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The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion
in ancient Greece

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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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2. Why did the Greek gods need objects?

Abstract

Objects were ubiquitous in the world of the gods. The gods lived in houses, sat at tables and slept in beds, wore beautiful clothes, and moved with chariots. These objects, described often as ageless and immortal like the gods themselves, could be of unique craftsmanship, creations of Hephaistos for instance, and made of precious materials, mostly gold. But the gods were also associated with particular, special objects, which were intimately linked with the exercise of their power, such as the bow of Apollo, the thunderbolt of Zeus, or the trident of Poseidon. This article discusses these “special” objects. What can stories about these special objects tell us about the Greeks gods and about how their power was perceived?

Keywords: thunder, trident, *aegis*, bow, lyre, throne, gods’ power, materiality

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I shall start with a scene from the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Apollo enters the shabby cave of Maia where Hermes is lying in his cradle pretending to be an innocent baby. But Apollo is not fooled. He understands that he is in the presence of a god. It is not Hermes’ distinctive, godlike appearance that gives him away, but the wooden chests in the dark corner of the cave filled with stuff that typically belongs to gods, such as gold, silver, nymphs’ dresses, nectar and ambrosia.¹ Another enticing scene that invites the reader to think how objects stand between, and this time cross the boundary between gods and men, is that at Kalypso’s cave in the *Odyssey*. Kalypso receives in her cave first Hermes then Odysseus, and invites them to sit, drink and eat. When entertaining Odysseus, Kalypso takes away the nectar and ambrosia she had offered Hermes, and

places food proper for mortals in front of Odysseus. Food then clearly divides gods and mortals, but the poet also draws our attention to the chair left empty by Hermes, who has just departed, and on which Odysseus can comfortably sit.²

In Greek religion the division between gods and humans was articulated through a continuous complex discourse which involved comparison, opposition and blending with other categories, such as for instance the category of heroes or that of animals.³ This paper argues that it is also worthwhile to think about the category of objects in relation to those of gods and humans. Modern work has demonstrated the importance of objects for the construction of identity, as well as the importance of the material dimension of religions.⁴ The question of the role of objects in defining the divine acquires particular interest in the case of ancient Greece. Greek religion seems to have given a prominent role to objects, not least through the ritual of dedication, the giving of material offerings to the gods, and through its mythology, which regularly, as we saw in the examples mentioned above associated gods with objects, in stories that encouraged speculation about the nature of the divine, the sources of its power, and its relationship to the human world.

Objects were ubiquitous in the world of the gods: the gods had houses, chairs, tables, beds, beautiful clothes, and moved with chariots. These objects, described often as ageless and immortal themselves, could be of unique craftsmanship, creations of Hephaistos for instance, and made of precious materials, mostly gold.⁵ But the gods were also associated with par-

² Hom. *Od.* 5.85–95, 194–200.

³ See for instance Vernant 1991b; Kearns 1992.

⁴ See introduction to the volume.

⁵ For Hephaistos, the Kyklopes and Telchines as makers of gods’ objects see further below. Precious materials: see for instance Hom. *Il.* 8.41–4, 13.22–25; Callim. *Hymn* 2.32–35: Apollo has a gold tunic, gold lyre, bow and quiver, and gold sandals. Stephens 2015, 86 about the possibil-

¹ *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 246–252.

ticular, special objects, which were intimately linked with the exercise of their power, such as the bow, the thunder, or the trident, to mention just the obvious. It is with these “special” objects that this paper is going to be concerned.

The topic of the Greek gods’ association with objects has not been systematically discussed. Late 19th and early 20th century scholars saw the importance of gods’ objects as a survival from earlier strata of Greek religion, reflecting the use of objects in magico-religious rituals and/or primitive pre-anthropomorphic perceptions of the divine, for instance as emblems of their power over natural elements.⁶ These interpretations are outdated, but they do have the merit of situating part of the gods’ power outside themselves, either in the ritual object or the “natural” element, something that was lost in subsequent interpretations. The insights of the French structuralists around Jean-Pierre Vernant are very important for any discussion of the Greek gods. They thought of the gods as distinct powers, each having a unique essence that characterized its mode of action. The structuralists’ understanding of the gods as powers rather than as personalities affects also their understanding of how the gods might relate to objects. Vernant talks of the gods’ objects very briefly and describes them as extensions, accretions that help “enlarge the field of action and reinforce the effects”. They are, in his words, “efficacious symbols of power held” but not the source of the power as such, which somehow is imagined by Vernant to reside within the god himself.⁷

Apart from Vernant, I have found very little discussion about Greek gods’ relationship with objects.⁸ In his discussion of Hermes, Henk Versnel draws attention to Hermes’ dependency upon his staff. He finds this highly unusual, since “gods do not need instruments for working miracles”. It makes sense though, Versnel argues, in the case of Hermes, a god who liked to spend so much time with mortals and who has more “human” aspects than the other immortals.⁹ Versnel is important

in drawing our attention to the particular way a specific god might be associated with a particular object, and how this relationship feeds back to issues concerning the personality of the god. Nevertheless, a perusal of literary sources shows that Hermes is hardly exceptional in his association with objects. If Hermes is called *chrysorappis* (of the golden wand),¹⁰ several other Olympians have poetic epithets stemming from objects: Apollo is *argyrotokos* (of the silver bow), Artemis is *chryselakatos* (of the golden “distaff”), Hera is *chrysothronos* (of the golden throne), Athena *chrysaegis* (of the golden *aegis*), testifying how central these objects were in the Greeks’ imagining of their gods.¹¹ Zeus’ body can barely be described, but his *aegis* can in terrifying detail.¹²

Ruth Padel takes a more wholistic approach to the topic, and thinks that the various gods’ objects, which become, for her, invariably weapons in their hands, emblemize the gods’ hostile relationship to humankind: they symbolize the gods’ negative powers, their ability to hurt and punish.¹³ Padel is right in emphasizing the connections between objects and gods’ power more generally, but this power, it will be argued below, is not portrayed only negatively. Some of the most attractive stories of Greek mythology recount how the gods came to acquire their special objects and how they performed their great deeds with them. These sources, as I will demonstrate below, locate part of the god’s power in an object; they testify to a belief that the god’s power comes from having control over and using the object in question. There is also great variety concerning the gods and objects involved and the particular relationship they have with the object in question. I aim to dig a bit deeper into the variety of these stories and discuss the ramifications for how the Greeks understood the identities of the various gods, their powers, the nature and source of their powers. In doing that I am inspired by recent theories on materiality that invite us to revisit the relationship between objects, identity and agency.¹⁴ I find particularly inspiring theories that stress not only the ability of objects to distribute and make one’s agency more efficient, but also those that emphasize the relationship of dependency that can exist between agents and objects.¹⁵

ity that a statue is described here. For the idea that gold is the child of Zeus: Pind. Fr 222 (Snell). For gods’ objects being immortal see Hom. *Il.* 21.507, Artemis’ robe is called *ambrosios*; Hom. *Od.* 4.75–80, where Menelaos’ palace is compared by Telemachos to that of Zeus, but Menelaos reminds him that the possessions of the gods are everlasting (*athanatoi*).

⁶ See for instance: Cook 1914–1940, iii 837 for the *aegis* being the skin of the owl, or the snake, with which Athena, the rock goddess, was originally identified. Konaris 2016, 99–100 discusses how early scholars of Greek religion associated Apollo’s symbols, such as the arrows, with his supposed origins as a solar god. Robertson 2001 is an example of a modern scholar who emphasizes ritual explanations in his discussion of the *aegis*.

⁷ Vernant 1991a, 37–38 discussing Ajax’ shield, Herakles’ lionskin but also Zeus’ thunder, Hermes’ rod and the dogskin cap of Hades.

⁸ Apart from Versnel, Padel and Brouillet & Carastro discussed below, see also Mylonopoulos 2010 and Pironti 2010 for a discussion of gods’ attributes in iconography.

⁹ Versnel 2011, 326–327.

¹⁰ Hom. *Od.* 10.77; *Hymn. Hom. Hest.* 8, 13.

¹¹ Just some examples: Hom. *Il.* 1.37; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 16; *Hymn. Hom. Mer.* 1; Bacchyl. Fr 15.

¹² Cannot be described: the closest we get is Hom. *Il.* 1.528–530. For various descriptions of the *aegis* see Deacy & Villing 2009.

¹³ Padel 1992, 152–157, who allows for the exception of Artemis’ arrows.

¹⁴ See now Brouillet & Carastro 2018, who are also influenced by materiality in their discussion of the *aegis* and *kestos* in the Homeric epics. Their discussion makes some interesting observations regarding the role of these objects in creating links between different agents, but does not explore their implications for conceptualizing divine power.

¹⁵ For an overview see Harris & Cipolla 2017, 87–108.

I will begin with Zeus. A lot has been written about Zeus' ability, already present in the Homeric epics, to rule and direct events with his mind and to impose his will effortlessly.¹⁶ But equally prominent is Zeus' reliance on his thunderbolt.¹⁷ Zeus' thunderbolt is not just an emblem of his control over the weather, the rain or the sun.¹⁸ It is perceived as an artefact, a powerful weapon. It is the "spear of Zeus", as Pindar and Bacchylides call it,¹⁹ fashioned by the Kyklopes.²⁰ The thunderbolt is not used just for simple tasks, where indeed a nod of his head would be enough, and Zeus is not pictured going around always carrying it with him. According to a tradition, the thunderbolt was kept hidden and was brought to Zeus by Pegasus.²¹ Zeus relies on it to rule over mortals and immortals.²² It is the ultimate weapon with which Zeus fought against the Titans and the Typhon, securing his supremacy. Its most devastating effects are seen in Hesiod's *Theogony*. It causes the earth to boil, the ocean and the sea to burn.²³ The threat of its use can also keep the other gods in order.²⁴

The importance of the thunderbolt in securing Zeus' rule is also brought out in stories that the Kyklopes might fashion a more powerful weapon for somebody else,²⁵ or that Zeus' supremacy could be challenged by an offspring wielding a more powerful weapon.²⁶ It is important to note that while these stories emphasize the idea that Zeus' power lies somehow in the thunderbolt, at the same time they do not locate the power exclusively in the object.²⁷ There seems to be an interdependence between Zeus and the thunder, and the contender is usually imagined as wielding another powerful weapon made

for themselves. Even later stories that have Typhoeus stealing the thunderbolt note that he is unable to use it properly. The thunderbolt is too heavy, even for Typhoeus 200 hands.²⁸ Of all the gods, only Athena has access to and can use Zeus' thunderbolt, but this is clearly a privilege that Zeus has bestowed on her, just as he has also given her the ability to bring things to fulfilment with the nod of her head.²⁹ Only in Aristophanes' *Birds* is the idea that somebody else might get hold of the thunderbolt fully entertained at the end of the play, when Peisetairos appears on scene with thunderbolt at hand. There is doubt of course on how the ending was perceived, and all but certainly the audience did not take this topsy turvy world seriously.³⁰ Other tyrants, like Salmoneus, who aspired to get the place of Zeus by constructing their own thunder-machine proved poor imitators and met a bad ending, being struck by Zeus and the real thunderbolt.³¹

It is often argued that Zeus' association with the thunderbolt, supposedly a symbol of cruel justice, declined in popularity during the 5th century BC, as his association with the sceptre and the throne, symbols of more benevolent ruling, gained in prominence.³² The evidence is mostly iconographic, and most specifically Pheidias' famous chryselephantine statue of Zeus at Olympia, which depicted the god seated on his throne, with sceptre in one hand and Nike in the other.³³ Nevertheless, we should remember that statues of Zeus bearing a thunderbolt continue to exist, at Olympia as well.³⁴ Throne, sceptre and thunder all seem connected with Zeus' exercise of

¹⁶ See for instance Seaford 2010 for Zeus in Aeschylus. Parker 2008, 134–135 for the idea being present in Homer.

¹⁷ Note that Zeus' exercise of his power is also closely associated with other objects, such as the scales, the throne, the *aegis* and the sceptre. The *aegis*, throne and sceptre will enter the discussion later on. The importance of scales in the exercise of his power is discussed by Seaford 2010.

¹⁸ Note what happens to Kapaneus who mistakenly compares it to the midday sun: Aesch. *Sept.* 427–431; Eur. *Phoen.* 1181.

¹⁹ Pind. *Pyth.* 4.195; Bacchyl. 7.48. See also Plato's *Leg.* 9.873E–874A, where the thunderbolt is discussed amongst other inanimate (ἄψυχον) things.

²⁰ Hes. *Theog.* 139–141, 501–506; Eur. *Alc.* 4.

²¹ Hes. *Theog.* 285.

²² Hes. *Theog.* 72, 504.

²³ Hes. *Theog.* 687–710.

²⁴ Typhon and giants or Titans: Hes. *Theog.* 687, 839, 853; Pind. *Pyth.* 8.18; Aesch. *PV* 360; Eur. *Hec.* 469; Other gods: Hom. *Il.* 1.581; 8.12, 402–405, 455.

²⁵ According to Pind. Fr 266 (SM) Zeus killed the Kyklopes lest they forge a more powerful weapons for somebody else. But Hes. Fr 52, 54 (MW) has Apollo killing them in revenge for the death of Asclepius by the thunder.

²⁶ Hes. Fr. 343; Pind. *Isthm.* 8.32–36; Aesch. *PV* 909–926.

²⁷ For what it is worth, in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* 9–11 the thunderbolt, which can by its stroke guide all works of nature, is called a servant (*hypoergon*), a word that emphasizes Zeus' control over it (Thom 2005, 72 and especially p. 76). Bielfeldt 2014, 27–28 for objects being perceived in Greek culture as slaves, and the concept of self-willed servitude.

²⁸ Nonnus, *Dion.* 1.304 with the discussion of Shorrock 2001, 121–125. But see also Hardie 2012, 214. In Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.6.3 he takes the sickle of Zeus. See also Luc. *Dial. D.* 11, where Hermes has stolen Poseidon's trident, Ares' sword, Apollo's bow, Hephaistos' fire-tongs, Aphrodite's girdle and Zeus sceptre, but leaves the thunderbolt untouched.

²⁹ See discussion below.

³⁰ Ar. *Av.* 1706–1719, 1750. Dunbar 1998, 512–513, discussing why Peisetairos appears with the thunderbolt and not the sceptre, argues it might have been more impious to have Peisetairos taking control over the sceptre than the thunderbolt. I am not convinced. The sceptre actually seems to have been perceived as a more "transmissible" object that could change hands: see Álvarez 2017.

³¹ On Salmoneus: Platt 2011, 197–199 and Cowan 2014, who also draws attention to Soph. Fr 538 (Radt) and the bad smell emitting from Salmoneus' thunder-machine. Salmoneus is not usually mentioned in discussions of the *Birds*, but I am struck by the "unspeakable smells" in the scene where Peisetairos and Basileia make their entrance (although, it is true, incense is mentioned later on). Perhaps in our understanding of the ending we should also think about the effect that the use of props would have had: on the topic of props in drama see Mueller 2016.

³² For mentions of the throne but not the thunderbolt see: Aesch. *Eum.* 229; Eur. *IT* 1270; Theoc. *Id.* 7.93; Callim. *Hymn* 1.67.

³³ Cook 1914–1940, ii. 731 "throughout classical times Zeus becomes less and less the impetuous thunderer, more and more the dignified ruler. He wields both the thunderbolt and the scepter ..." He calls it (p. 737) a transition from might to right. More recently see Burton 2011.

³⁴ Paus. 5.24.9 about the statue of Zeus Horkios at Olympia holding two thunderbolts. Barringer 2010, 171–174 for the archaeological evidence of possible Classical statues of Zeus with thunderbolt.

power,³⁵ and one cannot just simply replace the other. Indeed, it seems that in popular belief the sceptre cannot replace the thunderbolt, given the later tradition that Hermes managed to steal the sceptre but not the thunderbolt, as he too like Typhoeus before him found it very heavy to lift.³⁶ The scepter on the other hand appear to be a more transmissible object that can more easily change hands. Not only can Hermes steal it, but Zeus himself can hand it in Orphic hymns to Dionysus.³⁷ As for the throne, I am going to talk more about it later, but suffice here to say that Zeus shares it with Hera. So it is with the thunderbolt that Zeus' particular power is more intimately associated. Finally, although the terrifying effects of Zeus' thunderbolt are emphasized in the sources, we should allow the possibility that its power could also be perceived positively. This idea, it is true, finds clearer expression in various philosophical texts where the thunderbolt becomes a cornerstone of Zeus benevolent ruling, but as Jan Bremer has argued it seems to have also some mythological antecedents.³⁸

Be that as it may, the benevolent effects of a god's weapon are clearly articulated in the case of Poseidon's trident, an object that is sometimes compared to the thunderbolt.³⁹ On several instances Poseidon uses his trident in order to destroy, such as when he uses his trident to destroy with it the wall of the Achaeans,⁴⁰ to stir up the sea,⁴¹ or to kill Erechtheus in revenge for the killing of Eumolpos.⁴² At the same time the trident is also clearly a powerful weapon that has the ability to generate new life and forms.⁴³ Some of the most memorable deeds Poseidon performs with his trident, indicative of his generative power, include the creation of rivers, horses and springs, that appear after he struck the rock with his trident.⁴⁴ On a more mundane level, the god and his gold trident are credited with a catch of fish in a dedicatory epigram from the Athenian Acropolis.⁴⁵

The trident, as mentioned above is often compared to the thunderbolt,⁴⁶ and, similarly, it too was made by the Kyklopes or according to another tradition by the Telchines.⁴⁷ In Pindar we also find the tradition that a wedding to Thetis, courted both by Zeus and Poseidon, would produce a son with more

powerful weapons than either father.⁴⁸ There are differences of course. Perhaps most importantly, unlike the thunderbolt which is unique and whose form cannot even be imitated, the trident can, in iconography at least. Various other, usually older maritime, deities can be depicted as carriers of a trident.⁴⁹ Moreover, unlike the thunder bolt the trident can be stolen. Hermes could easily managed this, although as we have seen he had problems lifting Zeus' thunderbolt. But even mortals can lay their hand on the trident, and on these instances the trident is not meant to be a poor human replica but the divine object itself. On a series of Attic vases Herakles is shown attacking Nereus house holding a trident;⁵⁰ while on a kabeiric vase Odysseus is depicted holding the trident while sailing over the sea, the implication being that the hero has managed to take over the object and the power of the god who has relentlessly pursued him.⁵¹

Apollo presents yet another variation on how a god is associated with objects. Exceptionally amongst the gods, Apollo is consistently associated with two objects—the bow and the lyre.⁵² Scholars have often commented on the links between bow and lyre. The bow can be compared in literary sources to the lyre and vice-versa.⁵³ We might think that the bow is associated with the cruel side of Apollo, while the lyre is related to his kind side.⁵⁴ Apollo's gleaming arrows attack men and animals in the Greek camp at Troy⁵⁵ and he is credited with the death of several young men.⁵⁶ Similarly, in Callimachus' *Aitia*, when asked why he is carrying the bow on the left hand and the Charites on his right, Apollo replies that the bow is used for punishment which however he does not give as often as he

³⁵ See for instance Hom. *Il.* 1.536, 8.442; Aesch. *PV* 230, 361, 391.

³⁶ See above note 28.

³⁷ Álvarez 2017.

³⁸ Bremer 2006–2007.

³⁹ See discussion further below.

⁴⁰ Hom. *Il.* 12.27.

⁴¹ Hom. *Od.* 5.292.

⁴² Eur. *Ion* 281.

⁴³ See also Mylonopoulos 2003, 326 who writes "that it symbolizes the power of Poseidon as a whole".

⁴⁴ Hdt 7.129.4; Philostr. *Imag.* 2.1.4; Callim. *Hymn* 4. 31; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.1.4.

⁴⁵ *IG* I³, 828.

⁴⁶ Hom. *Il.* 14.384 calls it a sword like a lightning.

⁴⁷ Callim. *Hymn* 4.30–31.

⁴⁸ Pind. *Isthm.* 8.3–36.

⁴⁹ Mylonopoulos 2010, 188–189, who mentions various other maritime deities, but also Zeus.

⁵⁰ Glynn 1981, 129–130. This is not the only divine object that Herakles can get hold of: see Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.10 for Sun's bowl and of course the story of Herakles seizing Apollo's tripod was very popular. See also Pind. *Ol.* 9. 31–38 for Herakles fighting with his bow Poseidon's trident, Apollo's bow and Hades' staff.

⁵¹ Mylonopoulos 2010, 188–199, comments on the scene as a sign of Poseidon's powerlessness. The scene is comic in tone (Mitchell 2009, 272–273) but for speculation for its possible meaning in the context of the cult see Lowenstam 2008, 80. For the trident as an object in the hands of mortals see also Plut. *Mor.* 843e–f about Habron being depicted on a *pinax* passing the trident to his brother who succeeded him as priest of Poseidon Erechtheus.

⁵² He is also associated with the sword, which, though, he does not use: Hom. *Il.* 5.509; *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 123.

⁵³ Typical is Pind. *Ol.* 9.5–12, who calls the lyre the bow of the Muses with sweet arrows. In general: Carlier 1992, 140–141.

⁵⁴ Graf 2009, 28 comments on the beneficial (music) versus deadly (archery) use of strings.

⁵⁵ Hom. *Il.* 1.44–49.

⁵⁶ Phrontis, Menelaos' helmsman (Hom. *Od.* 3.279–283); sons of Niobe (Hom. *Il.* 24.605–606); Rhexenor (Hom. *Od.* 7.64–65), Eurytus (Hom. *Od.* 8.266–668); Otus and Ephialtes (Hom. *Od.* 11.318–319).

gives rewards.⁵⁷ Indeed, other sources play with the idea that Apollo, although he always carries it around, does not use his weapon very much. In the *Iliad*, in the theomachy, Artemis rebukes Apollo for not entering the fight and she wonders why he is carrying a bow if he does not use it.⁵⁸ The same theme is picked up by Euripides in *Alkestis* where Death wonders why he is holding the bow if he is not planning to use it, to which Apollo amusingly replies that it is just a habit!⁵⁹

Apollo given a choice, we are meant to imagine, would rather let go of the bow and pick up the lyre, the ultimate “weapon” that deactivates all other weapons. The lyre is so powerful, according to Pindar, that it can stifle the thunderbolt and stop Ares’ spear.⁶⁰ This ability of the lyre to disarm and reconcile was manifest from the moment of its creation. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the lyre was made by Hermes, who gave it to Apollo as a gift, henceforth linking the two quarrelling brothers in close friendship.⁶¹ The lyre being Hermes’ invention and gift brings something of Hermes to Apollo, since Hermes, it was thought, had little interest in arms and fighting, unless of course there was an emergency.⁶² Instead in stories Hermes is the god who often disarms other gods, either at the entrance of Olympus relieving gods of their weapons, or stealing them, like he once did with Apollo’s bow.⁶³

Despite Apollo’s preference for the lyre and the rewards of the Charites in these sources, in Greek dedicatory language it is as a god of archery that he is mostly invoked by his worshippers. Epithets evoking his bow and archery in general, such as Hekabolos or Argyrotoksos, are common in dedicatory epi-

grams.⁶⁴ And in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Apollo* the archer god is also invoked as a helper, asked to “send forth his arrow, he who were the saviour from the moment he was born”.⁶⁵ As for the contrary, cultic epithets evoking Apollo’s association with the lyre seem to be very rare. I have not found any actually in dedicatory inscriptions. But Apollo is called Eulyras in the second Delphic hymn.⁶⁶

Another interesting feature regarding Apollo’s bow is its craftsmanship and the fact that Artemis’ bow can be imagined as a kind of replica of that of Apollo. Apollo is sometimes credited with inventing the bow himself, but in Callimachus hymns the bow is on one instance called Lyctian, that is from Lyctos the Cretan city, and on another instance, Callimachus’ hymn to Artemis, the goddess asks Kyklops to make her a Kydonian bow too, the implication of the “too” perhaps being that Apollo had a Kydonian bow as well.⁶⁷ Coming back then to the theme of how unique is the gods powerful object, who can have it, steal it, imitate it, it is remarkable that Apollo’s and Artemis’ bows are replicas of one another, but that even if made by the ultimate divine craftsmen of powerful weapons, the Kyklops, they ultimately imitate, a human type of bow from the island of Crete. This raises questions about what is really exclusive and divine about this object and the power it confers.

Let us look a bit more in Artemis connection with the bow. The bow is central in Artemis identity, not only in relating to her twin brother Apollo, but also in distinguishing from him. Artemis seems to have a more temperamental and exclusive relationship with the bow. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* we hear that Artemis also likes the lyre, but this is an exceptional statement. Other than that, Artemis has very little to do with the lyre either in literary sources or in iconography.⁶⁸ Contrary then to Apollo, Artemis sticks with the bow and scatters her arrows, bringing a sudden, often painless death, to

⁵⁷ Callim. *Aet.* Fr 114.

⁵⁸ Hom. *Il.* 21.474.

⁵⁹ Eur. *Alc.* 35. Note also that in Aesch. *Eum.* 182 Apollo threatens the furies with his bow but never uses it.

⁶⁰ Pind. *Pyth.* 1.5–12. Eur. *Alc.* 575–587 on the soothing effects of the lyre on wild animals. Apollo’s lyre and gods feasting in peace: Hom. *Il.* 1.603.

⁶¹ But in *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 131–132 and Callim. *Hymn* 4.253–254 Apollo plays the lyre from the moment he is born. Similarly, in Alcaeus’ hymn to Apollo (Fr 307) Apollo receives the lyre from Zeus when he is born.

⁶² Diod. 5.75 for Hermes being the deity who introduced the practice of negotiating peace and truces. But note the dedications of cavalry commanders to Hermes in Athens: see Parker 2005, 392 who argues that the connection may have been made because the cavalry’s place of master chanced to abut the region of the agora known as “the Herms”. For Hermes Hegemonios who receives dedications in Athens and elsewhere by the *strategoi* see Wallensten 2003, 69, who argues that these dedications seem to be related to the ephebes. Emergencies: Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.6.1–2, note that Hermes in the *gigantomachy* does not fight with his wand, but wears the helmet of Hades and slays giant Hippolytos; Paus. 9.22.2 for Hermes Promachos at Tanagra fighting with a scraper and leading the ephebes into battle.

⁶³ Disarming: Callim. *Hymn* 3.143. Stealing: Alcaeus’ hymn to Hermes (Fr 308). The same event may be alluded in *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 515. See Vergados 2013, 7, 76–77.

⁶⁴ See for instance *CEG* nos. 334, 338 and in general Day 2010, 145 n. 68.

⁶⁵ Callim. *Hymn* 2. 103–104. Note also that in *Anth. Pal.* 13.22.4–6, Apollo is invoked to close his wolf-slaying quiver and send forth the arrow of love, creating ties of friendship between the warriors. Other deeds where the bow is used for protection are the killing of the she-dragon at Delphi that, according to a tradition, was torturing the local inhabitants: *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 300–305; Callim. *Hymn* 2.98–100. Apollo also uses his bow in the battle against the giants: see for instance Pind. *Pyth.* 8.18. See in general Graf 2009, 91–92 about bow and arrows as weapons of protection.

⁶⁶ *FD* 3:2.138.

⁶⁷ Callim. *Hymn* 3.1–12, 81. Apollo’s bow is called Lyctian in Callim. *Hymn* 2. 33. According to Diod. 5.74 Apollo invented it himself.

⁶⁸ *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 18–19. Faulkner 2008, 95 argues that ownership is not implied here, and notes that she is rarely depicted with the instrument in art. In terms of literary epithets Artemis is also associated with the throne (*chrysothronos*) and the distaff (*chryselakatos*): see for instance Hom. *Il.* 9.533, 16.183, 20.70; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 16. But the exact meaning of both epithets is disputed: Pironti 2014.

animals and women.⁶⁹ Her arrows also bring comfort, releasing women from the pains of childbirth.⁷⁰ In one of the most enticing scenes in the *Iliad* we are offered a glimpse of what happens when a god loses their weapon, when Hera grabs the young goddess' bow, and Artemis runs away in panic scattering her arrows.⁷¹ In Homer Artemis deprived of her bow turns into a young girl, running for comfort to her father's lap, and it is left to Leto to pick up the bow and arrows and give them back to her daughter.⁷² The same possibility, that Artemis might indeed lose her weapon is perhaps entertained by Callimachus when he portrayed the goddess handing her bow to Hermes at the entrance of Olympus.⁷³ Hermes after all was well known for messing with the objects and *timai* (honours) of the other gods.

Artemis can replicate Apollo's special object, not least because she is his twin sister.⁷⁴ But we may also see a pattern here with other female deities who seem to lack their own distinctive objects. Athena's and Hera's most close and common association seems to be with objects associated with Zeus.⁷⁵ Athena's most common association, in Homer and in later sources, is with the *aegis*. It is described as ageless and immortal, with tassels of pure gold,⁷⁶ it can be gleaming bright or terribly dark, and on it is fastened the head of Gorgo.⁷⁷ It is fantastically powerful, the one thing that Zeus' thunderbolt cannot break.⁷⁸ It can be carried around, or shaken to cause panic, bring disaster, or inversely raise somebody's courage.⁷⁹ It is indeed its protective functions that are often emphasized, especially in connection with Athena, who often wears it as a garment around her shoulders, rather than wielding it as a weapon.⁸⁰ Euripides in *Ion* describes it as Athena's *stole* (clothing), rather than as an *hoplon* (weapon).⁸¹ And in a fragment of *Erechtheus* the women of Athens cry to the goddess to come and help the city wearing the golden *aegis*.⁸²

Despite this close connection with Athena, according to a popular tradition going back to Homer, the *aegis* belonged to Zeus.⁸³ In the *Iliad* it is called a fearful thing given to him by Hephaistos.⁸⁴ The tradition that emphasizes Zeus' relationship with the *aegis* could be associated with other stories which show Athena using Zeus' objects. The most stunning scene comes from the *Iliad*, where the poet describes the goddess preparing for action. Athena lets fall the dress that she has made herself, puts on the tunic of Zeus and arms herself for war. Although it is not made clear, even the huge spear, with which she is also closely connected, might ultimately belong to Zeus.⁸⁵ By the Classical period the idea that of all the gods only Athena could have access even to Zeus' thunderbolt seem to have been very popular.⁸⁶ According to Callimachus and Aelius Aristides this sharing of weapons and clothes between father and daughter testifies to their intimate relationship, the bond of loyalty between father and daughter.⁸⁷

Whether this bond of loyalty also hid elements of control and submission is open to question. Most interesting is a Hesiodic fragment that narrates the birth of Athena, and in it the goddess and the *aegis* seem to be equated, as Themis creates the *aegis* while Athena is still in Zeus' belly. This impression that the birth of Athena is also the creation of the *aegis*, is encouraged because a few lines above we read of Zeus' fear that Metis might give birth to something stronger than the thunder.⁸⁸ Given that the story of the birth of Athena is about challenges to the power of Zeus,⁸⁹ we may speculate about what the *aegis* actually is. Is the *aegis* just a powerful weapon which Zeus gives to favorite ones? Or is it also the object that helps him secure his stability? The god who takes it, who wears it, will necessarily remain loyal. Be that as it may, several sources distance the *aegis* from Zeus' controlling power and emphasize its connection with Athena herself. In various stories

⁶⁹ For a collection of sources see Petrovic 2010. Painless, easy death: Hom. *Od.* 5.123–124, 11.172, 15.409, 18.201, 20.61.

⁷⁰ As stressed too by Padel 1992, 152–153, citing Eur. *Hipp.* 164–168. But see *Anth. Pal.* 6.273 where the goddess is asked to put away her bow and arrows into the bosom of Graces and go help Alkestis in childbirth.

⁷¹ Hom. *Il.* 21.489.

⁷² Hom. *Il.* 21.489–507.

⁷³ Callim. *Hymn* 3, 143.

⁷⁴ Petrovic 2010, 223 on sibling rivalry and Artemis resembling her brother.

⁷⁵ Both deities also use the objects of gods other than Zeus: for Hera see further below. For Athena see Hom. *Il.* 5.844–845, where she uses the helmet of Hades.

⁷⁶ Hom. *Il.* 2.446–449.

⁷⁷ Deacy & Villing 2009; Hartswick 1993; Marx 1993.

⁷⁸ Hom. *Il.* 21.400–401; Hes. *Fr.* 343 and discussion below.

⁷⁹ Hom. *Il.* 2.446–449; Hom. *Od.* 22.297.

⁸⁰ Hom. *Il.* 5.738; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.6.2. For the *aegis*' protective functions: Henrichs 1977; Deacy & Villing 2009.

⁸¹ Eur. *Ion* 996. In Aesch. *Eum.* 404 the *aegis* helps her fly.

⁸² Eur. *Erechth.* *Fr.* 41.

⁸³ Zeus is associated with the *aegis* mostly through the popular literary epithet *aigiochos* (used 50 times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), but he uses it only twice. He shakes it and brings disaster to the Trojans, panic to the Achaeans: Hom. *Il.* 17.593 and 4.167. But he is occasionally depicted with it, especially in the Hellenistic period, i.e. on the Pergamon Altar. See Cook 1914–1940, ii, 712; iii, 532–540; Mylonopoulos 2010, 193–194. Apollo is also once given the *aegis* by Zeus: Hom. *Il.* 15.307–323, 15.360, 24.20. For a depiction of Aphrodite with the *aegis* see Mylonopoulos 2010, 194–195; Pironti 2010.

⁸⁴ Hom. *Il.* 15.309. On later sources it was the skin of goat Amaltheia which Zeus used as protection in the Titanomachy (*POxy.* 3003. Col. 2. 15). For other stories that connect its creation with Athena see below.

⁸⁵ Hom. *Il.* 5.733–748. Kirk 1990, ii, 134.

⁸⁶ Aesch. *Eum.* 825; Eur. *Tro.* 80, 92. Athena was depicted with *aegis* and thunder on 3rd century BC Boiotian and Macedonian coins: Head 1911, 353; Cook 1914–1940, iii, 819–820, 868–887; Voutiras 1998, 127–128. Later on she is also found on coins of Phaselis, Lykia and India.

⁸⁷ Callim. *Hymn* 5, 132–133; Ael. *Ar. Or.* 2.10.

⁸⁸ Hes. *Fr.* 343.

⁸⁹ See also Hes. *Theog.* 895–898 and discussion in Yasumura 2011, 89–91.

about the *aegis*, Zeus is left out and Athena is credited with the making of it from the skin of a giant given different names; a theme that links back to Athena's well-known ability to make powerful clothing.⁹⁰ And the tradition that she put the head of Gorgo on the *aegis* further emphasizes that, even if the *aegis* was given to her by Zeus, Athena changed it and transformed it, putting her distinctive mark on it.⁹¹

Hera, Zeus' spouse and queen of the gods, seems at ease with several of the objects of her fellow goddesses. Hera dresses in a robe made by Athena, wears the belt of Aphrodite, and snatches the bow of Artemis.⁹² In any case, it is fair to say that her most common association is with the throne. To start with, a common literary epithet of Hera is "of the golden throne", an epithet which nevertheless is used for other goddesses and whose precise meaning and connection with the throne has been disputed.⁹³ It has for instance been suggested that epithets like *chrysothronos*, *protothronos*, *poikilothronos* or *euthronos*, which are often used for female divinities, are to be associated not with the word *thronos* (throne), but with the word *thrōna* meaning "flowered garment".⁹⁴ But in the case of Hera the meaning of the epithet as "of the throne" seems clear.⁹⁵ Hera's relationship with the throne is also found in various stories, most tellingly in the one where Hephaistos took revenge on her by sending her a throne as a gift, which kept her fastened down as soon as she sat on it.⁹⁶ Hera, throne, and Zeus are often mentioned together, just like Hera, bed and Zeus are, the implication being that it is because she shares Zeus' bed that Hera can be "of the golden throne".⁹⁷ Hera, though, seems to be restless on the throne that links her to Zeus. When angry she tosses in it.⁹⁸ When really angry and pregnant with Typhaon she never sits on it.⁹⁹ When punished, on the contrary, she is tied to it.¹⁰⁰ So is the throne, one may wonder, the source of Hera's power or a limit to it, a vessel to contain it? These stories, I think, play with this idea, but as elsewhere in Greek cult it is put aside and there is more emphasis on the interdependency of the two gods and the

stability of Olympus. Pindar calls Zeus *homothronos* with Hera (sharing the same throne),¹⁰¹ and in Euripides' *Herakles Amphitryon* is wondering whether Zeus is watching from the throne of Hera.¹⁰²

I have left Demeter and Dionysos for the end of this brief review, two gods closely connected with each other in myths and in their involvement in agriculture and mystery cults. Perhaps we can detect here another link between the two gods, in that neither of them exactly conforms to the broader theme I have been discussing thus far. Neither Demeter nor Dionysos have a close connection with a special divine object. Demeter is called *Chrysaoros* (of the golden sword) in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, but this peculiar association between Demeter and a weapon is not elaborated anywhere.¹⁰³ Demeter is also associated with torches, or the grain stalk, but these are not special "god-objects" as they are also shared by the worshippers. The same applies to Dionysos and his connection with the *thyrsos* or the *kantharos*. The *thyrsos* is described as a wand wreathed with ivy and vine leaves. It is true that in descriptions of the *gigantomachy* Dionysos is portrayed fighting with the *thyrsos* just as Zeus fights with his thunder,¹⁰⁴ and in the *Bacchai* the *thyrsos* carried by the maenads are magical, powerful implements that can be used to attack animals and people, or for other purposes. One maenad striking her wand against a rock gets water, and when another hits the ground with it produces wine.¹⁰⁵ So the *thyrsos* is clearly a powerful object. But I think it is important to note that there aren't any stories about the *thyrsos*, no fear that somebody might steal it, nor punishments for those who try to imitate it.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, and to Plato's disdain, the *thyrsos* is commonly carried by the devotees of the god.¹⁰⁷

To sum up then, most of the major Olympians, not just Hermes, are intimately linked with special objects, and, if there are exceptions, these seem to be Demeter and Dionysos. It is not clear that these special objects act, following Vernant, as extensions of the gods' power, enlarging his domain of action. There is often the idea that these objects are the very source of the god's power, at least as this power can be perceived in the tangible results it has on the world. What the objects seem to do is to give shape to the god's power for good or for bad, which would otherwise be impossible to define.

⁹⁰ Epicharmus Fr 135; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.6.2; Diod. 3.70.3–5; *Etym. Magn.* s.v. Pallas; Eur. *Ion* 987–997. See Henrichs 1977; Robertson 2001, 42.

⁹¹ Hartswick 1993; Marx 1993.

⁹² Hom. *Il.* 14.178, 215, 21.489–492. Is this a prerogative she has because she is the queen of the gods, and like Zeus then, who is often credited in stories with giving to the other gods their special objects, she can also have access to the objects of other female deities?

⁹³ Hom. *Il.* 1.611 and 14; Pind. *Nem.* 1; *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 344–346; Eur. *Hel.* 241.

⁹⁴ Scheid & Svenbro 1996, 75–76.

⁹⁵ See also Pironi 2014, 14–15.

⁹⁶ Alkaios Fr 349; Pind. Fr 283.

⁹⁷ Hera, Zeus and bed: Hom. *Il.* 1.609–611. Hera, Zeus, throne and bed: Eur. *Hel.* 241; *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 344–346.

⁹⁸ Hom. *Il.* 8.199.

⁹⁹ *Hom. Hymn Ap.* 344–346.

¹⁰⁰ See above note 96.

¹⁰¹ Pind. *Nem.* 11.1–2.

¹⁰² Eur. *Her.* 1127.

¹⁰³ *Hymn. Hom. Dem.* 4. See Richardson 1974, 139–140, for a discussion of the epithet.

¹⁰⁴ Eur. *Ion* 218, where it is also called *apolemos* (unwarlike); Apoll. *Bibl.* 1.6.1–2.

¹⁰⁵ Eur. *Bach.* 704–706, 1126–1135. See Kalke 1985; Olszewski 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Only in late orphic traditions the *thyrsos* becomes the instrument with which the Titans deceived Dionysos: Procl. in *Hes. Op.* 52; Damasc. in *Pl. Phaed.* 1. 170. Álvarez 2017, 118.

¹⁰⁷ Pl. *Phd.* 69c.

In this sense they are indeed identifiers of the gods, part and parcel of their identity and their ability to act on the world.¹⁰⁸ They are the gods' attributes in iconography without which we would be unable to identify them as particular gods, or as gods in general. And they are of course very common as poetic epithets, helping the worshippers to picture these divinities whose name and power, would otherwise remain mysterious. Concomitant with this idea of giving shape to the gods power, is the idea that at the same time this power is somehow restricted. The whole theme of the "god relying on an object to perform his deeds" puts, as Vernsel pointed out in the case of Hermes, a question mark over their omnipotent divine status. The very act of taking the powerful object that is handed to them, imposes a restraint on the power of the gods. This theme emerges in various ways: once Zeus gets hold of the thunderbolt the security of his rule is tied to it. Apollo's association with the lyre affects his relationship with the bow. And this possibility emerges even more clearly in the stories of Hera and Athena whose bodies and identities can seem to be trapped in somebody else's objects. Greek gods of course were not omnipotent, and the fact that their powers are circumscribed is necessary to their co-existence. One theme that emerges most clearly in the stories discussed above is how objects help situate the Olympian gods within a network of relationships, linking them to each other, as well as with the gods that came before them, and with mortals.

The paper, I hope, has shown that we should think harder about the various stories which linked gods with special objects. By linking the gods' powers with artefacts that can be created, replicated, exchanged or stolen, these stories open up a range of possibilities of imagining what exactly is divine power and how this relates to the material world, a world which the humans also share, even if their experience of it can be different from that of the gods. The idea that humans too could have access to these objects and the power they bring is variously entertained in the stories we looked at. This possibility is of course never fully allowed: it would be impossible to try and make a copy of the thunderbolt, and it is telling also that the *aegis* or the thunderbolt are not even described as fully material objects.¹⁰⁹ But Apollo's bow can be imagined as a replica of a human bow, the trident can be found in human hands, and one could get a glimpse of Athena's *aegis*.¹¹⁰ It is an

essential feature of Greek religion that gods were within the material world, not outside it like the Christian deity. Something that is most readily visible in the creation myths, where the embeddedness of the gods in the world is reflected in their sexual creation of it. As entities that were within the material world, they operated in ways that were conditioned by it. The possibilities raised by these theological ideas should be in a dialogue with the study of the specific materiality of Greek religion: its temples, statues and numerous dedications that form the "stuff" discussed in this volume.

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¹⁰⁸ See also Bielfeldt 2014, 28, who writes about Hephaistos "Hephaistos wäre ohne seine Dinge nicht er selbst: sie machen wesentlich die Existenz des Gottes aus". But later on (p. 34) she makes this less about the divinity of Hephaistos and more about him as a craftsman and paradigmatic of the relationship between objects and men.

¹⁰⁹ Brouillet & Carastro 2018, 101 for the *aegis*.

¹¹⁰ Brouillet & Carastro 2018, 95–96 emphasize the visual effect of the *aegis*. Note also the "sacred aegis" carried around at Athens by the priestess of Athena: *Suda* s.v. aigis.

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