

Unravelling past identities in postmodern times

T. Hodos & S. Hales (eds.). *Material Culture and Social Identities in the Ancient World.* Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xv, 339, figs. 50, b/w. ISBN: 978-0-521-76774-3.

For the past twenty years, archaeology and classical studies have increasingly focused on the study of past identities, and the theme is now one of the major research addresses — especially in archaeology —, ‘spreading like fire in drought-afflicted land’ (Mattingly in this volume, 283). The volume edited by Tamar Hodos and Shelley Hales, both based at the University of Bristol, is an ambitious attempt to offer a broad material culture view on ancient identities studies by putting together a highly differentiated set of perspectives, as provided by archaeologists, art historians and historians. Yet, the book is not only aimed at showing the powerful potential of material culture by focussing on specific case studies, but it also offers an up-to-date insight on current theoretical frameworks which have been elaborated to explore ancient — ethnic, cultural, social, etc. — identities.

The editors have organised the eleven chapters which make up the book into three sections. In section one, three papers (Hodos, Antonaccio, Hingley) explore current theoretical perspectives in past-identities studies. Section two is made up of seven case study papers (Riva, Sommer, Ilieva, Llewellyn-Jones, Isayev, Hales, Alexandridis), which deal with issues of identity by focusing on specific arrays of material culture, ranging from Iron Age Samothrace’s ceramic assemblages to funerary customs in Roman Imperial Noricum and Roman female portrait statues in the early centuries CE. In the last section, named ‘Afterword’, David Mattingly offers his thoughts and reflections. By circulating draft papers, particularly the theoretical ones, among all contributors, Hales and Hodos ensure cohesion to the volume and allow contributors both to discuss their case studies against a common theoretical framework and to compare their views with each other.

The opening chapter is by one of the editors (Hodos) and fulfils two functions: while it provides ‘an indication of key moments when the relation between cultures and identity has been stressed’ (Hodos, 5) in ancient history, classical art and archaeology, it accomplishes also the task of general introduction to the volume. In the first paragraph, Hodos makes clear the overall aim of the volume, which is to reconsider ‘the ways we recognize the perceived and projected identities of past cultures through their material and visual remains’ (Hodos, 4). In so doing, current theoretical assumptions on identity are outlined in order to explore ‘how various postmodern models of identity may be used to forge more potent interpretations of how material and visual culture was created and manipulated in the past’ (Hodos, 10).

Papers in the volume, she explains, are articulated around two major perspectives, one localised and focused on contextualised phenomena of hybridization, and the other exploring ‘how the heterogeneous natures of these regional cultures work together to

create a sense of broader cultural unity’, adding that papers ‘grapple with both these perspectives’ (Hodos, 4).

These two perspectives are explored theoretically and outlined subsequently in Hodos’ paper and, in more detail, in the following two papers (Antonaccio and Hingley) which make up Section One. By focusing on two broad themes, Greek ethnic identity and cultural unity and diversity in the Roman Empire respectively, Antonaccio and Hingley discuss how, in their specific research themes, analyses of past ethnic and cultural identities benefit from a focus on two levels, the local and the broad.

The paper by Antonaccio considers perceived and traditional assumptions of Greek ethnic identity and puts them against the much more articulated picture which emerges from the analysis of Iron Age to late Classical Sicilian contexts she explores. In particular, by focusing on the study of ceramic artefacts as a means to explore ethnic identities, she points to mutual phenomena of hybridization which took place in both indigenous and colonial Greek communities and observes that the ‘mixing of genealogies and origins of things that is at the heart of the concept of hybridity ... makes the discourse of things inherently ethnic’ (Antonaccio, 50).

In the last paper of the theoretical section, Hingley focuses on the broad theme of cultural unity and diversity in the Roman Empire by exploring political and social contexts within which scholars have elaborated current ideas on this theme. While he complains that ‘studies of classical Rome often explain ancient historical phenomena in terms that satisfy modern tastes and interests’, he calls for a more critical perspective and proposes ‘that we should work to develop a Roman past that enables us to challenge, as well to ground, contemporary ideas about our own world’ (Hingley, 54). By focusing on frameworks elaborated by scholars to explore integration of the Batavi of the lower Rhine in the Roman Empire, he shows to what extent contemporary social and political contexts have biased the approach to the study of interactions between natives and Roman power. He concludes his paper by calling for a more critical approach which allows the pursuit of ‘the context in which our understanding of Roman imperialism has developed’ (Hingley, 70).

In Section Two, seven contributors present a very heterogeneous array of case studies which are discussed, as a *trait d’union*, against the same theoretical framework outlined in Section One. Because papers focus on very different chronological and geographical contexts, which are explored from archaeological, historical and art historical perspectives, it is very important that a strong theoretical focus on identity and discussions of ideas proposed in Section One looms large. The task was not an easy one, but all the papers have successfully managed to outline clearly from their case studies the issues at stake in the volume.

The first case study is provided by Riva, and deals with issues of identity by taking into account the iconography of an artefact — the San Paolo olpe — which was collected at an Etruscan burial dating to around the mid-seventh century BCE. In chapter five, Sommer, on the basis of ancient texts and archaeological data, challenges

ancient and modern perceptions of Phoenician identities by considering the Phoenician commercial enterprise in the Iron Age. The paper by Ilieva is eminently focused on traditional ethnic identity issues because it considers the origin of the inhabitants of Samothrace in the Archaic period on the basis of the material record. A very different perspective is provided by Llewellyn-Jones in chapter seven, as he explores images of women and perceptions of beauty by analysing a particular class of artefacts, the Anatolian so-called 'Graeco-Persian' seals dating to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. A wider range of material culture is analysed by Isayev in her paper which focuses on Lucanian ethnic identity before Roman hegemony by exploring, in particular, cultural practices at the sanctuary of Rossano di Vaglio in southern Italy. The examination of funerary imagery on Roman grave altars from the area around the modern town of Klagenfurt in southern Austria is the theme Hales explores in chapter nine. An iconographic perspective is also adopted by Alexandridis, in the last paper of Section Two, while dealing with Roman female portrait statues dating from the Late Republic to the second century CE.

Following the diverse and articulated picture outlined in Section Two, the concluding paper of the volume is a useful general reflection on issues raised by the book. Despite the fact that his paper reflects his Roman bias, Mattingly offers a thoughtful insight on developments of identity studies with particular regard to his discipline in the past fifteen years, from the decline of the concept of Romanization to the emergence of the focus on discrepant identities.

The volume as a whole is a very useful — and up-to-date — discussion on current issues broadly relating to identity. As Mattingly points out in chapter eleven, 'the theoretical underpinnings of the contributors are distinctive and striking, as are the chronological scope and geographical range of coverage' (Mattingly, 283). The editors have successfully managed to bring together a very diverse set of papers and to link general discussions and theoretical frameworks to well-expounded and specific case studies. The volume is therefore a very valuable contribution for all those scholars engaged with identities issues in the ancient world.

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