fact almost entirely about sculpture, with brief excursuses into mosaics, architecture, and (in passing) other pictorial representations such as wall-paintings and relief ceramics\textsuperscript{12}. The same is broadly true of a recent, and brilliant, developmental analysis of the Greek influence on Roman art, though its authors choose to put painting first.\textsuperscript{13}

There are many important volumes—too many to list here—on the pottery (usually fine wares) and other classes of finds from specific excavations, such as Athens and Corinth. There are catalogues of exhibitions and museum collections\textsuperscript{14}. Professor Drougou has organized eight Scientific Meetings on Hellenistic Pottery (Επιστημονικά Συναντήσεις για την Ελληνιστική Κεραμική) so far\textsuperscript{15}, in which over 500 papers, posters, and abstracts have been presented; of those, only about one in ten takes a view wider than a particular site or locality,\textsuperscript{16} though in many cases this only means analysing the development or distribution of a particular ceramic form across the wider Greek world. A still smaller number of the studies in these excellent volumes attempt to characterize a regional society, economy, or culture; or to examine the meanings which artefacts had for ancient users, the use contexts in which they are found, or the assemblages of disparate objects of which they formed part.\textsuperscript{17}

Some classes of artefacts, such as jewellery or figurines, are treated in substantial volumes often covering the whole of Greek, or even the whole of Greco-Roman, antiquity. These and other so-called ‘minor arts’ are even less likely than fine pottery to receive synthetic and contextual treatment, and in excavation reports they are all too likely to be relegated to a catch-all chapter called ‘Small finds’\textsuperscript{18}, whether they are individually small or not. Coarse and unpainted pottery often receives only summary treatment. In her recent studies of classical and hellenistic furnishings, Andrianou makes similar points about the misrepresentation of so-called minor objects.\textsuperscript{19} And all of these points could be made with redoubled force for the hellenistic period, since few overviews of artefact types are specifically focused on this period, let alone on the social background to the artefacts in question.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{2} Deetz 1996.
\textsuperscript{3} Vlassopoulos 2007 (quotation from 237).
\textsuperscript{4} Key works on approaches to material culture include Bradley 1990; Chapman 2000; Cumberpatch and Blinkhorn 1997b; Deetz 1996; Garwood et al. 1991; Gosden 1999; Hill 1995; Moore 1982; Richards and Thomas 1984; Shanks 1996; Sterner 1989; Wells 1999.
\textsuperscript{5} One is to do with households in Greco-Roman Delos, with particular reference to early Christian times: Trümper 2003. The ‘cluster’ of papers in TAPhA 137. 2 (2007) collectively entitled ‘Literary and material culture in hellenistic Greece’ (introduction in Miller 2007) is important, but they focus variously on the materiality of inscriptions (Champion 2007) and of books of epigrams (Höschele 2007), the theft of statues from Sicily by Verres (Rosenmeyer 2007), and the relationship between poetry and painting (Gurd 2007) – not on settlement archaeology.
\textsuperscript{6} Rotroff 2006.
\textsuperscript{7} e.g. Higgins 1963.
\textsuperscript{8} e.g. Boardman 2001.
\textsuperscript{9} Overview in Davis and Kraay 1973.
\textsuperscript{10} e.g. Wycherley 1978; Lauter 1986; Lawrence 1996.
\textsuperscript{11} Classic works include Smith 1988; Smith 1991.
\textsuperscript{12} Pollitt 1986.
\textsuperscript{13} Beard and Henderson 2001.
\textsuperscript{14} e.g. Pfommer 1993; Pfommer 2001 (but see criticisms of Rotroff 2002).
\textsuperscript{16} (Figures based on the first seven meetings.) I do not include the general discussions and conclusions at the end of each conference.
\textsuperscript{17} Examples, all from the later conferences, include Doulgeri-Intzesiloglou 2000; Morel 1997; Rizakis 2004; Rizakis and Touratsoglou 2011; Rotroff 1997.
\textsuperscript{18} As remarked by Allison 1997.
\textsuperscript{19} Andrianou 2009, esp. 3–4.
\textsuperscript{20} On hellenistic art see now Burn 2005 with Gorrie’s review in
A welcome exception to the above generalizations appears to reside in Tal’s synthesis of the material culture (in its widest sense) of hellenistic Palestine21, though he is apparently seeking to answer broad questions of cultural continuity between periods, rather than to understand individual (public or domestic) environments. Art and architecture can also be used to address questions of culture contact22. Equally welcome is Andrianou’s emphasis upon the use and depositional context of Greek furniture, marking a contrast with many earlier studies of artefacts, which are rarely if ever presented in their context of discovery. They are typically divided between specialists whose task is to establish – as is indeed necessary – a chronology and typology of their own material by invoking comparanda from other sites, rather than to go further and contribute to an elucidation of the social or economic features of the society that occupied a site. In a complete site report the project directors may write a synthetic chapter, usually quite brief, drawing general conclusions but not systematically showing by what methods the finds, let along ‘small finds’, have been analysed to produce those conclusions23. In some respects the authors of field survey volumes have done better in this respect, starting from compartmentalized study of types but teasing out (usually in period-specific sections) diachronic social change from the variation in surface assemblages recovered; for example the field surveys of Keos24, Laconia25, Methana26, and so on.

Conversely, the work of hellenistic historians – even those who use quantitative and other data from excavations to investigate economies (such as in the Liverpool volumes)27 – usually stands at a remove from the work of archaeologists. Two recent historical surveys of the hellenistic period in English are noticeably short on overviews of Greek archaeology: those tend to focus on archaic and classical and to underplay the hellenistic. This is not just a problem of the hellenistic subfield. Even a session on ‘Material histories and textual archaeologies’ at the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference in 200028, an event normally attended by at least some ancient historians, attracted an audience made up entirely of archaeologists29. The work of Sauer in explicitly bridging the gap between ancient history and classical archaeology, based on a session at the 2001 TAG31, seems to have had limited impact as far as hellenistic studies are concerned32. Efforts to provide more sophisticated theoretical underpinnings for classical archaeology as a whole have gathered pace with important publications33, but this, too, has so far had a limited impact on hellenistic studies. Most historians of this period remain uninterested in the hands-on process of interpreting individual artefacts, or even in the compiled quantitative data regarding classes of artefact, and hence in the rules of evidence which a rigorous engagement with archaeology imposes; conversely, classical archaeologists (at least in the English-speaking world) often rely on outdated historical analyses or fail to offer sufficiently complex historical explanations or to problematize those they do offer. As always, there are opportunities to go forward, such as that provided by the imminent ‘Theory in Greek Archaeology’ conference34, though at the time of writing none of the titles of papers so far announced appears to focus on the hellenistic period as such.

Hellenistic studies were not always so strongly compartmentalized between historians and archaeologists. Consider the wealth of archaeological evidence exploited by Tarn in his work on Baktria35; or, again, consider how Rostovtzeff’s Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World (originally published in 1941)36 is decorated with photographs of scores of artefacts of many different categories – portrait sculptures, coin portraits, bronze copies of busts, relief carvings, ceramic and metal vases, gravestones, terracottas, faience statuettes, mosaics, wall-paintings (from Pompeii), glassware, jewellery, paintings representing textiles, bronze figurines, and so on. What Rostovtzeff does not do – understandably, given the era in which he was working – is to ‘read’ artefacts systematically, and with strict rules of engagement, in order to get history and society out of them. His aim seems to be, rather, that of illustrating the rapidly changing, multi-cultural nature of the hellenistic world whose economies are his central concern. Many of his artefacts are given no context in terms of an assemblage – indeed, they may have lacked such a context in the first place, especially those in museum collections. Nevertheless, one is grateful for the mind-broadening range of his expertise and the stimulus he gives us if we wish to conjure up imaginatively the aspects of life about which sources and inscriptions do not tell us. I should like to pay tribute, too, to another volume – somewhat neglected, I judge, since I have rarely if ever

seen it cited – which makes a bold attempt to integrate artefacts with history. I have in mind the Plates volume to the Cambridge Ancient History volume vii part 1, edited by Ling\cite{ling1984}; particularly his own chapters on ‘Houses and life’, ‘Sport and education’, ‘Theatre’, ‘Religion’, and ‘Death and burial’.

With very few comparable exceptions, it seems that when either archaeologists or historians do attempt to do justice to hellenistic material culture, they do not always follow through very convincingly. Stamped amphora handles, for example, may be used as a measure of trade volume and direction, but not of culture. The former is a perfectly valid way of addressing certain questions, and I am certainly not saying the same one person should practise both; rather, I am urging that both should be done. Again, drinking vessels and the manner in which wine was consumed are typically interpreted on the basis of the Attic symposium, not that of wider consumption practices; yet we now know taverns existed in Greece, and that the symposium was the exception, not the rule\cite{rotroff2006}. Studies have shown that existing typologies of divided domestic space, such as those involving the notions of the andron and gymnaiikonitis (the male room and the female room), are too schematic, and that rooms at Olynthos and elsewhere had multiple uses. In other studies, regrettably, pottery styles that draw on iconographic elements from multiple sources, or different styles of pottery occurring together, are sometimes taken simply as evidence of migration and the co-existence of different ethnic groups. Scholars may even fall into the trap of estimating the proportion of each ethnic group in a population from the proportions of different pottery styles.

There is an additional problem of combining sources of different kinds: for example, representations of women, such as figurines, are sometimes compared with literary texts, such as Menander\cite{andrianou2008}, rather than interpreted as possible evidence of changes in social relations in their own right – let alone interpreted alongside the objects with which they were found. Cultural analysis does not always get further than treating, for example, apparent borrowings from classical styles, or from the culture of Old Greece, as expressions of a Hellenism beleaguered in a sea of barbarian culture.

**Great men and others**

My particular interest in raising these issues is born of a desire to know more about the everyday, small-scale material culture of the hellenistic period, for most aspects of which there are, as far as I am aware, no synthetic treatments. I have in mind not only the so-called minor arts – figurines, coins, metalwork, jewellery, and so on – but also pottery assemblages, where the data are available. In a chapter in an edited survey of the period, Rotroff gives a wonderful list of the kinds of things that must have existed, of which I quote a part: utilitarian objects and structures that, were we walking through a Hellenistic environment, we might not particularly notice, but which nonetheless carry important messages about life in that environment.

... in the house, aside from the house itself and its fittings (doors, locks, paving, walls and their decoration, roof tiles, water pipes), furniture, domestic tools (looms, washtubs), textiles, baskets, wineskins, the pottery for storage, cooking, serving, eating, drinking, washing, and bathing, equipment for the household shrine, toilet items and secular ornaments; on ancient bodies, clothing, footwear, and items of personal adornment; in public buildings, ballots and voting machines, public measures, tokens and nametags, inscriptions, papyrus rolls, writing tablets; in the workshop, the potter’s wheel, sculptor’s tools, kilns, furnaces; on the farm, hoes, plowstones, harnesess, beeves; in the gymnasium and the bath, athletic and bathing paraphernalia (jumping weights, discus, balls, strigils); and at shrines, votive pottery and figurines, offering tables, and sacrificial equipment. Out on the borders, soldiers on patrol would present another collection (armor, weaponry) and the unlucky victims of a siege could view from their walls the approaching material culture of the enemy in the form of siege machines. At sea, the ship, perhaps the most complex piece of material culture of its time, laden with its cargo of commodities and material culture, was also crammed with the nets, knives, cooking pots, crockery, gaming pieces, and navigational devices that sustained the crew and the passengers throughout the voyage\cite{arnold2000}.

One of the goals at which history should surely aim is the reconstruction of daily life and personal relationships, particularly when written sources are virtually silent on these matters. It is not as if politics is divorced from personal relations. John Arnold, in his splendid book *History: A Very Short Introduction*, argues compellingly that cataclysmic events happen not merely because of great men but precisely *because* of the non-great – not to mention women, including great ones\cite{arnold2000}. The English civil war, for example, or the colonization of America, or the Reformation could not have happened without the mass (not an undifferentiated mass!) of ordinary and middling folk who were prepared to follow others, often into danger. There have been plenty of potentially charismatic leaders who never led anyone. Luther was not the first to nail theses to a church door, but he found a response others had not. And so on. One could make a similar point about Alexander the Great: his conquest would not have taken place without the tens of thousands of people willing to follow him. Their material culture, I suspect, has not been of much interest to ancient historians, even historians of ancient art.

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\footnote{Ling 1984.}

\footnote{Kelly-Blazeby 2008; also Kelly-Blazeby 2001.}

\footnote{Again, the work of Andrianou marks a significant step forward in the sophistication with which archaeological and literary evidence are combined.}

\footnote{Rotroff 2006, 136–137.}

\footnote{Arnold 2000.}
The first part of Rotroff’s imaginative list is perhaps the most tantalizing. Artefacts relating to technology, political-military life, or commerce relate to areas of ancient society that have tended to dominate research in any case. How much more urgent to look for evidence of value and meaning in the artefacts from domestic contexts! This sphere, it seems to me, offers the greatest potential for innovation. It might be objected that the amount of meaningful comparison we can make is limited by the differential preservation of different kinds of data in the conditions of the eastern Mediterranean, as well as by the inadequate recording practices of older excavations; but excavation and publication practice has changed, and we surely have a wide enough of range of small artefacts – sometimes even assemblages in context – to make the attempt worthwhile.

Reasons for neglect?

Why has the small-scale material culture of the period not been synoptically viewed or adequately theorized?

One undoubted reason is the relative decline of interest in hellenistic history during much of the twentieth century, at least in the English-speaking world. ‘Classical archaeology’ in its Greek embodiment has tended to mean the archaeology of the archaic and, as the name suggests, classical periods, the hellenistic often being appended or subsumed in studies of artefact categories such as jewellery, fine pottery, and sculpture. Happily, the level of interest in hellenistic history has revived since the 1980s, and one may hope that this carries over into the study of archaeology.

Another explanation, superficially attractive, could be that, as with archaic and classical Greece, it takes a huge effort just to make sense of, and in particular to date, the vast amount of material remains. To put it less charitably, the quantity of finds gives us plenty to keep us at work, so that we are not under too much pressure to devise theoretical models. One step in rebutting that view would be to point to the post-Winckelmann aestheticism that was, until recently, dominant in all quarters of classical archaeology and that still has great influence, perhaps particularly in the USA. This approach either admires what it selects as ‘art’ or ‘arts’ and marginalizes other classes of artefacts, or actually regards hellenistic art as second-rate in comparison with classical, compounding the problem.

A more convincing explanation for our failure to develop a strongly social approach to hellenistic material culture is that this period, like the classical, is one for which we have written sources, so that we tend to think we have all the necessary reference points to understand society and ideology – or, better, societies and ideologies. One could respond, however, not only that the sources for the period are very gappy42, but also that material culture theory has been most actively developed precisely in the study of literate societies such as early colonial America. And it is clearly not the case that Greek sources, or sources for any period, tell us all we would like to know about social relationships and attitudes.

New work

On the positive side, some studies have attempted to move in the direction indicated. All those I know of are by archaeologists rather than historians. One of the few explicit considerations of hellenistic material culture is Rotroff’s chapter, already mentioned43. It contains valuable pointers to what might be done, though given the introductory character of the volume of which it forms part, it understandably does little more than that. Rotroff does make telling points about the non-correspondence of datable artefact types either with the conventional limits of the period or, indeed, with each other. So-called hellenistic pottery, such as the new lagynos shape, perhaps intended for a single drinker’s portion of wine, can attest changes in drinking practices. Amphoras are valuable interpretative tools not only when they have stamped handles: some 90 per cent probably had no stamp, and these too must be considered. The use of rooms in elite houses, she remarks, becomes more flexible in this period. Greek cooking ware shapes are adopted in new places, helping to define a hellenistic koine. At a certain stage Italian cooking wares enter on the scene. Some pottery styles may be described as hybrid (combining ostensibly Hellenic and non-Hellenic elements), and the interplay between conservatism, innovation, and fusion may illuminate cultural change. Material culture may tell us even more about non-Greek cultures than about Greek cultures not described in the sources. Changes in the representation of women may be the basis for a study of ideological changes. Finally, the design, use, and location of artefacts may reflect the importance of memory and ‘spirit of place’ (if I may foist upon Rotroff a term popularized, though not invented, by Lawrence Durrell), such as the attempt to claim a heroic past, discussed in Alcock’s classic paper on late classical–early hellenistic cult at Bronze Age tombs44. Residue analysis may further elucidate the physical uses to which ceramic artefacts were put.

To Rotroff’s general methodological statement one may juxtapose a few detailed studies that engage with issues of context and interpretation45. Houby-Nielsen has argued that the abandonment of sculpted grave monuments in Athens, under and after the regime of Demetrios of Phaleron, was

43 Rotroff 2006.
44 Alcock 1991.
not the result of his sumptuary law but part of a wider trend (already proposed in her earlier paper on the Kerameikos) towards (a) equal treatment of men and women and (b) the conscious placing of grave markers against a background of earlier, still visible sculptural monuments meaning that people had a certain sense of landscape, of the placing of new monuments in a context that evoked a vision of the past; she uses the term ‘romantic’ at one point. Her earlier study calls to mind one of the few attempts I have seen to tease out the implications for social attitudes from art: Sutton’s study of fifth-century vase iconography, which argues for a softening of gender opposition at Athens and a greater willingness to permit women’s sexuality to be represented iconographically. Zanker’s study of sculptural reliefs from Smyrna is another such attempt; while the work of Masséglia represents the most comprehensive attempt yet to reassess the notion of individualism in hellenistic figurative sculpture.

Clearly the methodological climate is slowly changing, and some site publications now acknowledge the need for more synoptic analysis. Thus Eiring, in his excellent study of graves at Aitolian Chalkis – from which comes the cover photo on the relevant volume of *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens*, showing a selection of finds all from one tomb – declares as his ultimate goal a synthetic study of West Greek burial customs.

I should not of course neglect to mention complementary historical studies which attempt to characterize certain classes of social relationships in great detail, for example Gabrielsen’s outstanding work on Rhodian associations. Nor would I rule out, as irrelevant to the study of everyday material culture, studies of economies and trade patterns based on the evidence of pottery and other finds. Elsewhere I have argued on the basis of studies of particular sites and localities that the stylistic analyses of early hellenistic pottery in the Peloponnese allow us to identify at least two different ‘Peloponneses’. Some regions are characterized by the pottery experts as conservative and inward-looking: Eleia, the small *poleis* of Achaia and Arkadia, and the *polis* of Messene; while others show more active links with the wider world: Corinth, Dyne, coastal Messenian towns, and, perhaps surprisingly, inland Laconia including Geronthrai. It is also possible to divide the Peloponnesian into a northern and north-western zone where pottery styles are apparently influenced more by Corinth, with other areas such as Laconia and coastal Messenia displaying stronger stylistic links with Magna Graecia and the eastern Mediterranean, particularly Alexandria. It would be interesting to tie this in with possible social and ideological developments in different areas.

While networks are vital to understand, we must not shirk the attempt to go beyond them and comprehend the social relations that underlay them.

**A new agenda?**

When Michael Shanks published his provocative book on Greek archaeology, he highlighted the need for a sociologically and anthropologically informed approach to artefacts. What, then, is it possible to aspire to do for the hellenistic period, and how feasible is the task?

To turn an earlier point on its head: hellenistic archaeology is extremely well placed to move forward into a new phase of study informed by material culture theory, precisely because the material record is relatively rich. To formulate telling questions, however, it will be necessary to draw upon methods applied by archaeologists to other cultures, as well as upon sociological and anthropological discourses.

In an encyclopaedia article, Morphy emphasizes, first, artefacts as ‘indices of cultural boundaries and markers of social categories’; second, as evidence of transformations in the value and meaning of objects as they move from context to context, either as part of local exchange systems or global trading processes. Material objects frequently outlast their maker; thus they are both sources of evidence about previous lifeways and objects to be reflected on by the generations who succeed their makers. People make meaningful objects but they can also change the meaning of objects.

This formulation, while not exhausting the interpretative possibilities, does seem helpful, above all in its stress on **value** and **meaning** – notions I have rarely seen attached to the hellenistic ‘minor’ arts. The relative values we place on material items are not always predictable or consistent. When my family and I moved house a few years ago, we left behind (temporarily, since our old house was not yet sold) some of our most valuable silver-plated utensils because we didn’t have room for them. Among the things we took great care **not** to leave behind were a number of rather tired-looking mugs, some well-worn soft toys, and a very old, handmade table of rather ordinary pine, which we valued for its utility.

The term ‘historical archaeology’ carries a special meaning in the English-speaking context, namely the post-colonization archaeology of North America. Deetz’s classic study of early modern American life includes extensive discussion of ceramic finds, and prompts one to formulate questions about the hellenistic period. First, can we do more with the function and use of particular vessel shapes, for example to extract information about

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49 Masséglia 2102; Masséglia forthcoming.
50 Eiring 2004, esp. 155.
53 Shanks 1996, esp. ch. 6.
54 Morphy 2004 (quotations from pp. 620 and 621).
Of course, it is a moot point whether there is a distinctively hellenistic material culture, or even cultures, as opposed to ‘categories of material evidence that happen to be datable within certain chronological limits’58. Equally, we must keep an open mind about the extent to which there was such a thing as a hellenistic material culture koine and, if so, when it existed and where, and when and where it did not. The interplay between koine, region, and locality must also be borne in mind59. Given the quality of recent excavations from urban sites outside Old Greece – for example at Tell Anafa in Israel60, Failaka off Kuwait61, and Jebel Khalid in Syria62 – it may well be that the most fruitful areas for investigation small-scale material culture lie in the ‘new’ Greek lands of western Asia. On the other hand, the intensity with which material from Greece itself has been studied may also lend itself to contextual investigation.

We are of course at the mercy of older excavation methods, as well as of delayed publication or even the failure to publish – what might be called ‘un-publication’. Above all we are at the mercy of preservation of data, or the lack of it. The imagined sketches at the beginning of this paper may be thought of, in some respects, as shopping lists for what we would like to know rather than drawing on what we do know or even what we can hope to know. Zopyrion’s self-interrogation about the harbour at Samos is predicated on Ptolemaic naval control of the island in the third century and the presumption that the fleet was manned by a cosmopolitan mix of well-travelled sailors; despite their officially military preoccupations, they ‘surely would have’ acted as long-distance purveyors of acculturation in several directions (Samian honey to Egypt is just one plausible object of trade)63. But would a family whose mother had no slave to cook for her necessarily live in a relatively generously proportioned building? Only a probabilistic case can be made, and it would need to be made on the basis of the best current knowledge and theory. The fiction, consciously un-grounded in direct evidence, asks questions; it does not seek to provide authoritative answers. Neither do those about the craftsmen at Ai Khanum (whose Greek name is indeed uncertain) who are aware of Egyptian fashion (which seems wholly likely), and about the Laconian helot (helots, too, have families)64 who works at his house but lives in relative comfort65.

All these perspectives may be enriched by the study of excavated artefacts. I suggest that, given the right kind of data, we can use the surviving domestic material culture of the hellenistic period to explore social relations and ideology in greater depth.

59 See now Colvin 2010 and, in the same volume, Erskine 2010, for sceptical remarks about notions of a linguistic or cultural koine in the hellenistic period.
60 Berlin and Slane 1997.
61 Hannestad 1983.
62 Jackson 2006 (figurines); Jackson 2011 (housing); Jackson and Tidmarsh 2011 (pottery); Jackson 2000 (lamps); Wright 2011. Cf. also study of Dura-Europos by Downey 1993.
63 Cf. Shipley 1987, 18 and 269, for circumstantial evidence that Samos then, as now, produced noted honey. Cf. the multifarious island goods imported into Alexandria in 259 BC (Austin 2006, no. 298 = Austin 1981, no. 237 = P. Cairo Zen. 59.012).
64 e.g. Hodkinson 2000, ch. 4.
65 A Hybrion was commemorated near the perioikic town of Sellasia: Shipley 1996, 214 no. 2; see also http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/laconia/inscription02.html (last visited on 11 Oct. 2012). To what social class he belonged remains unknown; Spartiates who died in battle...
We may never know whether Greek children would take water from a pithos using a ceramic ladle, but if we do not present such scenes – and alternatives – to our imagination we may struggle to get closer to both the functions of everyday objects and the meanings they held for people.

While we may not find the data to answer all our questions, I believe that we must ask those questions. If we do not, we impoverish our understanding of life in hellenistic Greece.

Bibliography


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were allegedly commemorated with a gravestone (Plut. Lyc. 27. 1), and the battlefield of Sellasia is close by, but the lettering may be Classical. His name is oddly derogatory and the carving, to all appearances, not that of a professional letter-cutter.


