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The parlance of things: new approaches to ancient Roman material culture

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The question “can the thing speak?”¹ is at the very basis of the crucial quest for an archaeology that goes beyond representation. Things have become a proxy for the “subaltern” for some classical archaeologists, a way to recover the voices of those silenced by the ancient written sources. Some scholars have included in this emancipatory manifesto not only groups of people, but also the “things” themselves². Yet, if the earliest postcolonial literature denounced how representation was a powerful tool to create subjects (“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”³), postcolonial theorists such as G. Spivak have shown as well that the subaltern cannot scape the circle of representation and cannot speak for him/herself⁴.

This paper investigates whether there are alternatives to the archaeological ventriloquism that lies behind the meaning we attribute to things and our interpretations of what things do. It also explores how insights from current debates in material culture studies can contribute to ask questions that are relevant for an archaeology of the Roman provinces interested in “talking”, “walking” things that travelled around the empire.

I will look in particular to provincial female statues from the late Republic and the early empire. These objects were produced in large quantities all over the Mediterranean and in many cases can be assigned to a series of popular types: large and small Herculaneum women, Ceres and Pudicitia. The statues’ bodies replicate closely a particular type, while the heads are considered to be portraits of individuals.

¹ Holbraad, M. 2011. *Can the Thing Speak?*, OAC Press, Working Paper Series 7. ISSN 2045-5763 (Print). <http://openanthcoop.net/press/2011/01/12/can-the-thing-speak/>.

² Olsen, B. 2010. *In Defense of Things. Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Lanham. Olsen, B., Shanks, M., Webmoor, T., Witmore, T. 2012. *Archaeology. The Discipline of Things*, Berkeley.

³ Marx, K., *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Quoted in Said. E. 1978, *Orientalism*, London.

⁴ Spivak, G. C. 1988. *Can the subaltern speak?*, in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke, 271-313.

These objects seem particularly interesting for several reasons. How shall we interpret things that *actually* stood for people? Female statues are stone doubles of past individuals and, at the same time, are clear examples of “mass produced” items that replicated canonical types across the empire. J. Trimble and A. Alexandridis have, however, challenged the idea that the standard bodies of these statues can be considered neutral in any way⁵, showing that replicated bodies were as meaningful in the building of social personas as the faithful representation of individual facial traits. This also poses important questions about the illusory distinction between what is usually labeled as “form” and considered accessory and what we regard to be “content” and therefore essential⁶.

If it is not possible to separate shape from meaning, what are these statues that were replicated again and again in different corners of the Mediterranean saying about the Roman women silenced by the ancient sources? What did these statues do for them or to them? It is true that “the things that people make, make people⁷”... but, at the same time, female statues cannot be analyzed without taking into account gender constructions in the classical world, in the same way that bathhouses were never think of in Rome or the provinces “separately from bathing and cleanliness, or amphitheatres from games, civic pride and the cult of the emperor.⁸” Female statues represented individuals who could afford a likeness and who were prominent enough to be commemorated with one. Male relatives or officials normally commissioned them, but the audience in the public or funerary contexts where they were displayed included female and non-elite members of society as well.

Taking those considerations in mind, I propose to explore to what extent the represented thing also represents as an (un)authorized proxy, and whether ancient categories of things can have an interpretative value for us in the present when things’ parlance is studied in broad archaeological contexts.

⁵ Trimble, J. 2011. *Women and Visual Replication in Roman Imperial Art and Culture*, Cambridge. Alexandridis, A. 2011. Neutral bodies? Female portrait statue types from the late republic to the second century CE, in S. Hales, T. Hodos (eds.), *Material Culture and Social Identities in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, 252-279. P. 261.

⁶ Sontag, S. 1966 [2001]. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York, pp. 4, 6, 11.

⁷ Miller, D. 2005. Introduction, in D. Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, Durham, NC. 1-50. P. 38.

⁸ Woolf, 1995, The formation of provincial cultures, in J. Metzler, M. Millett, N. Roymans, J. Slofstra (eds.), *Integration in the Early Roman West: The Role of Culture and Ideology*, Luxembourg, 9-18. p. 17.