



# Choosing an Adequate Methodological Approach and Methodology for Antique Objects in Archaeology

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## Introduction

As an analytical tool, memory is a major theme in Social Science, which established its methodological foundations. Faced with field data from anthropologists and ethnologists early on, archaeologists have recently begun to use these findings, by giving increasing importance to the study of “the past in the past”. This archaeology of memory highlights the existence of numerous recollections of the past – such as continuous occupation, reused ruins or funeral rites –, but the preservation of antique artifacts discovered in contexts past their manufacture date has received little attention<sup>1</sup>. So far, only a few studies on the Aegean world have been carried out and paralleled with other memorial phenomena<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore crucial to define a methodology allowing the identification of these antique artifacts in an archaeological context, and to choose an appropriate terminology.

## History of research

The written works of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, which are often grounds for discussion in memorial studies, have often been quoted but rarely read *in extenso*<sup>3</sup>. He studied the correlations and differences between individual memory and collective memory. Memory, which is considered as a social phenomenon, requires a framework. It can only live, sustain itself and be passed down through communication. This requires a “figure”<sup>4</sup>, in other words, a tangible form such as an event, a public figure, a place or an object. By identifying such evidence, archaeologists would therefore be able to understand how memory develops and what part it plays in constructing a society. While it is difficult to identify individual memories, collective memory is more accessible. There are two forms of collective memory. First, communicative memory, which stems from everyday communications and compiles recent memories in order to create a common past shared by a small group, such as a family. It is limited to about three or four generations, in other words, a span of 80 to 100 years according to the Oral History. Second is cultural memory<sup>5</sup>, which is more removed from everyday life as it roots itself in specific times in the past. It sustains itself through cultural formation, more institutionalized communication and tangible objects called “socio-transmitters”.

Studies led by Halbwachs were set in specific historical and social contexts, yet the theoretical bases he developed – while often criticized – were often used in later sociological and anthropological studies. The aim of Historical Sciences is, first, to understand how social memory is built, by focusing on its

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<sup>1</sup> They are, to this day, mostly analyzed for their “biographical” aspect. See I. KOPYTOFF, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodization as Process”, in A. APPADURAI (ed), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) 64-92; J. HOSKINS, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Story of People's Lives* (1998); C. GOSDEN and Y. MARSHALL, “The Cultural Biography of Objects”, *World Archaeology* 31.2 (1999) 168-179; M. K. LANGDON, “Beyond the Grave: Biographies from Early Greece”, *AJA* 105.4 (2001) 579-606; J.-P. CRIELAARD, “The Cultural Biography of Materials Goods in Homer's Epics”, *Gaia* 7 (2003) 49-62.

<sup>2</sup> Among which is my PhD thesis, defended 18 November 2018 and titled “Mémoire, identité et paysage dans le monde égéen du XII<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C.” (to be published).

<sup>3</sup> M. HALBWACHS, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte : étude de mémoire collective* (1941), *La mémoire collective* (1950, published posthumously).

<sup>4</sup> These “figures of memory” are characterized by three elements: a tangible connection to time and space, an actual connection to a group and an ability to rebuild. Cf. J. ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (2011) 25.

<sup>5</sup> J. CANDAU, *Anthropologie de la mémoire* (2005) is against the use of this term, which he sees as too generic.

practices and where it manifests itself<sup>6</sup>. Jan Assmann was one of the first to apply theories from the sociology of memory to research on ancient history<sup>7</sup>. He crucially argued that a memory requires a tangible form to be effective. Archaeological studies only developed in the late 1990s<sup>8</sup> and proceeded to study places and monuments as social frameworks of memory<sup>9</sup>.

### A methodology based on the sociology of memory

Antique artifacts are viewed, characterized and named in different ways, depending on how they were discovered and their typology. While strictly applying interpretative theories across specialties should be avoided, it appears that the tools created by social sciences, already used in ethnographical studies, can be used to design a proper methodology for archaeological data.

One major question needs to be answered: when does a material remnant – in this case, an artifact – hold a memorial value to its owner? In a family, personal belongings and properties are handed down from generation to generation and acquire a biographical memory which is only meaningful to the family members. However, for an item to gain an antique value in the eyes of an entire community, the memories it carries have to echo a cultural memory, which only emerges after three to four generations. According to Jan Vansina, this floating gap varies from 30 to 80 years<sup>10</sup>, but such a short and fluctuating length of time cannot be perceived with certainty in an archaeological context. This is why we decided to place the shift from communicative to cultural memory at the symbolic barrier of 100 years: before then, objects hold a memorial value to a limited number of people; after that, they become significant to an entire community. This choice is dictated by necessary caution due to dating issues with some typologies, but it also allows us to confirm that the objects were kept intentionally.

This raises another question: can the entire material production of a given society be viewed as “socio-transmitters”, or do some typologies have to be excluded? From our point of view, we must consider that all man-made items can become memory bearers<sup>11</sup>, as one of the core characteristics of these *media* is their limited number within one group<sup>12</sup>. The materials, size and uses of an artifact cannot be discriminatory criteria, although some typologies seem to be favored when it comes to long-term preservation.

### Which terminology should be used?

Many terms have been used to describe these artifacts, but some of them should be dropped. A book edited by Philippe Borgeaud and Youri Volokhine used the term “**object of memory**” to refer to more ancient artifacts<sup>13</sup>, the intrinsic qualities, preservation quality and long lifespan of which were proof that they were memory bearers. This term introduces no restriction as to the intrinsic nature of an object, but using it would be unwise, for it suggests that the object serves as a memory transmitter, which is to the archaeologist to prove through a contextual study.

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<sup>6</sup> P. NORA, *Les lieux de mémoire*, tome I (1984).

<sup>7</sup> J. ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992).

<sup>8</sup> R. BRADLEY and H. WILLIAMS, “The Past in the Past”, *World Archaeology* 30.1 (1998); S. ALCOCK, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments and Memories* (2002); R. BRADLEY, *The Past in Prehistoric Societies* (2002); J. BOARDMAN, *The Archaeology of Nostalgia: How the Greeks re-created their Mythical Past* (2002); R. VAN DYKE and S. ALCOCK, *Archaeology of Memories* (2003).

<sup>9</sup> It is called the phenomenology of landscape. Cf. C. TILLEY, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994).

<sup>10</sup> J. VANSINA, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Fossils and natural elements are excluded from these considerations, as they are not made by man and have an “antique value” which cannot evolve. Cf. A. MAJOR, *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (2000); I. TASSIGNON, “*Naturalia et curiosa* dans les sanctuaires grecs” in V. DASEN and M. PIERART (eds), *Idia kai dêmosia : Les cadres « privés » et « publics » de la religion grecque antique* (2005) 289-300.

<sup>12</sup> K. LILLIOS, “Objects of Memory: The Ethnography and Archaeology of Heirlooms”, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 6.3 (1999) 235-262.

<sup>13</sup> P. BORGEAUD and Y. VOLOKHINE, *Les objets de la mémoire : pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte* (2005).

The term **relic**<sup>14</sup> has also been used extensively<sup>15</sup>. However, it carries too many connotations of the Christian tradition inherited from the Middle Ages: it is mostly associated, in the collective consciousness, with the remains of a Saint's or a martyr's corpse<sup>16</sup>, and with the objects they used, or the tools used to torture them. This term also implies the existence of a cult, which has not been attested in Aegean settings.

In Ancient Greek, no specific word is used to refer to these artifacts<sup>17</sup>. Specialists often borrow a term from Homeric poems: **κειμήλιον**, which means “things that you keep”, as opposed to “things that move”, such as cattle (**κειμήλια τε πρόβασιν**, *Odyssey* II, 75)<sup>18</sup>. The analysis of the Homeric poems reveals that these artifacts are a product of human industry, mainly metallurgic: they are treasures made of hand crafted gold, bronze or iron objects (*Iliad* VI, 48 and IX, 133; *Odyssey* XIV, 324 and XXI, 10). These *keimèlia* are often part of the gift exchange system<sup>19</sup> and work, in epic poetry, as mnemonic tools. The mere sight or mention of them conjures up the story of their owner and previous owner(s), as well as their own life and the circumstances under which they were exchanged. However, another term should be used to refer to them, as no evidence shows that these ancient artifacts circulated through gift exchanges, and some of them have no intrinsic value.

Most English language studies call them **heirlooms**, meaning “anything inherited from a line of ancestors, or handed down from generation to generation”<sup>20</sup>. However, archaeological remains never allow us to say, with certainty, that an artifact was passed down within a family circle<sup>21</sup>. Thus, this term should only apply to specific elements discovered in specific contexts: it could refer to artifacts kept for less than 100 years, provided that they were found in domestic or funerary settings.

Struggling to name these ancient artifacts, some have decided to use several terms, depending on how the artifacts were acquired or handed down. In his study of Mycenaean ceramics discovered in Iron Age contexts in the Eastern Mediterranean region, Gert Van Wijngaarden considers three different terms<sup>22</sup>: “souvenir-scenario”, when vases are imported while already old; “antique-scenario”, when they have been circulating for a long time; and “heirloom-scenario”, when an object is exported shortly after being manufactured but is still around for a long time. During the international conference, Brent Davis, Emilia Banou, Louise Hitchcock and Anne Chapin suggest six categories<sup>23</sup>: “heirlooms”, for items handed down from generation to generation; “mementos”, which embody the memory of a particular

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<sup>14</sup> Comes from the Latin word *reliquus* and originally designated “what remains”. Writers from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries used it in that sense. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the term also referred to “an object of great value, which one holds dear and keeps as a souvenir”.

<sup>15</sup> F. PFISTER, *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum* (1909); H. GALLET DE SANTERRE, “Les statuettes de bronze mycéniennes au type dit du « Dieu Reshef » dans leur contexte égéen”, *BCH* 111.1. (1987) 7-29; L. LACROIX, “Quelques aspects du « culte des reliques » dans les traditions de la Grèce ancienne”, *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, XXV, 1-2 (1989) 59; BOARDMAN (supra n°8) 76-126.

<sup>16</sup> The word has also been used to designate the bones of Greek heroes, such as Orestes or Theseus: cf. E. THOMPSON, *The Relics of the Heroes in Ancient Greece* (1985), Ph. D. University of Washington.

<sup>17</sup> CAMBERLEIN (supra n° 2), 92-94.

<sup>18</sup> A term we have used: cf. C. CAMBERLEIN, “Observations préliminaires sur le rôle des *keimèlia* en Crète du XIV<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C.”, in LEFEVRE-NOVARO, D., MARTZOLFF, L. and GHILARDI, M. (eds.), *Géosciences, Archéologie et Histoire en Crète de l'âge du Bronze récent à l'époque archaïque*, Actes du Colloque International pluridisciplinaire de Strasbourg 16-18 octobre 2013 (2016) 319-332.

<sup>19</sup> E. SCHEID-TISSINIER, *Les usages du don chez Homère : Vocabulaire et pratiques* (1994).

<sup>20</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “heirloom”.

<sup>21</sup> J.-P. CRIELAARD, “Surfing on the Mediterranean Web: Cypriot long-distance Communications during the Eleventh and Tenth Centuries BC”, in V. KARAGEORGHIS and N. STAMPOLIDIS (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Symposium: Eastern Mediterranean: Cyprus-Dodecanese-Crete, 16th-6<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.* (1998) 187-204 already drew attention to the difficulties raised by using this term.

<sup>22</sup> G. VAN WIJNGAARDEN, “Mycenaean Heirlooms, Antiques and Souvenirs”, in R. LAFFINEUR and E. GRECO (eds.), *Emporia. Aegeans in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean, Proceedings of the 10th International Aegean Conference (14-18 April 2004)* (2005) 405-413.

<sup>23</sup> B. DAVIS, E. BANOU, L. A. HITCHCOCK and A. P. CHAPIN, “Curation in the Bronze Age Aegean: Objects as Material Memories” (in this volume).

event; “entangled objects”, which come from long-distance trade<sup>24</sup>; “antiquities”, which are kept for several generations; “companion objects”, for tools which entail the preservation of a specific knowledge upon being passed down; and finally, “found objects”, for items with such a large chronological gap between their manufacture and their deposition in an archaeological context that their discovery could be incidental and not actually result from deliberate preservation. This categorization, already suggested by Amanda Reiterman in her PhD thesis<sup>25</sup>, comes from ethnological parallels that are difficult to apply to archaeological contexts. Indeed, these categories are difficult to identify without first-hand testimonies on the symbolism of artifacts and remain questionable.

In Aegean contexts, it is impossible to establish with certainty how ancient objects were acquired, or how they were preserved (handed down within a family circle or a group, trade exchanges, gifts, diplomatic relations, incidental findings, and so on). For these multiple reasons, any forthcoming study should use the more neutral term “**antiques**” to refer to artifacts kept for 100 years or more. This term proves most convenient, as it highlights the chronological depth and ancient quality of an object, without excluding typology, context of discovery, method of preservation or means of transmission.

## Conclusion

Focusing on antiques, which have often been neglected by scientists, offers a new approach to study cultural phenomena in the Bronze and Iron Ages. A holistic approach jointly analyzing various memorial phenomena, including the preservation of antiques in various social settings (funerary, domestic, communal or ritual contexts), will show the crucial role played by memory in construction of ancient societies. Early studies seem to indicate that most material remnants of the past were reused and reinvested by elite members of Aegean societies during the Bronze and Iron Ages, in pursuit of social validation. Nonetheless, a more personal use of memory, for instance within family circles, should not be disregarded.

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<sup>24</sup> J. WHITLEY, “Homer’s Entangled Objects: Narrative, Agency and Personhood in and out of Iron Age Texts”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23 (2013) 395-416. To describe these objects coming from other cultural spheres, we prefer to use the term “exotic antiquities”. The term *entangled object* was first used by anthropologist Nicholas Thomas in his study of Pacific Islands economics; this notion is mainly based on the distinction between gift exchanges and trade, which is difficult to grasp through archaeological remains. Cf. N. THOMAS, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (1991) 38-39.

<sup>25</sup> A. S. REITERMAN, *Keimêlia: Objects Curated in the Ancient Mediterranean (8<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC)* (2016) 79-112.