

AHAH7014



Materiality and Material Culture

What is Materiality?

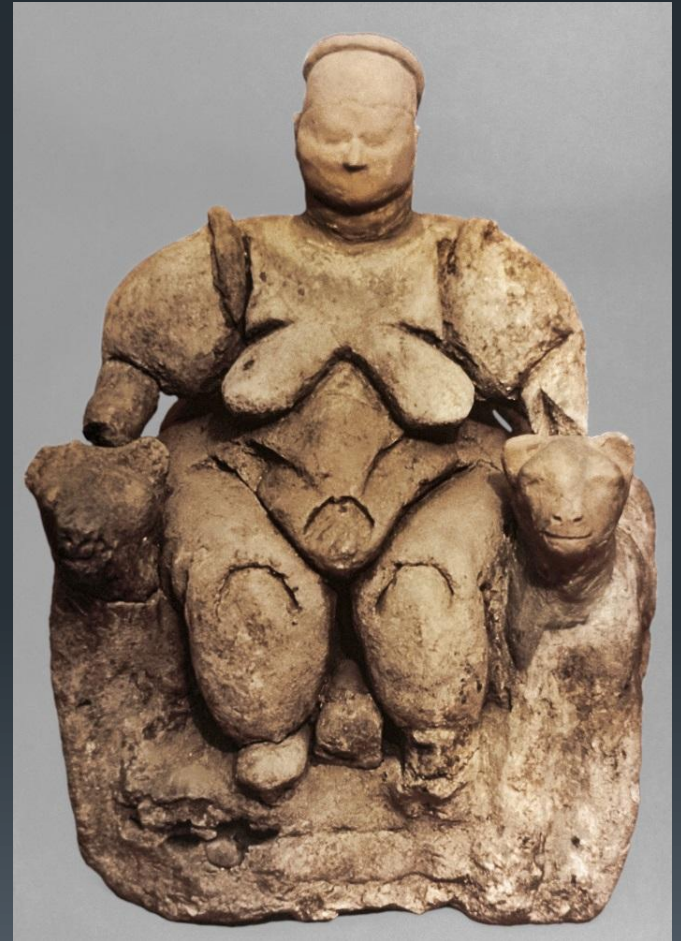
- Material Culture:
 - Things/objects created through human agency
 - Manipulation of the material world
- Material Culture Studies:
 - (Anthropology): how people invest the material world with meaning
- Materiality:
 - The physical/material properties of things
 - How people & things are entangled



Handling Mycenaean figurines
in the Ashmolean

Thinking About Objects

- “...all societies, complex as well as primitive, externalize the ideas they hold about the physical & metaphysical universes, & about social relations within their own society, by making & manipulating artifacts”
(Leach 1983: 243)



“Goddess”, Çatalhöyük

Thinking About Material Culture

- How is material culture **consumed**?
- How is it **perceived** by different peoples?
- What role does it play in the creation of social relations, in social action?
- How is it used to negotiate identities?
- The diverse ways in which 'inanimate' artefacts come to be socially alive



Cypriot figure

Ritual

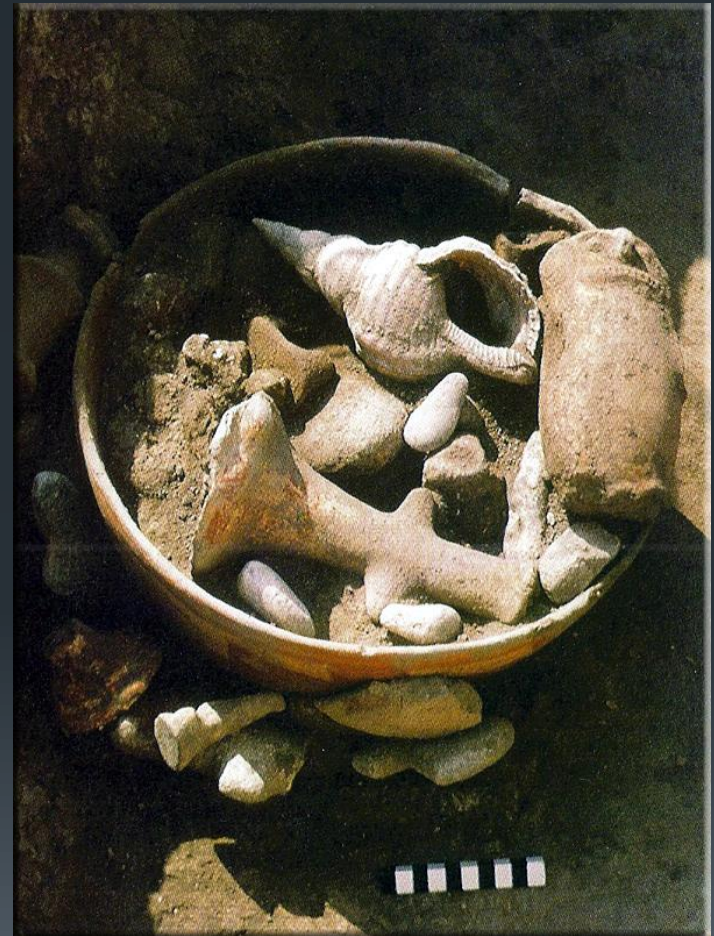
- Repeated actions, movement, communication & esoteric knowledge combined
- Use of specialized equipment, altered manner of speech
- Prescribed formalized, formulaic behaviour distinct from the repetitive activities of daily life
- Ritual is transformative
- **Ritual behaviour:**
 - How this is materially visible through evidence for activities such as processions, sacrifice, feasting & votive deposition



Detail of Ayia Triadha Sarcophagus

Materiality of Cult

- How do we decipher actions performed with ancient objects?
- How were objects incorporated within ancient cult practices?
- How were they handled & by whom?
- How were they perceived by the communities that used them?
- What was the role of memory & materiality in people's interactions with objects?
- What about the life history of an object?



Kissonerga, ceremonial deposit

Bourdieu: Theory of Practice

- Social theory: individuals (social agents/actors) play a key role in development of society / social change. Over time groups of people learn & reproduce their social structure.
- Bourdieu's *theory of practice*: how individual social actors enact, reproduce & transform social rules
 - Emphasises actions & choices of the individual
 - Recognises that these actions are culturally constructed
 - Individuals have cultural knowledge & their actions are situated within wider patterns of society
- Capital manipulated by social actors for social advantage:
 - Economic, social & cultural

Material Habitus

- Incorporated practice:
 - Handling & use of material culture is culturally engrained – habitus
 - Correct handling, actions, embodied practices
- People are socialised through objects & become culturally competent members of society through their engagement with the material world



Handling figurines at the Ashmolean

Habit Memory

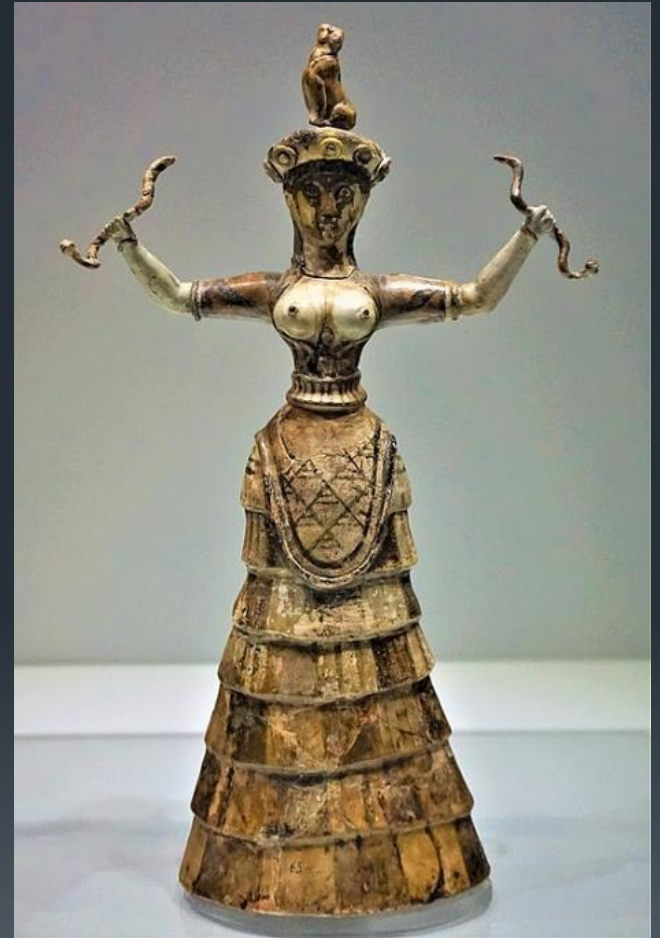
- The ability to (repeatedly) reproduce certain embodied actions
- Cognitive-bodily skills – subconscious knowledge engrained within cultural life
- Habitual action (socially prescribed rules of behaviour) an important aspect of ritualised performance
 - Correct gestures as part of worship which are repeated formulaically



Mycenaean figurine

Incorporating Practices

- Messages conveyed by means of bodily actions & dress
- Postures & gestures are important in the creation & expression of identities & status:
 - Knowledge is socially engrained & understood at a subconscious level



Minoan "snake goddess"

Structuralist Approach

- Material culture can be deconstructed as a language:
 - It communicates meaning through 'grammars' of artefact forms & style
- Objects considered to be part of a structured sign system & can be read as "texts"
- Objects can be decoded to reconstruct social relations in the past
- "What does it mean?"



Kotsiatis model, Cyprus

Object Agency

- Agency is infused into objects
- This is not an extension of human agency
- Objects & people are intertwined & connected within a network of things
 - “emeshed in a texture of social relationship” (Gell 1998: 17)



Çatalhöyük, obsidian mirror

Biography of Object

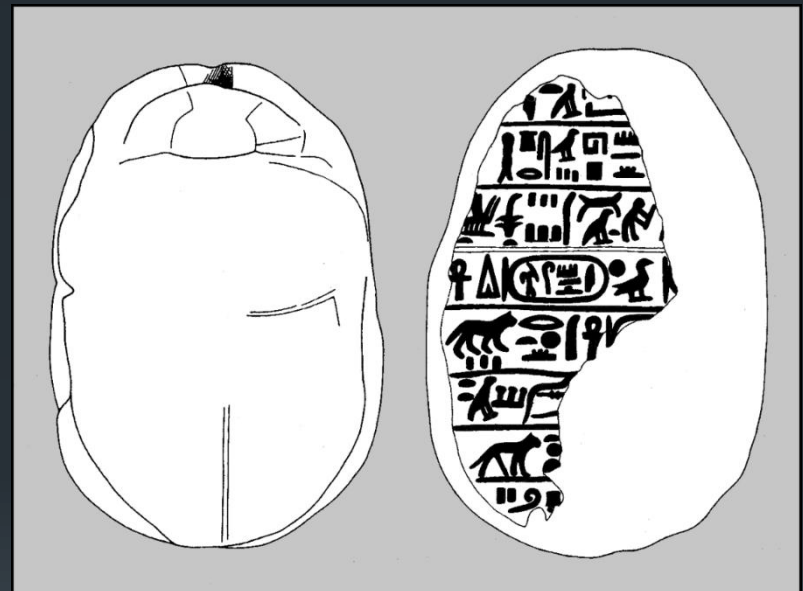
- Objects have a life history & cannot be fully understood at just one point in their existence
- Objects are transformed through their life-use
- Can we identify key events in the “life history” of an object, from its production, to its exchange, consumption (use)?
- ...& its destruction & deposition?



Plastered skulls *in situ*

History Objects

- Throughout their use objects may acquire significance, histories & value from the persons & events to which they are connected
- Fame of objects & renown of people are mutual & recursive
- History objects: personal possessions intimately connected to a sense of self/personhood
 - Mark an individual's progression through key life events



Lion hunt scarab of Amenhotep III,
Palaepaphos

Social Memory

- The past plays an important role in the creation of identity
- Material culture: an important tool for mediating people's relationship with their past
- **Social memory:** group tradition/custom
 - The construction of a collective notion about the way things were in the past
 - Malleable: active, ongoing process that is created or represented materially



Carved pillar, Göbekli Tepe

How Do We Remember?

- **Commemoration:**
 - Deliberate marking of something to be remembered
- **Memorialization:**
 - A highly self-conscious practice for constructing memories & the use of mnemonics
- **Memory aids/devices:**
 - Objects that assist in remembering



Statuettes from 'Ain Ghazal

Materiality of Memory

- Engagement with the past practised through literary & oral traditions: song, dance, epic
- Ritual action (incorporated practices within sacred spaces)
- Objects: representational art, heirlooms (inalienable objects),
- Relationships with the landscape: natural places & creation of monuments



Gold signet ring, Isopata tomb Knossos

Memory Practice

- Rowlands (1993):
- **Inscribed memory practices:**
 - Manifested through visible commemorative activities such as the construction of monuments, use of equipment
 - Repeated communal events
- **Incorporated memory practices:**
 - Fleeting transitory acts that leave few traces

Stone vase from Zakros depicting
Minoan peak sanctuary



Summary

- Materiality & Material Culture Studies:
 - How objects were incorporated within cult practices
 - & imbued with significance
- Key approaches covered :
 - Bourdieu's theory of practice
 - Material habitus & Connerton's work on habit memory & incorporating practices
 - Structuralism
 - Biography of object
 - History Objects
 - Object agency
 - Memory/identity