

The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion in ancient Greece

Edited by Matthew Haysom, Maria Mili & Jenny Wallensten

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ABSTRACT

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

Keywords: Greek religion, Etruscan religion, Mycenaean religion, materiality, religious change, *temenos*, temples, offerings, cult statues, terracottas, *omphalos*, cauldrons, sacred laws, visuality, purity, pollution, gods’ identities, divine power, inscribed dedications

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Introduction

Abstract

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

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The material turn in the humanities and social sciences is now well-established. Across multiple disciplines this phenomenon consists of a set of essential elements. First comes a reading of the history of scholarship, which emphasises a preceding tendency to rarefy and privilege a realm of the mind divorced from the material world. Second, there is a recognition that people and the material world are co-dependent and intertwined. People’s imaginations are predicated on their material experiences. Objects and spaces have the capability to make human behaviours just as people make objects and spaces. Third, there is the assertion that an immaterial realm of the

mind does not exist. Cognition and emotion are themselves material phenomena. There is no form of culture without a material dimension. Elements of the debate around the material turn remain sources of discomfort within scholarship. There is ongoing disagreement, for example, about the degree and nature of any agency that should be attributed to objects. But the essential point, that people’s habits, their perceptions and understanding of the world are formed by their physical experience of living in it, is uncontroversial.¹

It has been recognised that this material turn has particularly momentous ramifications within the study of religion. Here, as much as anywhere, the tendency to prioritize an immaterial dimension of beliefs has been a dominant strand in scholarship—a strand that betrays western academia’s inheritances from Christian traditions that reject the material world in favour of the spiritual. David Morgan, in one of the most frequently cited contributions to the study of religion and material culture, provides a manifesto for a post-material turn study of religion, which inspired our organisation of this conference.² Morgan argues that belief should be thought of as a practice. It is “an embodied epistemology, the sensuous and material routines that produce an integrated (and culturally particular) sense of self, community and cosmos.”³ Belief is both formed through material experience and forms material experiences.

The material turn has certainly been felt within the discipline of Classics. Either ironically or fittingly, depending on one’s point of view, the turn can be most strongly detected in the corner of the discipline that has traditionally been most detached from material evidence: the study of literature. The

¹ For an excellent summary of these developments in archaeology, see Harris & Cipolla 2017. For other disciplines the bibliography is enormous but see, for some examples, Miller 2005; 2010; Bennett 2010.

² Morgan 2010.

³ Morgan 2010, 8.

last few years have seen a wave of stimulating studies looking at the role of objects in a variety of works from Homer, through lyric to drama.⁴ Where the material turn has explicitly influenced the study of Greek religion, the emphasis has often been on personal or subaltern experience and material beyond that traditionally studied.⁵ This volume extends this influence of materiality over the core corpus of data that has long concerned scholars of religion. Other trends in the Classics are less explicitly related to the material turn but are reflective of new creative outlooks opening up on the combination of textual and material evidence. One such trend can be found in the extraordinary success of a sophisticated series of theological discussions of visual media.⁶ Another is the boom in studies of text and monument.⁷ These combine art, epigraphy and other texts in novel ways, giving a new sense of the ancient experience of an inscribed material world. The outcome of this bundle of tendencies has been to move material culture more quickly from a peripheral position in the Classics to its centre than has ever been the case before.

This provides a ripe context for the application to Greek religion of the approach laid out by Morgan. There has, of course, been a long engagement between archaeology and the study of Greek religion. The Swedish Institute under Robin Hägg led the way in this approach, with a well-known series of conferences in the 1990s.⁸ The present work was conceived of as following in that tradition.⁹ But it is the premise of this volume that an explicit engagement with the material turn offers great opportunities. There has been a common consensus about what the study of material culture could hope to achieve within the study of Greek religion. First, material culture can complement texts. It can fill the gaps in the documentary record, revealing a topography of religion beyond the viewsheds of literature. Second, material culture can be an illustrative background providing images associated with the practices we read about in texts. Third, material objects can be symbols reflecting human interests and divine functions in religious settings. Fourth, archaeological material from sanctuaries can be used to address questions of social structure and change. We do not believe that the material turn presents a *tabula rasa* invalidating these kinds of approaches. Instead, it demands we go beyond these in our integration of material culture in discussions of Greek religion. We must allow material culture a

greater role in forming beliefs, practices and experiences. We need to reassess the ancient Greek conception of a religious material world and we need to look at how Greeks sought to create and manipulate appropriate material contexts for interactions with the divine. We need to acknowledge and investigate the distinctive contribution of material culture to change. To these ends the conference on which this volume is based brought together scholars to discuss and explore the contributions of material culture to the study of religion within and beyond traditional approaches.

The title the *Stuff of the Gods* was framed, with its deliberate colloquialism, to encapsulate the tension between the somewhat mundane aspect of material culture and the rarefied aspect of the divine. One of the great lessons of the material turn is that the power of materiality can be insidious. It can sometimes have its greatest influence when it is most humble, least noticed or most taken for granted. With this in mind we have taken the broadest possible definition of “stuff”, one that encompasses the entirety of the material world. By stuff we mean objects ranging from piles of dung to chryselephantine statues and spaces of all sorts. Another lesson of the material turn has to do with categories. It highlights the degree to which the lines between the material and the numinous that we are used to are dependent on our own cultural tradition. As a result, we have allowed a very broad understanding of “... of the gods”. We have avoided imposing an *a priori* set of categories delineating certain things as properly being the stuff of the gods. As the fundamental aim is to explore the relationship between religion and the material world, making such *a priori* decisions would invalidate the entire enterprise. At the same time, all aspects of materiality from the most humble to the most extraordinary have the potential to form people’s experience and expectations. Only with the broadest view can we allow the dynamics of material relationships to emerge. The material turn highlights the value of breaking interdisciplinary boundaries and combining things in new ways. As a result, we have aimed for a diverse mix of approaches and viewpoints. By bringing together literary, art historical, archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic and hybrid approaches to materiality we want to demonstrate the all-pervasiveness that material culture should have in discussions of religion.

As we hoped, the chapters in this volume intersect with one another in multiple ways. But we have divided them into sections based on some of their commonalities. Robin Osborne’s chapter (*Chapter 1*), expanding on his keynote lecture, introduces the volume as it covers many of the themes explored in depth in other chapters. Osborne forcefully argues that the durability of the material world means that while objects give us information about the dedicants, by becoming the “stuff of the gods” they also conjure up images of the divine world. Taking the Athenian Acropolis as a case study, he shows how

⁴ Bassi 2016; Fearn 2017; Kurke 2015; Mueller 2016; Canevaro 2018. See also the various articles in Brouillet & Carastro 2018.

⁵ Rask 2023.

⁶ See for example Platt 2011; Gaifman 2012; Hughes 2017; Gaifman, Platt & Squire 2018.

⁷ Newby & Leader-Newby 2007; Ma 2013; Elsner 2015; Neer & Kurke 2019.

⁸ See for example Hägg 1994; 1996; 1998; 1999; Hägg & Alroth 2005.

⁹ As did a 2009 conference at the Swedish Institute at Athens, see Haysom & Wallensten 2011.

changes in its material evidence relate both to changes in the perception of Athena and the links of these to Athenian society. Osborne thus gives material an active role in the production of gods. Material interventions in the sanctuary combine with the wider changing material environment to produce new senses of the divine. Osborne's approach to the so-called sacred laws, or ritual norms, is important. He observes that while Greeks did not regulate myths, they did regulate the material aspects of cult. This, he argues, is not just about controlling worshippers: it ultimately controls how the god is imagined. At the end, Osborne points out the potential of new ways of conceiving of the relationship between gods and the material world. He highlights how both gods and material have absolute qualities and argues that gods are more like stuff than they are like people.

The three chapters that follow all continue this exploration of the relationship between gods and material. Maria Mili's chapter (*Chapter 2*) explores the close connection that Greek gods had with particular objects in Greek mythology. It serves to highlight how the Greeks themselves, even in stories, used particular material objects to encapsulate their gods. She points out how stories about gods' relationships with objects have been consistently undervalued. Through a plethora of examples, she demonstrates that divine objects were in fact central to a god's powers and status—the power resided in the objects. Osborne and Mili's chapters complement one another in delineating a new conception of the relationship between materiality and theology. For Osborne gods arise out of the material world and Mili demonstrates that material culture was essential to their identity even in the Greeks' conception. Together they demonstrate how objects were essential to the making of a Greek god, both in the material world of day-to-day experience and in the world of the poets' imaginations. Greek gods were not immaterial entities either theologically or practically.

The chapters of Cécile Durvy and Hedvig von Ehrenheim serve as counterpoints to the emphasis on gods' dependence on things found in the chapters by Osborne and Mili. In *Chapter 3* Durvy takes us back to the level of cult practice and explores the "limits" of the importance objects had on the identity of the god. She looks at two different contexts of the Aphrodision at Delos, one in the 4th century BC, the other in the 2nd, after the old population was expelled. She adopts an approach that explores objects as actors in fluctuating social networks. Such an examination entails the entire lifespan of objects, not only their function and appearance at the time of dedication, but also subsequent storage, maintenance, registration and degradation. She wonders about the extent to which the 2nd century BC incomers to the Delian Aphrodision were conditioned in their interpretation by the pre-existing material of the cult. Durvy persuasively concludes that in this case the objects were not "successful" in maintaining a specific personality for the god. Without being buttressed by

a broader set of relationships, objects could not maintain the character of the god on their own.

von Ehrenheim, meanwhile, looks at the importance of locality and built space for the perception of the divine at sanctuaries of Asklepios (*Chapter 4*). She argues that the secluded enclosed space of the dormitory seems to have encouraged more material and physical perceptions of the god. For the mass of incubants in the dormitory the god was a doctor equipped with tools, who left tangible evidence of his passing. But von Ehrenheim draws attention to another, rare and sophisticated, kind of incubant for whom the god was more immaterial, appearing in a dream-like variety of forms. Importantly, these more variable and immaterial visualizations of the god were not bound to the material space of the dormitory but could be experienced at a variety of spaces within the *temenos*. At first, Durvy's and von Ehrenheim's emphasis on divergent responses to material in people's conceptions of the gods might seem at odds with Osborne's and Mili's emphasis on the gods' dependence on stuff. But all four authors emphasise the power of objects within networks of relationships. To paraphrase Osborne, stuff has both relative and absolute qualities, both of which need to be brought out if we are to take it seriously.

The next five chapters explore the boundaries of the category "the stuff of the gods" both within *temene* and beyond. Petra Pakkanen raises the question of "fluctuating sacredness" inside and outside the *temenos* (*Chapter 5*). She argues that the sacred quality of much of the stuff of the gods was unstable. While the staking out of sacred enclosures was an act of consecration and their sacredness was considered fixed, this did not by necessity encompass all of a sanctuary's materiality. She draws attention to the existence of a number of objects that could move in and out of sanctuaries and suggests that there was a different perception of "sacredness" in this case, a sacredness which was less fixed. The sacred or non-sacred character of these objects was not the result of specific acts of consecration. Rather, the status of sacredness of movable (and consumable) objects changed as the ownership of the items changed according to the place and space they were in. Overall, Pakkanen outlines a less bipolar ancient conception of sacredness than we are used to, one more akin to a modern idea of ownership.

Gunnel Ekroth's contribution (*Chapter 6*) complicates the notion of sacredness in the material world from another direction. If Greek sanctuaries could be awesome and otherworldly, theatres of the extraordinary, they could also be hot, smelly and uncomfortable. Although spaces cut-off for the gods in a wide variety of ways, sanctuaries could also be intensively used, and it was not always easy to accommodate the habits of gods, men and animals within limited space. Even the central sacrificial act brought filth and effluent that needed to be con-

tained. Ekroth's chapter takes on the invaluable task of completing our holistic vision of sanctuaries by inviting us to think about these practical realities. She fills in this overlooked but essential aspect of the materiality of sanctuaries by compiling the variety of measures undertaken to deal with the situation: from the physical demarcation of the *temenos*, to measures to deal with the movement of animals, the filth animals and humans generate, or the remains of meals.

Where Ekroth's eye is on the messy practicalities of worship and sacrifice, Tyler Jo Smith's is on its objectification especially beyond the sanctuary (*Chapter 7*). She draws our attention to the rendering of living things into objects in art. She demonstrates how vases turn potentially troublesome resistant beasts into manageable victims: things wholly dependent on humans. This objectification is completed the moment the animal is chosen for sacrifice, neatly illustrated in vase-painting when together with other material props included in the scenes (sacrificial knives, baskets, altars), the animal becomes yet another (crucial) object needed to fulfil ritual acts for the gods. The depicted animal could furthermore be said to give physical form to the ritual act, since it "by its mere presence embodies the meaning of the scene and the timing of the occasion". Not least when the vessel carrying the sacrificial scenes itself takes the shape of an animal, the victim lets the communicative link between man and god become materialized.

Smith's chapter has started us on journey exploring sacredness beyond the *temenos*. Jenny Wallensten continues this theme in *Chapter 8*. Through a study of magistrates' dedications, hers is an example of the dialogue between epigraphic and material perspectives that has become a major trend. In her first case study she presents inscriptions that are entirely typical of dedications, as would be found in sanctuaries, but the materiality of the objects together with their context would have resulted in their being differently understood. By adding a dedicatory inscription to measuring tables, for example, the gods were brought to the agora to sanction the roles of the dedicants. Her second case presents a different combination of object, inscription and setting. Statues of gods in the *nomophylakeion* of Cyrene created a sense of place but the inscriptions diverge from the standard dedicatory norms and follow a honorary formula you would expect in the agora, except with the god taking the place of the honorand. In this way, Wallensten argues, the unequal and uncertain *charis* relationship is mitigated and the presence of the gods sanctifying the officials is more manifest. In both cases she emphasises the material context of the agora or office building as formative—unlike in a sanctuary, the interactions of people were in the forefront and the gods supported these.

Caitlín Barrett also considers potentially sacred objects beyond the sanctuary (*Chapter 9*). She looks at the terracotta figurines found in domestic contexts. While scholarship has often been divided between seeing them as religious or as

decorative, Barrett proposes to by-pass this conundrum by investigating the full range of a figurine's affordances, defined as "their potential for facilitating certain outcomes, actions, or behaviors". This way, attention can be given to user choice as well as to the agency of the objects themselves. A case study from a domestic context in Hellenistic Delos suggests how manifold affordances could function in practice: easing contact between gods and men (cult figurines), guarding the *oikos* (gorgoneion image, foundation deposit with Bes figurine), as social mirrors for human behavior (piety, drunkenness), cultural showing off (travels, connoisseurship, wealth) and as magical instruments activating spells to affect both mortals and immortals. Like Pakkanen, she highlights the modern nature of categories of sacredness, and demonstrates how ancient objects in their contexts transcended these categories.

The next group of articles explore the formative role of sacred space focusing on the initial creation of specifically sacred buildings. This is one aspect of the materiality of Greek religion that was a focal point for scholars long before the material turn won widespread acceptance across academia. Discussions of sacred space have had a particularly important place in discussions of change through time, one of the most influential arguments being that the encapsulation of built sacred space went hand in hand with the emergence of the *polis*. The link between the organisation of space and society, implicit in the term *polis*, was explored in pioneering works by scholars such as François de Polignac, Nicolas Coldstream and Anthony Snodgrass, as well as in important edited volumes.¹⁰ In this volume, Matthew Haysom, Catherine Morgan and Charlotte Potts represent the continuation of this debate under the influence of new perspectives enlightened by the material turn. In each case, this influence is evident in the focus on detail: thick description highlighting the case-by-case specifics of people's engagement with the materiality of sacred space. This is an essential technique in giving due weight to the material in interpretation and results in a more precise delineation of consistencies and variegation. The resulting discussions rebalance the social construction of space and the agency of the material world, to produce increasingly reflexive and nuanced interpretations of change.

Haysom looks at the appearance of the bench shrine, the characteristic built religious space of the Aegean Bronze Age (*Chapter 10*). He highlights the importance of the emergence of this form in the Late Bronze Age, arguably the first independently accessible built cult spaces in the Aegean, and explores how the materiality of these shrines encouraged particular encounters between worshippers and a distinctive

¹⁰ Snodgrass 1980; de Polignac 1984; Coldstream 1985; Alcock & Osborne 1994; Marinatos & Hägg 1994.

range of objects. The appearance of the bench shrines, he argues, is not to be reduced to a straightforward reflection of social structures. We should not rush to “jump to the society or the meaning ‘behind’ material culture”. Rather, we should consider “the imminence of the material”, its ability to shape developments. A shift from probabilistic to deterministic forms of architecture more generally, found across various regions of the Aegean, might have “provided the impetus for a new conception of the place of the numinous in the built environment”.

Morgan takes us forward in time to the Iron Age, the next major era witnessing a novel encapsulation and spread of built religious space around the Aegean (*Chapter 11*). Morgan’s chapter challenges major tenets of the association between built space and the emergence of the *polis*. Her treatment emphasises the fact that buildings in Iron Age sanctuaries were often inserted into spaces where ritual had previously been going on. She sees buildings as artefacts within a web of relationships rather than as “isolated indices of broader processes.” Her discussion of developments radically changes the picture from traditional accounts. Instead of a one-off event, the social construction of sacred space by an emergent state, which provided the structure of the future, Morgan envisions an ongoing reflexive process. By its nature such a process is diverse and multidimensional. Morgan highlights the variety of social interests that might have been involved. She explores the dynamics between ritual, the visual effects of early buildings and the articulation of enclosed space and so brings to life the diversity of experience of built space across the early Greek world. The result is not only radically different from that found in the above mentioned classic works on early “temples”, it is also much more realistic.

The processes Morgan explores happened in a reticular interconnected Mediterranean. One of the most important trends in recent years has been the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries established along “ethnic” grounds within the scholarship on the Mediterranean Iron Age. This has resulted from scholars’ exploration of the co-involvement of diverse groups in parallel processes occurring simultaneously on different shores of the Middle Sea. Potts, in complement to Morgan, gives some sense of this bigger picture (*Chapter 12*). She, too, demolishes a traditional reading while exploring the affective and communicative aspects of religious architecture. The chapter examines the emergence of a distinctive style of religious architecture previously understood as emphatically frontal, imposing, and exclusive. Potts’ more careful examination of the position of Etrusco-Italic temples in the landscape and in relation to other structures suggests that they may have been viewed from various angles, and prized accessibility. She places emphasis on the role of these buildings in the development of a distinct religious aesthetic, which also served to

facilitate greater interaction between cult buildings and worshippers.

The last theme covered by the volume concerns the impact of objects. A characteristic of Greek sanctuaries is the multiplicity of objects found within them. Archaeologists have long struggled with these sometimes seemingly chaotic assemblages. Each of the chapters in this section tackles in its own way the key questions of multiplicity versus individuality that these assemblages raise. Altogether they illuminate the tapestry of memory, meaning and affect that is distinctive to objects.

Themes of replication and ambiguity are taken up by Gina Salapata, who focuses on some of the most modest offerings found in sanctuaries, the numerous terracottas: objects that impress neither with their materiality nor their metaphorical associations (*Chapter 13*). Salapata argues that we should bypass the various dichotomies in the scholarship concerning the precise identification of many anthropomorphic terracottas. Instead, we should explore the various ways in which ambiguity might have been intentional, taking into account the full life cycle of these objects. Ambiguity offered a number of possibilities, both to producers who could mass produce these objects and modify existing types with a number of slight alterations, but also to users who could offer the same objects in a variety of sanctuaries. It would be through various contextual associations, she further argues, that an ambiguous representation could become more specific, if desired. At the same time, the accumulation and repetition that was a by-product of these mass-produced objects could have symbolic overtones. The massing of offerings could serve to glorify the sanctuary and repetitiveness may have reinforced communal ideals.

A key observation of Salapata’s is that the multitude of objects in Greek sanctuaries were rarely individuated, at least not in ways that we can recover. In contrast, James Whitley focusses on those cases where writing on objects did individuate them (*Chapter 14*). He explores Archaic votives and questions the validity of various interpretations usually applied to later inscribed dedications to account for this earlier material. Noting the relative absence of the “*anetheke*” dedicatory formula on Crete, and its absence among early dedicatory inscriptions in general, he argues that these inscriptions reflect a variety of relationships between gods and mortals, not just reciprocity. His chapter urges us to pay more attention not only to chronology, but also to regional variation and variation within sanctuaries of the same region. His main case study is that of inscribed weapons from Olympia. He argues that these inscribed votives were only a small part of the actual material. He explores the afterlife of inscribed trophies, which could be damaged and combines this with the fact that many of the battles commemorated on trophies were not the ones

we know about from literature. This leads to the intriguing argument that the inscriptions, which he regards as primarily social rather than religious, were failures. They did not add to the agency of objects or aid their commemorative impact in the way that might have been hoped. This is an argument that questions the power of text in relation to materiality. When standing, the trophies were hugely impressive memorials, the texts added little to this and may even have acted against the trophies' extended existence.

Nassos Papalexandrou's chapter explores how materiality shaped "an aesthetic of rare experiences" in certain large Panhellenic sanctuaries during the Orientalizing period, when a few great sanctuaries, such as those at Samos, Delphi and Olympia, came to possess collections of exotic artefacts (*Chapter 15*). Papalexandrou argues that these did not simply showcase the sanctuary's wealth and contacts. More importantly, they acted as stimulators of extreme wonder. One example of these wondrous artefacts is the orientalizing cauldron. Intriguingly, these objects were not ingrained in symbolic thought and had a very low discursive profile. But their material, visual and sensory effects caused to the viewer a maelstrom of emotions both positive and negative.

Troels Myrup Kristensen also focuses on the specialness of an object. But this time it is an object with a high discursive profile (*Chapter 16*). The *omphalos* at Delphi is mentioned by a number of Greek and Roman authors and more than one *omphaloi* have been recovered from the sanctuary itself. Myrup Kristensen highlights the *omphalos* as an extraordinary object in spite of an unremarkable form that led some authors to give it only cursory attention. Within it an entire sacred landscape of the inhabited world was encapsulated. He explores the various threads connected to this. Its rounded material form, for example, made it a suitable centre. Developing ideas of multiplicity, discussed also by other chapters, such as Osborne (*Chapter 1*), Salapata (*Chapter 13*) and Vout (*Chapter 17*), he makes the important observation that ambiguity and shifting meanings around an object can be an essential element of their power, and furthermore demonstrates how replication of something inherently singular can be seen as an embodiment of the concept of unknowability in any engagement with the gods.

Caroline Vout's chapter continues the discussion of multiplicity and individuation by drawing our attention to the distinctive aesthetics of Greek sanctuaries (*Chapter 17*). Her strikingly evocative technique calls for an inclusive and messy reading of the material, where all evidence is included. This holistic approach, piling up the mass of objects in a sanctuary, results in a "visceral encounter" with the stuff of the gods. She picks as case studies for such encounters Delphi and the Athenian Acropolis during the Archaic era. She highlights how the crowding of stuff works differently in each case: in the case of Athens there is a differential seriality, in Delphi a more heterogenous crowding, creating in turn feelings of awe

and religious ecstasy. It is against such crowding, Vout argues, that we can also take isolation seriously. For some viewers, as she argues, "godhead" might reside in the pile's chronological confusion as well as in the confusion of shapes, sizes and substances. For others, it took these confusions, and each statue's presence in a crowd, to bring out its particular properties. By fully evoking the affective power of assemblages, hinted at also by the preceding chapters, Vout's analysis offers some kind of resolution to the fluctuations and uncertainties highlighted by them. On their own travelling through their lifecycles any one simple object could be buffeted by its changing circumstances. But viewed *en masse* such objects had the power to mould people's experience of the divine.

Comparison of the chapters in this volume with previous editions in the Swedish Institute's series provides the opportunity to gauge the impact of recent trends on scholars' approaches to the material aspects of religion.¹¹ Much less evident in the chapters here is a sense that the value of material culture is only an imperfect witness to people's thoughts and actions. Questions of social structure, identity and the details of ritual practice, which have had a prominent place in previous collections, are however present here too. But again, there is a different emphasis in the approach. In the present volume, objects stand at the forefront, and issues of society, identity or ritual tend to emerge alongside them. Central to this change is a debate that runs throughout the chapters here about the agency of material culture. Again and again, we have seen a to-and-fro between an emphasis on the power of objects to impact people and the weakness of objects to establish and maintain specific meanings. Rather than being in opposition, however, these contrasting perspectives in combination capture something of what is particular about the agency of material culture. Repeatedly, the contributions emphasise the importance of material culture within networks of relations, the importance of assemblages and the importance of the lifecycles of objects. Throughout the chapters in this volume, we see how the forefronting of these three analytical elements can give material culture its own distinctive place within the study of Greek religion.

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¹¹ See for example Hägg 1994; 1996; 1998; 1999; Hägg & Alroth 2005; Haysom & Wallensten 2011.

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