

# Preface:

## Continuities and Changes of Meaning

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It is our pleasure to introduce the Distant Worlds Journal (DWJ), an online peer-reviewed journal established especially for presenting the research of early-career scholars on the ancient world. In seeking to encompass a broad range of distinct academic fields, each edition of the DWJ takes as its starting point a question or specific topic pertinent to the diverse disciplines engaged in the study of ancient cultures. In our opening edition, “Continuities and Changes of Meaning”, we thus wish to take up a question that both scrutinises and captures the very essence of scholarly endeavour: how does the meaning of an object change – or resist change? – throughout its “life” both in the past and, as an object of academic research, in the present? It was our aim in choosing this topic to not only address the changing functions, contexts, and interpretations of objects in antiquity, but also to problematise our own modes of interpreting the (material and textual) remains of societies temporally distant from our own.

The practice of speaking of a “life” of objects and providing them with a biography derives from the field of artefact studies. In this volume we refer to objects in the broadest sense: all manner of artefacts, texts, symbols, and images are objects – in short, anything and everything made by human hands which carries meaning. This meaning can be symbolic or practical; it can be abstractly conceived or closely bound to the actual use of the object in daily life. Trying to recognise and understand this meaning is a challenge that everyone working on past societies has to face. Since we cannot speak directly with members of these societies and ask them questions, we attempt to glean insight into their modes of thought and behaviour by “asking” the things they made and used – these are the sources upon which we base our knowledge. Unfortunately, these objects do not speak for themselves: the

same object could have an entirely different meaning in different societies or even be given different meanings by different people within the same society. An object could be created for a specific purpose, but later be reused for a different purpose, either because the new owners did not know of or because they intentionally changed the object’s former function. It is this dynamic that is the topic of the opening paper, “Biographies of Things” by Professor Anthony Harding, currently guest professor at the Graduate School for Ancient Studies “Distant Worlds” at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität of Munich. In his essay, Harding elucidates the theoretical framework concerned with the life of objects or “things”, and examines the value in considering a given object in multiple contexts – its “birth, life, and death”.

The lifecycles of ancient objects do not end with antiquity: after being excavated, they become objects of scholarly interest and are then given (assumed, reconstructed) meanings which they may never have had before. The difficulty in reconstructing an object's meaning is frequently exacerbated when the archaeological context has been lost or disturbed or when the conceptual, i.e. cultural context is particularly unclear. To make it even more complicated, (literary) texts often survive only as later copies and drawings or photographs are sometimes all that remains of images such as wallpaintings. Despite being closely attached to the concretely physical objects onto which they were written or painted, the abstract ideas conveyed by images and texts could travel and multiply. During their travels, they were transformed and underwent changes in form, language, and style. Reception studies therefore give important insights into how meaning could change over time or be changed intentionally, and are accordingly also represented in this volume. Silvia Salin explains the re-edition of Assyrian therapeutic texts and the difficulties which they presented to Neo-Assyrian and Mesopotamian scholars. Michael T. Miller analyses the reception of the patriarch Enoch and the changes and consistencies of this figure in the course of 2000 years. Nina Gschwind presents her thoughts on the reception of the Psalmic topos of "seeing God" in the Book of Job and the consequences this has for the relationship between Job and God. Anastasia-Stavroula Valtadorou looks at the authorship of the Greek tragedy *Rhesus*, and handles the provocative question of how much we, as scholars, form meaning by following our own preconceptions. In a theoretical paper, Olivier Dufault examines the anachronistic usages of the term "magic" and asks how we can apply our modern concept of magic to antiquity.

In the field of artefact studies, Marek Verčák follows the lifecycle of Assyrian armour-scales that were dedicated as votive offerings in the sanctuary of Apollo in Didyma (Asia Minor). Even after their context and practical use had changed, the scales retained their symbolic meaning; they constituted valuable and exotic gifts for the god by virtue of their Near-Eastern origin and the high social status of their former owners. In her article on grave goods from Hellenistic Etruria, Raffaella Da Vela analyses the changing function of three vessel types. Michael Kiefer shows changes of meaning in synchronic terms in his study of the multifunctionality of rooms in late-Roman houses. Robinson Peter Krämer investigates the extended function of Greek archaic sanctuaries as "trade ports", which resulted in significant economic and socio-cultural changes. In his paper on late Bronze Age material culture, Fabian Heil revisits the scholarly assumption of the "maritime aspect" of Cyprus, and in their discussion of the figure with a bow appearing on Gandhāran reliefs of Śākyamuni's "Great Departure", Robert Arlt and Satomi Hiyama bring new textual evidence to bear on the much-debated identity of this figure.<sup>1</sup>

The call for papers for the first volume elicited a strong response, and as the wide range of topics, disciplines, and material shows, there is a widespread interest in engaging with the construction of meaning and the biographies of objects from different perspectives. Although the papers might at first sight seem quite disparate, all address the same fundamental questions: to what extent are we able to understand the meaning of an

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object, and what exactly do we know about a given ancient culture? All of the essays contained in this volume show that objects are constructed, defined, and endowed with meaning entirely by the consumer.

Ascertaining the relation between meanings and objects is a highly thorny issue that dictates the way in which we construct our knowledge about life in the past. At a rather intrinsic level, then, this complex of meaning informs, consciously or unconsciously, all scholarly endeavours, and thus returning to the question of meaning itself is a necessary component of the scholarly process, a self-reflexive re-examination reaching to the heart of what we think and claim to know.

Each paper in this edition therefore examines the culturally embedded meaning of a specific object or corpus of objects. The papers are not arranged chronologically, geographically or by discipline, but according to the material they approach (artefacts, texts, and images). The volume offers the reader two possibilities: whilst those interested in a specific subject or ancient society can gain unique insights into the meaning of an object relevant for a specific discipline, era, or culture, scholars wishing to explore multiple spheres of interest can see how the process of accessing meaning is achieved within different individual disciplines. Together, our authors both reflect and systematise the complexities involved in understanding the continuities and changes of the meaning of objects.

The idea for this interdisciplinary journal was born out of the Munich Graduate School for Ancient Studies “Distant Worlds”, and we would like to thank the Graduate School and in particular its Chair, Professor Martin Hose, for enabling us to make this idea a reality. During the process

of establishing the journal and working on this first volume, numerous people have generously invested their time and showed great support: we would especially like to thank the members of our Advisory Board and the scholars all over the world who have acted as peer-reviewers. The Heidelberg University Library has, in cooperation with the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, kindly offered to host our journal at the academic online publishing platform Propyläum, and we are grateful to both for their support. We are also grateful to Ricardo Posdijk, who skilfully created the DWJ logo to reflect the distant-yet-not-so-distant worlds that we all seek to understand more deeply. Last but not least, our many thanks go to the entire Editorial Board, to the authors for their contributions to this volume, and to Claire Müller for her meticulous proof-reading. All mistakes remain, of course, our own.

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