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# 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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# 15. The aesthetics of rare experiences in early Greek sanctuaries

## Abstract

Drawing from recent advances in theories of materiality and sensory archaeology, this paper explores how materiality shaped an aesthetic of rare experiences in the large panhellenic sanctuaries during the so-called Orientalizing period. At the core of my approach is the consideration of physical and cognitive approaches to wondrous objects assembled by sanctuaries as part of a systematically sought after “*Wunderkammer*” aesthetic. As a study case, I focus on cauldrons with siren, lion, and griffin attachments. These highly complex artifacts were endowed with physical (e.g. scale and material) and formal properties (e.g. lifelikeness), the negotiation of which by viewers or users required the activation of a new perceptual “software”.\*

*Keywords:* Greek sanctuaries, rare experiences, griffin cauldrons, *Wunderkammer* aesthetic

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## Introduction

In the early 21st century, the materialities and visualities of the Orientalizing phenomenon are archaeologically visible as never before. However, they are not easily comprehensible. Archaeological research throughout the Mediterranean has documented sites and artifacts, yet the relational nexus that gave meaning to these artifacts still remains elusive. The recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York un-

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\* Many thanks to Matthew Haysom, Maria Mili and Jenny Wallensten for the conception of and organization of *The Stuff of the Gods* symposium. My paper delineates an approach that was subsequently published in Papalexandrou 2021b, a monograph on the griffin cauldrons of the 7th century BC. The first half of the book (pp. 18–142) explores in depth the contextual circumstances of discovery of the remnants of these cauldrons and extrapolates from this and other evidence in order to put forward a new understanding about their function in Greek sanctuaries or in the elite funereal environments elsewhere.

der the title *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age* brought together an exuberant panorama of materials, shapes, forms, textures, colors, and images in a multiplicity of artifacts deriving from an impressive swath stretching from Mesopotamia to Iberia.<sup>1</sup> All of these artifacts may unexceptionally be claimed to have belonged to the incomparable realm of the spectacularly rare, the marvelous, and the unprecedentedly sensational. Even viewers fully immersed in the study of these materials could not help walking away with their heads spinning, sweetly bedazzled, transfixed.<sup>2</sup> The sensory effect of the exhibit as an assemblage may approximate sensory effects and cognitive experiences made possible only in major Greek sanctuaries from the late 8th to the beginning of the 6th century BC. This is precisely what I explore in this paper: sanctuaries (e.g. Olympia, Delphi, Heraion at Samos, Idaean cave on Crete) as spaces of rare experiences constitutive of a new aesthetics and a new sensibility.

## Some theoretical presuppositions

It is inevitable that the artificial assemblage of this fascinating exhibit did not tell the whole story of the objects on display.

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<sup>1</sup> Aruz *et al.* 2014. Tied to the exhibit was a series of public lectures published in Aruz & Seymour 2016.

<sup>2</sup> These effects would explain the usage of words like “extraordinary,” “masterpieces,” “miraculous,” used to characterize the artifacts on display and their effects in the otherwise no-nonsense review of the exhibition by Allison Karmel Thomason and Megan Cifarelli (Thomason & Cifarelli 2015). In a similar vein Holland Cotter used terms like “wonders,” “fabulous,” “absolutely stunning” to describe the artifacts on display and their effect (Cotter 2014); and Melik Kaylan wrote about the “resplendent beauty” of “gorgeous or poignant objects” (Kaylan 2014). Notwithstanding the rhetorical intentions of these authors, it was the cumulative effect of the exhibition’s assemblage that warranted this descriptive vocabulary. I experienced it myself during a visit on October 29, 2014.

The show programmatically defined the Mediterranean as the grand overarching framework of the Orientalizing within which many artifacts circulated far and wide. Much less attention was given to the social life of objects in antiquity. By “social life” I do not mean the capacity of material artifacts (e.g. as commodities or wealth traded or accumulated) to contribute to the construction of social status of groups or individuals.<sup>3</sup> I think more widely of the artifacts’ convoluted embeddedness in the messy lives of humans. Material culture is always entangled in an intricate nexus of infinite interactive relationships, physical and cognitive, temporal and spatial, that even in the best circumstances leave behind a very faint discursive trail.<sup>4</sup>

Artifacts do create relations as they invite responses that are partly shaped by the physical properties of the objects themselves and partly by the ambient interactive ethos, the culturally defined protocols that enable humans to engage meaningfully with material and visual culture.<sup>5</sup> These protocols entail behaviors consciously or unconsciously learned in the actuality of social life, and the normative prescriptions are oftentimes dictated or even controlled by those in power, that is, those with invested interests in the interactive nature of material and visual culture.<sup>6</sup> One’s acculturation to these norms often happens in degrees that define various identities, like class, gender, religion, and social role.

Successful communication with material and visual culture is, therefore, a two-way process that involves meaning generated at the intersection of two things: on the one hand artifacts or artworks project outwards in terms of various properties, like color, style, figurative content, syntax, and inner movement.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is the “perceptual software” of viewers that enables them to tune into the explicit and implicit messages of the artwork or artifact.<sup>8</sup> That is, viewers or users of material culture project in their turn their learned strategies of decoding and response. The degree of one’s mastery of a visual culture determines both the semantic nature of artifacts as objects of experience and the quality of contact between viewer and artifact. Equilibrium between artifact and viewer means that they both fulfill their culturally prescribed roles. Disequilibrium, on the other hand, may result in a spectrum of responses, most interesting of which is when viewers or users do not have the perceptual “software” at

their disposal for communicating with material culture, a state perhaps conveyed best by the formulaic expression *thauma idesthai* (a wonder to behold) of Homeric poetry.

## Greek sanctuaries as “cabinets of curiosities”

These premises underlie my engagement with the “stuff of gods” we explore in this conference. In this paper I focus on the Near Eastern or orientaling artifacts from the great pan-hellenic sanctuaries of the 7th century BC. My research is motivated by two overlapping questions: first, what cultures of seeing and being seen were made possible by the influx of oriental or orientaling material and visual culture in the Greek world from the late 8th century BC onwards? And second, to what extent were responses to the oriental and orientaling artifacts constitutive of new types of experience within the religious space of the sanctuaries?

In the remainder of this paper, I will be putting forward the hypothesis that precisely like the assemblage of the *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age* exhibition in New York City, from the 8th century BC onwards the Greek sanctuaries acquired the contents, ambiance, significance, fame, and functions of “*Wunderkammer*,” the well-known cabinets of curiosities of the Early Modern period. The “*Wunderkammer*” effect (Fig. 1) offers an excellent framework not only for considering the catalytic role of the sensory properties of artifacts but also for exploring the variegated physical and mental responses to them, the relational nexus that accounts for their social and religious significance. In recent decades scholarship has shed valuable light on the social function of material culture in antiquity. This scholarly preoccupation has monopolized attention at the expense of alternate and equally productive approaches. I propose that much is to be gained, if we also interrogate the sensory properties of objects *vis-à-vis* the culturally learned ways for negotiating these properties. This emphasis enables the exploration of *why* and *how* objects become affective and therefore loci of mediation in human relations and in relations between humans and gods.

The “*Wunderkammer*” phenomenon is symptomatic of historical periods characterized by conquest, exploration of new spatial frontiers, and expanding cognitive horizons.<sup>9</sup> I think, for example, of the Hellenistic world in the wake of Alexander’s conquests or Europe in the aftermath of Columbus’ discoveries. The former produced phenomena like the Museum in Alexandria and the great collections in cultural

<sup>3</sup> Appadurai 1986. On oriental or orientaling artifacts as status-shaping material culture see Saint-Pierre Hoffmann & Brisart 2010; Brisart 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Hodder 2012; Malafouris 2013; Gell 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Papalexandrou 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Bryson 1983, 148–149; As Jonathan Crary has aptly put it, “one who sees is one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations” (Crary 1990, 6).

<sup>8</sup> I explore these issues in detail in Papalexandrou 2021b.

<sup>9</sup> Impey & McGregor 1985; Pomian 1990; Findlen 1994; Daston & Park 1998; Findlen & Smith 2002; Poliquin 2012, 11–42.



Fig. 1. Tentative reconstruction of the interior of the 7th century BC temple of Hera at Samos, Heraion (Hekatompedon I), as a Wunderkammer. Drawing by Yannis Nakas.

capitals like Pergamon and Antioch.<sup>10</sup> The latter made possible the well-documented but now vanished cabinets of curiosities—a widespread phenomenon throughout Europe.<sup>11</sup> These periods often are politically, economically, socially, and culturally destabilizing. Intensive travel, circulation of new ideas, opening of trade routes and exploitation of new resources generate the impulse to redraw physical and conceptual maps of the known universe.

Established paradigms of thought are upset under the onslaught of the radically new and the recalibration of the *kosmos* becomes inevitable. A concomitant trait of such processes is the intensive pursuit, collection, and systematic study of marvelous objects, natural or non-natural. These assemblages are often new and exciting species of bizarre animals, monsters, exotic plants, fossils, shells, and raw materials or exquisitely crafted man-made artifacts that open up infinite possibilities for new forms, sensations, experiences, and knowledge. In the context of *Wunderkammer*, these objects literally came to epitomize the world. As Paula Findlen aptly put it, the cabinets of curiosities became “... a repository of the collective imagination of their society.”<sup>12</sup>

The documented material record of the great sanctuaries offers much to argue a character akin to that of the well-documented cabinets of curiosities of the Early Modern period. From the Early Iron Age onwards, the great sanctuaries assembled valuable materials, either as a result of intentional gestures of piety or systematic collection. With the passage of time their physical and conceptual spaces came to contain plenty for constituting a complete reversal of everyday reality, a suspension of the known and the familiar, and an otherworldly ambiance that only with great difficulty can be teased out of archaeological artifacts or ancient texts. The intensity of sacredness was predicated on physical and cognitive accessibility to everything enclosed within a *temenos*.<sup>13</sup> I cannot survey all the relevant materials here but I mention Samos mainly because of the richness of variegated materials preserved in the unique circumstances of Hera’s sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> Adrienne Mayor has called our attention to the amplitude of fossils and numer-

<sup>10</sup> Pergamon: Kuttner 2015. Alexandria: Miles 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Onians 1994. His analysis stresses that this period manifested an “excess of novelty” (Onians 1994, 26) and states that the “period between Leonardo and Le Brun, the 16th and 17th centuries AD, is the period of wonder, *par excellence*” (Onians 1994, 16).

<sup>12</sup> Findlen 1994, 9; see also Thomas Kaufmann’s characterization of Rudolf II’s famous *Kunstammer* in his imperial palace at Prague:

“... the world in microcosm ... expressed his [Rudolf’s] mastery of the world.” (quoted in Greenblatt 1991, 51).

<sup>13</sup> Hom. *Il.* 9.401–409 is an early attestation of the famed wealth inside the *temenos* of Apollo at Delphi. For a discussion of this rich in implications and overtones passage, see Papalexandrou 2005, 25–27. See Papalexandrou 2016a; 2021b, 96–142, for discussions of the 7th century BC princely elites in Italy as emulators of the *Wunderkammer* atmosphere argued here for sanctuaries.

<sup>14</sup> Kyrieleis 1993; Tsakos & Viglaki-Sofianou 2012; Niemeier 2014; Walter *et al.* 2019; Papalexandrou 2021a, 27–43.

ous osteological remains of extinct or exotic animals in Samos and other sanctuaries.<sup>15</sup>

I myself experienced the sensory effects of wondrous materials as a member of the excavation team at the Idaean cave during the 1980s: amber, ivory, quartz, rock crystal, carnelian, amethyst, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, faience, glass, bronze, and figurative bronze *sphyrrelata* thinner than paper.<sup>16</sup> All these artefacts are now extremely fragmentary, yet they still are tremendously powerful in affording a sense of their original affective power.<sup>17</sup> We can only imagine the original awe-inspiring splendor of Greek sanctuaries, if we take into account irreversibly lost artifacts made of materials like wood, often colorful and fragrant, multicolored and shiny textiles, or other perishable materials such as leather. Even if original display schemes and the etiquette of interaction with these artifacts eludes us today, there is plenty of evidence for positing sensory overload as a perpetually sought-after effect in the creation of the ambience of ancient Greek sanctuaries.<sup>18</sup>

## An aesthetics of rare experiences

From the very beginning, Greek sanctuaries capitalized on their self-construction as heterotopic points of contact with superhuman powers.<sup>19</sup> The manipulation of the wondrous was a constant staple in their business but the influx of ideas and artifacts from the Eastern Mediterranean ushered in unprecedented possibilities for shocking new materials, expressive media, technologies and experiences.

Philip Fisher argues that periods of radical cultural change, like the Orientalizing period, tend to make manifest phenomena that generate an intense experience of wonder. In his analysis of the late 19th century, for example, he talks about

novel techniques and materials “... that made possible, in combination, the construction of things never before seen on earth” like, for example, the skyscraper, suspended bridges, or moving images.<sup>20</sup> In more concrete terms, Fisher thinks of the modernist revolution after Monet’s first Impressionist work of 1873: “The address to the viewer of these great and often oversized works of the last century has been an address to the aesthetics of wonder, that is, to the feeling of radical singularity of means and purposes, to the idea of incomparable experiences, to the self-consciously fresh or first work in a technical direction where preparation of seeing it breaks down and gives few clues. But with wonder, above all else, there is an address to delight, to the bold youthful stroke, to pleasure in the unexpected ...”<sup>21</sup>

Drawing from responses to the radical novelty of impressionistic paintings may not be as paradoxical as it may seem for understanding the shockingly new of the Orientalizing period. Fisher’s aesthetics of wonder are predicated on radically new materials, styles, and techniques, the sensory effects of which demand physical, emotional, and cognitive responses for which viewers are completely unprepared. As mentioned earlier, meanings, significance, and value are not inherent in material or visual artifacts. Instead, to negotiate contact with them one has to have and internalized “perceptual software”, a *savoir faire* of sorts, that very often is the product of painstaking indoctrination in initiatory proceedings. When your preexisting “perceptual software” for negotiating the radically new breaks down, or when you do not have a “perceptual software” at your disposal, then you have a rare experience of astonishment that overwhelms your intellect, exhausts your emotions, numbs your senses or simply takes your breath away.<sup>22</sup>

During the Orientalizing period the great sanctuaries came to possess and manipulate a multiplicity of materials that not only showcased their accumulated wealth, their range of contacts, their control of resources, and the power of their patrons and visitors; the amazing exotica were intentionally set up as stimulators of extreme wonder, and it was precisely the protracted and intense surrender to wonder and its attendant psychological maelstrom that constituted a new, unprecedented form of religious experience. These experiences were exclusive to only very few sanctuaries, like Olympia, Delphi, and Sa-

<sup>15</sup> Mayor 2011, 180–183; Samos has also yielded the remains of a crocodile and two African antelopes, see Kyrieleis 1993, 138. He explains them as dedicated “trophies of the chase”. See also Ekroth 2018 on the remains of a crocodile at the Heraion.

<sup>16</sup> Sakellarakis & Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013, with bibliography; Kunze 1931 (bronze shields). *Sphyrrelata* are hammered metal sheets with embossed and engraved figurative or non-figurative decoration.

<sup>17</sup> See Papalexandrou 2021a, an exploration of the phenomenological dimensions of the combined effect of artifacts against the physicality of the cave and vice-versa.

<sup>18</sup> For the importance of seeking the sensory in the artifactual record of the past and the relationships it entailed see Skeates 2010; Hamilakis 2014; Neumann & Thomason 2022. Harris’s account of the treasures of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis is rich in implications regarding the cumulative sensory effect of the Parthenon’s interior, even if one does not take-into-account the intentionally stunning gold-and-ivory statue of the Parthenos (Harris 1995).

<sup>19</sup> I use the term “heterotopic” based on Foucault’s definition of *heterotopias* (Foucault 1986, 23): “real places ... a kind of enacted Utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously present, contested, and inverted.”

<sup>20</sup> Fisher 1998, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher 1998, 6.

<sup>22</sup> What I describe is not different from what Greenblatt has described as “intense, indeed enchanted looking. Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices” (Greenblatt 1991, 49). See also Papalexandrou 2010, 261 and extensive discussion in Papalexandrou 2021b, 189–224; 2023.

mos. These centers must have competed with each other not only in the accumulation of extraordinary artifacts but also in the creation of extraordinary effects, phenomena well documented in later periods of Greek antiquity but also in more recent eras.<sup>23</sup> I am thinking, for example, of the Acropolis in the Classical period or the marvelous architecture of the Gothic or the Baroque that operated in tandem with interiors crammed with all sorts of literally marvelous objects arranged in strictly controlled hierarchies of accessibility and holiness.<sup>24</sup>

## The wondrous “stuff” of the gods

It is within a *“Wunderkammer”* framework and through a conceptual lens of an aesthetics of wonder and rare experiences that I would like to focus on the study case of the so-called orientalizing cauldrons. From the late 8th century BC these sumptuous artifacts were equipped with a largely Near Eastern repertory of griffins, lions, and human-headed birds (“sirens”) in various combinations (Fig. 2). Outside Greece, these cauldrons belonged to princes and royals who deposited them in extraordinarily lavish tombs, the interiors of which were indeed construed like veritable *Wunderkammer*.<sup>25</sup> In Greece, large numbers of these cauldrons have been documented in Samos, Olympia and Delphi, but they did appear in other sanctuaries as well.<sup>26</sup> In these contexts cauldrons survive only in fragments, a situation that has by default conditioned the method of archaeological publication, which is usually very thorough, and scholars’ or laymen’s understanding of these objects.<sup>27</sup>

The individual components of orientalizing cauldrons have become reified as autonomous self-standing objects. This ontologically problematic status underlies their canonization in histories of the 7th century BC art of the pre-Classical Mediterranean. However, in antiquity these cauldrons possessed material, visual, and sensory effects as integrated wholes and it is with this consideration in mind that we have to explore how these objects contributed to the shaping and enhancement



Fig. 2. Graphic reconstruction of griffin cauldron. After Furtwängler 1890, pl. 49c.

of the sacred ambience of the sanctuaries.<sup>28</sup> I start with two fundamental questions: What was it exactly that these objects radiated outwards to their viewers or users, human or divine? And what was the necessary “perceptual software” for communicating properly with these objects? Before addressing these questions, I would like to take a few moments to argue against two prevalent misconceptions about the function and significance of orientalizing cauldrons.

One is that the orientalizing cauldrons were the 7th century BC versions of the monumental tripod-cauldrons of the Geometric period.<sup>29</sup> Concomitant to this understanding is that the orientalizing cauldrons were showy dedicatory objects deposited in sacred space to constitute and advertise the

<sup>23</sup> Onians 1994. A major investment to the otherworldly ambience of the great sanctuaries was the result of foreign dedications either from the West or the East. On dedications by Etruscans and other Italics to Delphi, see Colonna 1993. On the lavish dedications of Anatolian rulers to Delphi, see Kaplan 2006. On oriental imports to the Heraion of Samos: Jantzen 1972. On 7th century BC bronzes from Delphi, imported or not: Aurigny 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Quintessential for the Gothic is Panofsky 1979. On the Baroque see Onians 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Papalexandrou 2016b; 2021b.

<sup>26</sup> For a brief synthesis of the material see Aruz *et al.* 2014, 272–281; extensive discussion in Papalexandrou 2021b.

<sup>27</sup> Papalexandrou 2021b, 1–17. For the archaeological circumstances of their discovery, see Papalexandrou 2021b, 18–142, a case-by-case analysis of their archaeological context and its implications.

<sup>28</sup> Papalexandrou 2021b.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Philipp 2012.

fame and outstanding status of their elite dedicants. If true, this function would account for only a small fraction of the documented material. Unlike the tripod-cauldrons, which from the Early Iron Age were deeply ingrained in the symbolic thought and rituals of the Greeks, the orientalizing cauldrons left behind a very low and puzzling discursive profile.<sup>30</sup> There is only one textual reference (Hdt. 4.152). And the handful of pictorial renderings suggests that the orientalizing cauldrons were neither properly understood nor positively welcomed as material objects in sacred space.<sup>31</sup> If, for example, the Polyphemos Painter was indeed directly inspired by the orientalizing cauldrons for his rendering of the Gorgons' heads on the belly of the Eleusis amphora, his choice of model betrays a negative sentiment rather than an admiring attitude toward the cauldrons.<sup>32</sup> To me at least he seems to say "these are the ugliest and most threatening objects in Athena's sanctuary."<sup>33</sup> And this aesthetic statement, if I read it correctly, may also have had moral or even political connotations.<sup>34</sup>

The second widespread misconception I argue against is that in antiquity orientalizing cauldrons were physically accessible and cognitively intelligible. I propose instead that upon their introduction and for a long time afterwards the orientalizing cauldrons were not physically or cognitively accessible within the sanctuaries. Rather, they were the sanctuaries' well-hidden secret. And usage and sensory contact with them must have been reserved for a very select few. To answer the first question formulated above, I submit that in terms of technical intricacy, size, value and technical effect, these artifacts offered shockingly new interactive experiences, especially for audiences versed in the minimalist visuality of the Geometric period. Their monstrous components were rendered with an unprecedented emphasis on lifelikeness usually explained as an apotropaic device of Near Eastern origin.

<sup>30</sup> On tripod-cauldrons see Papalexandrou 2005. See Papalexandrou 2021b on the low cognitive and physical accessibility of the griffin cauldrons.

<sup>31</sup> Papalexandrou 2021b.

<sup>32</sup> George Mylonas already showed in detail that the models for the Gorgons' heads were orientalizing cauldrons (Mylonas 1957, 85–88). See my analysis in Papalexandrou 2016b; 2021b, 177–186.

<sup>33</sup> The plethora of evidence for griffin cauldrons on the Athenian Acropolis, the sanctuary closest to Eleusis that has yielded evidence for griffin cauldrons, has received little attention in the relevant scholarship. This is a result of their incomplete publication but also of the lack of attention to anything that lacks the splendor of the great sculptural masterpieces of the Archaic and Classical periods. For a recent listing see Scholl 2006, 152–155; see also Papalexandrou 2021b, 69–74. My assumption in this discussion is that the Polyphemos Painter would have been familiar, either by hearsay or through first-hand experience, with the griffin cauldrons there.

<sup>34</sup> Based mostly on textual sources, Ian Morris has shown that in Greece at least, responses to the orientalizing phenomenon and its material and visual manifestations were not at all unanimous (Morris 1997).

The "apotropaic" interpretation, however, can only go that far in illuminating the agency of these intricate artifacts. Since the 19th century, it has been established as an interpretive straightjacket that has hindered insights to the complex nature of visual objects and their affective power.<sup>35</sup> A detailed analysis of the formal properties of the objects themselves show that orientalizing cauldrons were made to be seen as both attractive and repulsive: their "animation" verged on the uncanny even as they were aggressively crafted to call attention to their technical and stylistic virtuosity.<sup>36</sup> By "uncanny" I mean that the movement, textures, surface treatment and assaulting gaze of the griffin- and lion protomes beckoned viewers to experience uncomfortable and contradictory sentiments: the frisson generated by confrontation with matter animated as never before, the puzzlement in front of the monstrous artifact that looks at you exacting a response of sensory submission or cognitive command, the confrontation with artifacts being at once familiar and overly alien, the disorienting sense of synaesthesia, fear entangled with attraction, the compulsion to share these sentiments and, if possible, recreate them at will. These were rare and unsettling experiences, the negotiation of which required strategies of response that were completely foreign to the perceptual DNA of Early Iron Age Greeks. The old paradigm of response involved extraordinary tripod-cauldrons, intricate and wondrous objects functioning as epicenters of performative events that generated narratives of epic style, content, and form.<sup>37</sup>

The orientalizing cauldrons, instead, generated an altogether new type of experience for those indoctrinated in the ways of orientalizing visuality: they attracted attention and scrutiny as material objects and the most important narrative they generated was telling of the thrill of having seen and interacted with them. And this interaction was premised on a new perceptual software that allowed one's surrender as much to the illusionistic aggressiveness of the cauldrons as to their address for purely aesthetic delight. Confronted with the orientalizing cauldrons, the savvy viewer experienced a maelstrom of emotions, both positive and negative, but he/she was careful enough to remain conscious of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity, and its revelations.

In other words, the shocking lifelikeness of the cauldrons caused profoundly epiphanic experiences. By "epiphanic" I do not mean that the objects themselves became stand-ins for the divine owners of the sanctuaries. Neither do I mean that their apotropaic visual qualities were experienced as functioning on behalf of the gods, that is, creating distance and fear. Rather, my notion of the "epiphanic" is premised on the experience of

<sup>35</sup> Schlesier 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Papalexandrou 2021b, 189–224.

<sup>37</sup> Papalexandrou 2005.

the cauldrons as *agalмата*—objects that cause delight. Experiencing the delight generated by the materiality and visuality of these *agalмата*, for a brief and happy moment the visitor of the sanctuary has an experience *in common with* the divinity and its incomparable power to bestow terror and extreme joy. This experience, however, was exclusive to only very few visitors for the greater part of the 7th century BC.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have delineated an experiential framework for reconstructing aspects of the relational nexus between people and objects, “the stuff of the gods”, in the context of sanctuaries. My study case was the griffin cauldrons but a host of other materials may be shown to have been actively constitutive of the 7th century BC visuality.<sup>38</sup> The orientaling phenomenon made available technologies of the visual that resulted in wondrous objects, contact with which was instrumental for the generation of religious sentiments. It seems that sanctuary authorities were quick to respond to and appropriate the novelties of the Orientalizing and perhaps competed in the manipulation of this new materiality for the construction of sanctuaries as otherworldly spaces for contact with the divine, as contexts of wondrous and rare experiences. As otherworldly and wondrous environments, the great sanctuaries became laboratories for the forging of the new orientaling visuality in Greece and the Western Mediterranean and ultimately of the formation that ushered in the political and social configurations of the Mediterranean Classical Age.

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<sup>38</sup> One wonders, for example, about responses to the exquisitely crafted tridacna shells (Aruz *et al.* 2014, 163–166) or to the aggressive visuality of the Idaean cave shields (Kunze 1931; Sakellarakis & Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013, 34–57).

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