

An Archaic Greek vase painting featuring a central female figure, likely a goddess or queen, flanked by two male figures in warrior attire. The woman has a white face, red eyes, and wears a red headscarf and a dark, patterned garment. She is holding a long, decorated staff or scepter. The two men on either side are depicted in profile, wearing blue helmets and carrying spears. The background is a solid orange-brown color. The painting is characterized by bold outlines and a limited color palette.

Achieving Ancestorhood in Ancient Greece

Carla Antonaccio
Presented by
Kayla Bird

Image: Archaic Greek Art, Learning history.

Introduction

- Different ways of connecting with their ancestors.
- Ancestors had a different meaning to what we consider.
- Heroes, and Gods were considered ancestors as well.
- The status of being an ancestor was earned.
- Turned into ancestors through honouring them



Image: James Whitley, ResearchGate.

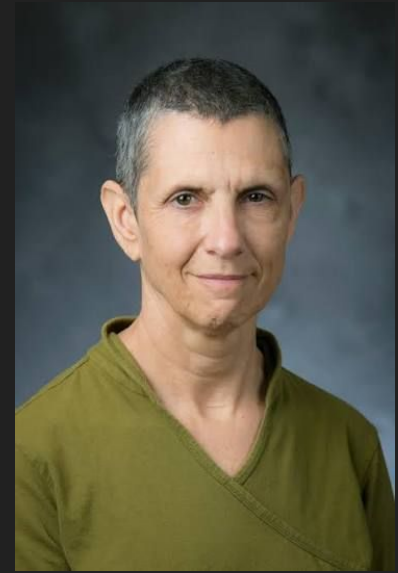


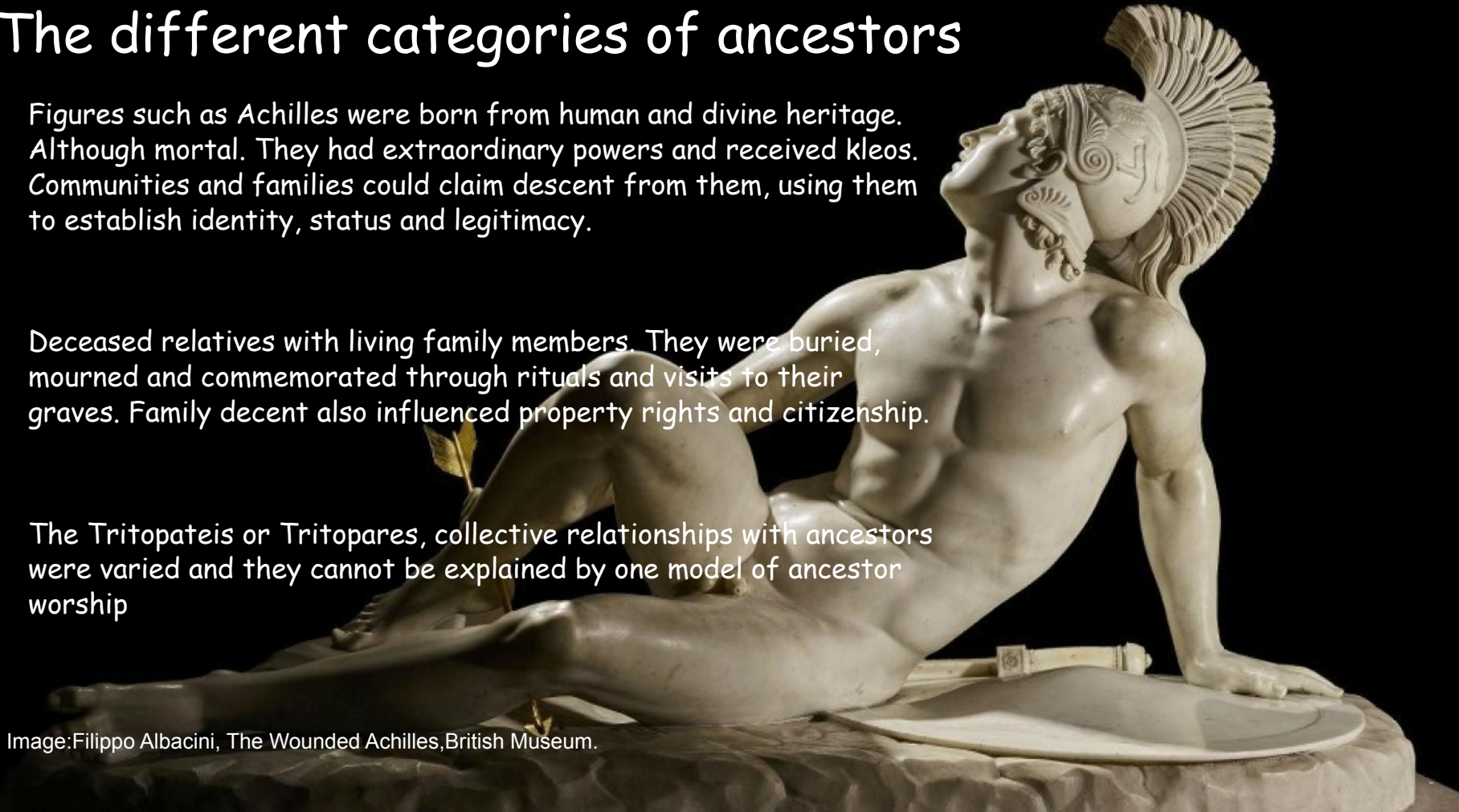
Image: Carla Antonaccio, Scholars@duke.

- Carla challenges James Whitley
- He argues that ancestors must have biological descendants who remember them continuously.
- Carla believes that later descendants can remember them and establish new relationships at any given time

The different categories of ancestors

- Figures such as Achilles were born from human and divine heritage. Although mortal. They had extraordinary powers and received kleos. Communities and families could claim descent from them, using them to establish identity, status and legitimacy.
- Deceased relatives with living family members. They were buried, mourned and commemorated through rituals and visits to their graves. Family decent also influenced property rights and citizenship.
- The Tritopateis or Tritopares, collective relationships with ancestors were varied and they cannot be explained by one model of ancestor worship

Image:Filippo Albacini, The Wounded Achilles,British Museum.



The importance of the bronze age collapse

The collapse of the Mycenaean civilisation around 1200 BCE is crucial to Antonaccio's argument.

During the bronze age, greek society had powerful elites, monumental tombs, elaborate burial practices and established social hierarchies. Following the collapse:

- Many major centres were destroyed or abandoned
- Writing and monumental construction declined
- Collective burial practices gave way to individual burials
- Connections with earlier generations became less direct

However some elements of Greek culture survived, including the Greek language, religious traditions and epic poetry.

Antonaccio argues that this period created a problem of historical continuity and legitimacy.

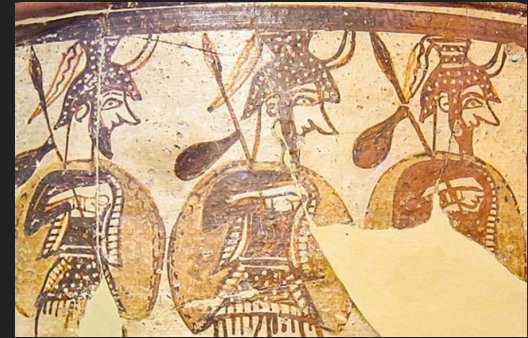


Image: Three Soldiers, All That History.

How later Greeks created connection with the distant past

Antonaccio examines archaeological evidence to show how people established new relationships with earlier generations.

Elite burials at Lefkandi

- Around 950 BCE an elite man and woman were buried with valuable objects.
- A large building as destroyed and covered by a burial mound and surrounded by a cemetery.

Reuse of ancient tombs

- During 9th century BCE, Greeks began visiting and sometimes reusing Bronze Age tombs.
- Antonaccio interprets these practices as attempts to connect the living and their recently deceased relatives with much older dead.

Use of valuable and antique items

- During the early iron age, elite burials sometimes contained old or exotic objects imported.
- These objects could convey prestige, authority and a connection with a remote past.

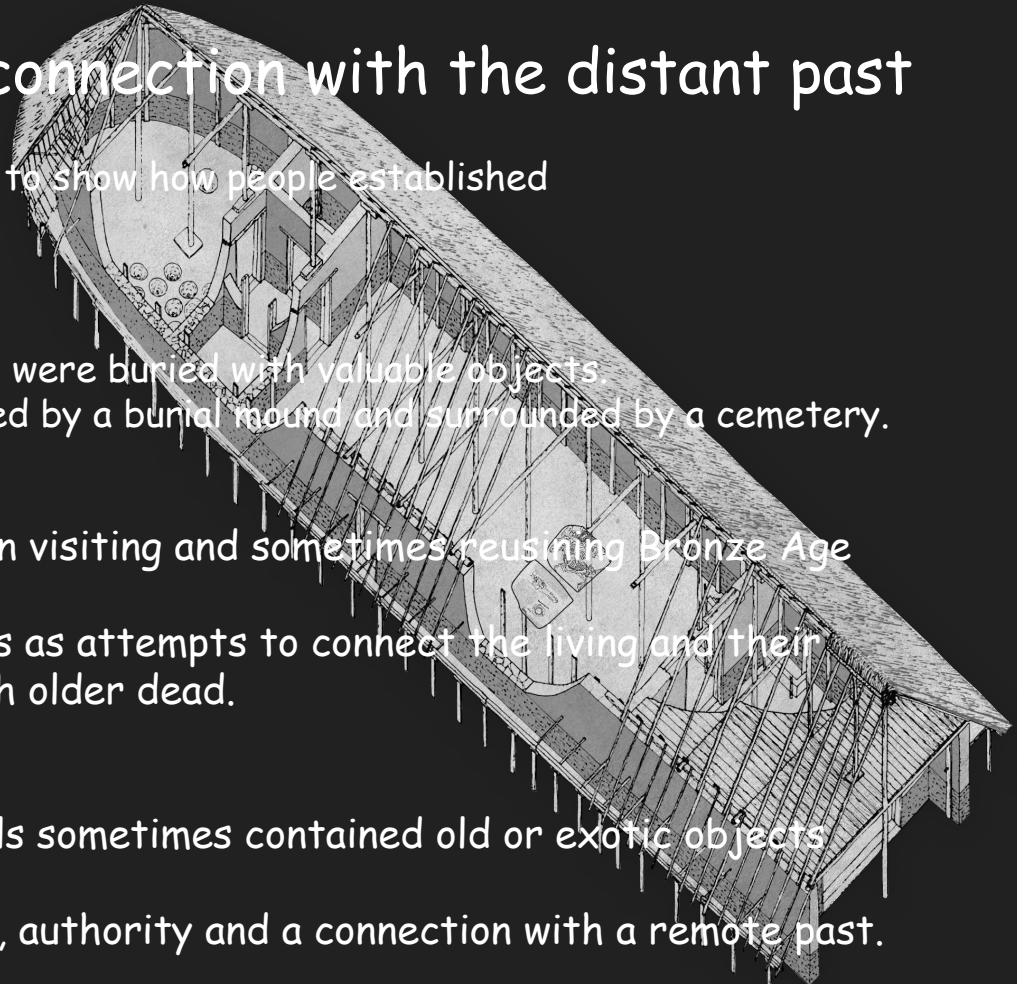


Image: The Urn Krater of the Lefkandi Lord, National Archeological Museum .

Greek ideas about the past were diverse

Antonaccio also examines how different accounts of the past coexist.

For example the poet Hesiod described five successive ages or races

- Gold, Silver, Bronze, Heroic and Iron.

This presents the past as both connected to and separated from the present. The Heroic Age, associated with the Trojan War, could be understood as a predecessor of the present generation, even though it differed significantly from it.

Other Greek stories linked ancient monuments to supernatural beings, such as the Cyclopes who supposedly built the walls of Mycenae.

Antonaccio's point is that myth, poetry, ritual and archaeological practices offered different ways of understanding the past.



Image: Monus, Hesiod, Britannica.

Ancestors and political power

Ancestors were important not only for religious reasons but also for social and political purposes.

- Claiming descent from prestigious ancestors could justify authority and social status
- Family descent helped determined who belonged to a community and who had certain rights
- Heroes provided shared origins for cities, religions and ethnic groups
- Wealthy individuals could use prestigious objects, burial practices and links with a distant past to separate themselves from ordinary people.

Antonaccio does not suggest that every ancient tomb or monument was deliberately used to claim ancestry.

Antonaccio's disagreement with James Whitley

James Whitley's position

- Ancestors require biological descendants who remember them.
- Continuous memory is essential for ancestor veneration.
- Heroes and ancestors should be distinguished.
- Reusing ancient tombs does not necessarily demonstrate ancestor veneration .

Carla Antonaccio's position

- Ancestor Hood can be achieved through later acts of remembrance.
- Ancestors can be reclaimed even after long periods of discontinuity.
- Heroes could function as ancestors for families and communities.
- In the appropriate context tomb reuse and offerings can indicate creation of ancestral connections.

Conclusion: multiple pasts and ancestors

Ancient Greek society had several overlapping ways of relating to its past. Heroes, recently deceased relatives, anonymous ancestors, ancient tombs, heirlooms and myths all contributed to different understandings of history and identity.

The discontinuity following the Bronze age collapse was important because it encouraged later Greeks to seek, reclaim and establish relationships with earlier ancestors.

Ancestors are not simply people who are remembered continuously by their biological descendants. They can also be figures whose ancestral significance are created or renewed by later generations.

Image: Reconstruction of Fresco, BBC News.

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