CHAPTER 6

Keimêlia in Context: Toward an Understanding of the Value of Antiquities in the Past

Amanda S. Reiterman

1 Introduction

The centrality of the past in the worldview of ancient Mediterranean populations is evident from a host of sources, including testimonia, people's recurring engagement with specific landscapes and monuments and—the phenomenon considered here—the prolonged use of certain valued objects, frequently described as keimêlia by early Greek authors. Although artifacts comprise the most abundant and ubiquitous category of surviving material evidence, they have received relatively little note in recent archaeological discussions of the uses of the past in antiquity. Yet ‘things’ presented an ownable, movable past.

In examining burnt temples, Margaret Miles in this volume (ch. 5) reveals how monumental physical remains served as foci for Greek memory communities, continuously evoking the trauma and lessons of the past. Fixed points in the landscape like these can speak of public commemorative behaviors that often tie into larger historical narratives, but this chapter explores people’s interactions with the past on a smaller, more intimate scale, through portable goods, such as pots, jewelry and weapons, among others. Artifacts with signs

2 The word keimêlia has several nuances (section 1.2 below). These do not follow a neat evolutionary pattern; the same text can invoke different connotations of the word. I use keimêlia and keimêlion as succinct descriptors for objects that were curated in antiquity.
4 ‘Object’ and ‘thing’ are used interchangeably here to refer to potential keimêlia, which are tangible items, small enough to be held or moved without difficulty and, therefore, owned. Anthropologists apply the same two words to a broader set of referents and problematize the word ‘object’ for its implications of opposition (for discussion, see Hodder 2012, 1–14).
5 Hence, they could be incorporated into ritual and performance (Lillios 1999, 242).
that they were ‘curated’\(^6\) in antiquity are important analogues to the silver kraters with distinguished lineages traced by Homer,\(^7\) the dedications recorded in temple inventories and the myriad ancient relics described by Pausanias. While these and other famous objects have been discussed elsewhere,\(^8\) this exploration probes the microhistories of *keimêlia* recovered through archaeological investigation. Such artifacts are portholes through which modern observers catch glimpses of the past active in the lives of anonymous individuals. They offer an alternative pathway for understanding the values assigned to the past in antiquity.

The following case studies are drawn from diverse parts of the Mediterranean (eighth to fifth centuries BCE), spanning the Greek heartland, colonies and non-Greek communities. The broad chronological and geographic scope reveals a spectrum of behaviors toward older objects, and the emergent patterns help to establish questions useful for assessing antiquities in the material record. But first, a brief look at select textual sources gives some sense of the significance individuals once attached to *keimêlia* and justifies the project of seeking them in archaeological contexts, despite the methodological challenges, also outlined up-front.

### 1.1 Setting the Scene: Why Study ‘Things’ from the Past?

A humble basket (*antipêx*) and its contents—a cloth with imperfections indicative of its young weaver, gold coils and a dried olive wreath—famously unlock the secret of Ion’s identity in the eponymous play by Euripides.\(^9\) These tokens, which were stored for years by the Delphic priestess, enter the stage as the ‘*res ex machina*’.\(^10\) Witnesses to Ion’s secret birth in Athens long ago, they bridge time and space, providing proof of maternity to a son who had no memory of his mother, and to a mother who could not recognize her child now grown. Although Euripides does not call the basket and its contents *keimêlia*,\(^11\) that is

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\(6\) For the origins of the term in archaeological dialogues, Binford 1971, 242.


\(10\) Mueller 2010, 389.

\(11\) Instead, Ion initially calls it ‘an old basket’ (*palaian antipêga*, *Ion* 1338), but upon recognizing the objects’ significance, he refers to them as ‘treasures’ (*thêsaurismasìn* [1394], a synonym of *keimêlia*). The basket’s perishable composition makes its survival semi-miraculous—nominally elevating it to the realm of the magical possessions of heroes