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From antiquity to postmodernity

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Part II: '…to Postmodernity'

As the title of this thesis states, the following Chapters are entrenched within a milieu of philosophical and archaeological reality defined here as '*postmodernity*'. This approach allows for multivocality wherein the cultural biographies of objects are used as a theoretical and methodological tool which brings ancient pithoi into modern archaeological discourse and demonstrates their many different agencies as they survive and resurface from antiquity to modernity.

Admittedly, there is a general problem when it comes to concrete definitions of *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*[202]. Although *antiquity* and *modernity* are terms clearly understood by historians, archaeologists and laymen, *postmodernity* remains, notoriously so, a hazy and elusive construct. In the following lines, therefore, I offer a general explanation of *postmodernism* and I outline the ways in which this trend is engulfed into the cultural biographies and the agency of objects.

Born as a reflexive critique to *modernism* in the late 1960s, *postmodernism* rapidly grew branches across literature, arts, architecture, the social sciences and historical and anthropological studies. Michel Foucault (1961; 1966), one of the founding fathers of *postmodernism*, introduced a different way to analyse history and language by pushing towards philosophically orientated historical inquiries. In the decades that followed, Foucault's compatriot philosophers and master visionary thinkers of *postmodernism* such as Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida theorized on the *postmodern*[203], but for many the term remained abstract. It was Jean-François Lyotard, another French leader of the movement, who famously defined *postmodernism* as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard 1979, 7). Metanarratives, according to Lyotard, are totalising stories about the history and the purpose of the human race which legitimise knowledge and cultural practises. For Lyotard, this incredulity translated as a refusal to the existence of a universal truth pertaining to the past and the present. Instead, he suggested that grand narratives

[202] Though the difference between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity* remains obscure, it is generally accepted that the former refers to the specific style in social and political sciences, arts, history, philosophy, etc., whilst the latter refers to the state or condition of being *postmodern.*

[203] For Baudrillard and Derrida and their respective contributions to social and cultural theory, see Abbinnett 2008.

should be replaced by 'little narratives' (*petits récits)*, such as histories from the everyday life and stories of underrepresented groups of people, thus bringing focus into singular and local events which illustrate the diversity of human experience.

As soon as Lyotard defined his understanding of *postmodernism*, it became widely known that the movement revolves around the notions of *deconstruction* and *relativism.* This triggered an unprecedented storm of criticism from all fields. To this day, *postmodernism* is criticized as a threatening philosophical current which makes the path towards historical and archaeological conclusions almost impossible. Its proponents have been called out for nurturing vagueness and obscurantism, for encouraging relativism in sciences, anthropology and morality, or even, for promoting parlous political agendas[204]. Due to such criticisms, the role of *postmodernism* in archaeological and anthropological studies remains a matter of debate. Ideas expressed by *postmodernism* have been associated with post-processual archaeologies (e.g. Hodder 1990; Bintliff 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1992). This association has been criticized as threat to the credulity and the epistemology of archaeology, since it has been generally considered as a trend which fosters hyperrelativism and advances 'a theory that is unlinked and apparently unlikable to archaeological practice (Yoffee and Sherratt 1993, 7).

However, in time and as both disciplines of archaeology and anthropology matured, scholars came to realise that the relationship between people and objects is indeed much more complex and multifaceted than formerly believed. From the 1980s onwards, academics increasingly emphasized that if we are to understand the full spectrum of interaction between people and their material culture, we are genuinely in need of de-constructed grand narratives which should be scrutinized and evaluated in their core elements before being again synthesized (Hamilakis 1999a; Fahlander 2012, esp. 121-122). In part, the response to this need emerged in the mid-1980s, as it was born out of the object-biographical approach (outlined in Chapter 1.3). As this approach became well-established, it became clear that the impact of an object's *agency* is largely dependent on its *biography.* Consequently, this encouraged considerations on the socio-cultural effect of archaeological objects not only in many different contexts but also in multiple time layers, with an interest in the 'after-lives'

[204] Indicatively, such criticisms against *postmodernism* can be found in Norris 1990; D'Andrade 1995 and Bishop 1996.

of ancient things and in their transformed meanings as they move through the modern period (i.e. Hamilakis 1999b; Moreland 1999; Peers 1999; Holtorf 2002; Herva 2009). A related emphasis on this interrelationship allows scrutiny on otherwise overlooked aspects of ancient Cretan pithoi, such as their depositional lives, their itineraries and their mobility in recent times, and on the ways in which these chronological and contextual transformations affect their agency. By endorsing such multivocality, the following chapters seek to explore these aspects and to convey the fluidity of meanings attributed to pithoi in modern social settings.