



THOUGHTS ON GRIFFIN CAULDRONS

PAPALEXANDROU (N.) *Bronze Monsters and the Cultures of Wonder. Griffin Cauldrons in the Preclassical Mediterranean*. Pp. xx + 276, figs, ills, map. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. Cased, US\$55. ISBN: 978-1-4773-2361-8.

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The advance of archaeological science within the discipline of classical archaeology seems to be unstoppable. This trend has been motivated by the fruitful implementation of the analytical research concept that originated in prehistoric archaeology. Now, new data and models of technology, kinship or diet, to name just a few, are constantly questioning the existing cultural, economic and socio-political narratives, and are often directing attention to interpretations that were previously considered unimaginable. Therefore, if one is sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new data, it is refreshing to take a step ‘further’ (p. 8) and to focus on the materiality and visibility of archaeological objects. This approach still enables us to ask questions about the nature of contact or modes of response triggered by the use and circulation of these artefacts, and what wider impact the encounters with material and visual culture had on ancient societies.

Bronze Monsters and the Cultures of Wonder is an example of a successful study. Grounded in the concept of the agency of things, objects and artefacts, which has already been declared exhausted, but is used to its full advantage here, the study uses a more interesting strand of ‘experiential entanglement in their surrounding environment’ (p. 10) and applies a detailed analysis of the phenomenological dimensions of objects (i.e. formal, sensory and affective properties) in order to recast an important category of spectacular, albeit short-lived, finds in new light – the griffin cauldrons. The success of this study is chiefly because of P.’s expertise, which has previously manifested in his programmatic research on tripod cauldrons (*The Visual Poetics of Power: Warriors, Youths, and Tripods in Early Greece* [2005]), based on which one can expect a theoretically complex, methodologically discursive, yet compact study that is also easy to read and inform. All these criteria are more than satisfactorily fulfilled by this book.

The volume is organised into three parts. A concise introduction introduces step-by-step the author’s method and approach. The comprehensive material basis is presented first, followed by a critical examination of the few written and the early archaic pictorial sources. This dataset establishes a firm foundation for the extensive discussion in which the latest theoretical essays in art history and cognitive psychology are successfully utilised in a new interpretation of the significance of very fragmentary archaeological objects.

Part 1 discusses the existing evidence for griffin cauldrons in terms of the contextual circumstances of their use, re-use and discovery. Through a detailed study of the ‘systemic’ and the ‘archaeological’ contexts (p. 18), P. tries to disentangle the dense relational webs that made cauldrons decorated with (but not limited to) griffin protomes meaningful for archaic societies. In three chapters he draws on numerous archaeological studies, and the well-designed spatiotemporal graphs preceding the individual chapters represent the most recent summary of the archaeologically recorded griffin cauldrons. One can thus only regret that this corpus contains a few factual errors. While the inaccurate information on the (non-)preserved rim or wall remains of cauldrons from the Heraion of Samos can easily be amended, the incorporation of the skeuomorph evidence of griffin and horse protomes from the Sanctuary of Athena in Phocaea, dated to the late seventh century BCE (Ö. Özyiğit, *Empuries* 56 [2009–2011]), could have opened new perspectives for

subsequent interpretation if added to the corpus. Moreover, the statement that ‘the lives of these precious artifacts cannot be reconstructed’ (p. 53), apart from the singular case of the cauldron from Olympia (p. 83), seems to be justifiable only to a limited extent from today’s perspective. Ongoing research has informed object biographies and, in particular, the treatment and fragmentation of the cauldrons in Olympia and Delphi after the primary use (A. Scarci, *e-Forschungsberichte* [2023]).

Yet, successful contextual interpretation of the archaeological evidence must be clearly commanded, as it makes it possible to look at the griffin cauldrons beyond the traditional lens. In the section on the Greek world, where the griffin cauldrons were found exclusively in sanctuaries, P. argues that these were used as cultic instruments and did not solely represent dedications. The sanctuary authorities collected the artefacts to enhance the otherworldly ambience in a performative context (p. 33 and 73). The concept of ‘Wunderkammer’ as a marvellous and physically and cognitively restricted environment is introduced here, on the basis of the example of the Samian Heraion. These were the true *daidala* and *agalmata* of the ‘Orientalising’ period because of their technological complexity (the use of segmentary hollow-casting) and frightening appearance induced by the aggressive body posture with open mouth, pointed ears and neck raised to strike.

Furthermore, P. develops the ideas on novel modes of sensory interaction with affective objects such as the cauldrons, which constituted new ways to express subjectivity and social distinction among non-Greeks in Italy (p. 96). His assumptions concerning the incongruence of the new forms of visuality with the preceding customs of seeing and being viewed before the onset of the ‘Orientalising’ phenomena prove to be conclusive, as is demonstrated by the rapid emergence and proliferation of griffin cauldrons in the central Mediterranean. What must be largely rejected, however, is his assertion that ‘the emancipation of the griffin-protome schema from its function on cauldron’ was a purely Etruscan phenomenon that spread to other areas of Italy and elsewhere (p. 123). Although the griffin-protome schema on bronze, ceramic and terracotta objects can already be observed in Etruria during the seventh century BCE, a linear transfer of their function as markers of liminality to the architectural griffins from Phocaea can hardly be justified. What is more successful are the new questions raised regarding the assumed attention-focusing value of these devices. Precisely because the griffin protomes are embedded in a tightly controlled relational network of experiences and cognitive accessibility in Italian contexts, the Phocaeen protomes represent a different function, since these were located on the walls of the temple as an architectural ornament and were thus visible and accessible to all.

The last chapter represents the culmination of the synthesis and deserves more attention. P. approaches the ascertained popularity of the griffin cauldrons during the seventh century BCE, and especially the problems of responses and reception, using unorthodox approaches, shying away from the usual generalising phraseology (e.g. the apotropaic function). For example, he succeeds in visualising the phenomenological dimensions of the challenge that griffin cauldrons presented to their viewers through the theoretical reflection on the attraction of early films in the late nineteenth century CE. The allusion to the taxidermic aesthetic also makes the effect of the programmatically designed *thauma* of the griffin protomes more apparent. In this way and with regard to the discussion of the low degree of physical and cognitive accessibility capitalised by the Greek sanctuaries and Italian elites, he succeeds in exploring how people responded to these myriad artefacts of the ‘Orientalising’ period. Overall, while P.’s interpretations are exclusively of a subjective nature due to the methods applied, they are coherent, discursive and logically structured, and comprehensible through repeated references to crucial aspects of argumentation.

Only at the end of the book readers might feel the limits of an art historical approach in two aspects. First, it would be beneficial if the study also considered the sensory aspects of the production of griffin cauldrons. After all, the production and consumption strategies were entangled in the *chaîne opératoire*. Second, the most recent typo-chronological study by Ö. Özyiğit based on the finds from Ionia and especially Phocaea calls into question P.'s conclusion, which connects the decline of the griffin cauldrons on Samos with the deconstruction of its secretive and exclusive practices in the sanctuaries, personified by the Kolaios monumental dedication in Hdt. 4.152 (pp. 229–31).

These two criticisms, however, do not significantly detract from this not only compact but also theoretically and methodologically excellent book, which clearly encourages us to try new approaches to tackle worthy old questions.

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