

Introduction to Material Koinai

Søren Handberg & Anastasia Gadolou

The word *koine* is an ancient Greek word, the literal translation of which is ‘common’ or ‘shared’. In antiquity, the word was used, foremost, to describe the common Greek dialect that flourished in the Hellenistic period,¹ but in research within Mediterranean Archaeology the term has recently, and increasingly, been used conceptually to denote perceived similarities in various aspects of material culture, usually within a bounded geographical area or chronological period.

A prominent example of such a conceptual usage of the term has been the description of the apparent uniformity and spread of artistic motives in various materials in the Mycenaean Palatial period.² The term *koine* has also been used to denote various perceived regional groups of pottery styles, especially in western Greece, from the Mycenaean period through to Hellenistic times.³ To a lesser extent, the term has also been used in regard to ancient Greek architecture, for instance, in similari-

ties in the use of architectural terracotta from the northern Peloponnese and the Achaean *apoikiai* in Italy.⁴ Most recently the term has been used extensively in the ongoing discussion of the so-called ‘Euboean *koine*’, which centres on the question of the extent, both geographically and in terms of social and cultural homogeneity, of the Euboeans in the Aegean and on the Greek mainland.⁵ Apart from describing regional groups in material culture, the conceptual framework of the term has also been extended to include notions such as religious *koinai* and cultural *koinai*.⁶

A precise definition of *koine* terminology is rarely offered by the scholars who use it, but, looking at the various ways in which the term has been employed in archaeological scholarship, it is clear that the term is loaded with an extensive range of implicit connotations. More precisely, concerning material culture, the term *koine* most often implies

1 See Dietler *in this volume*, 18.

2 For Bronze Age material *koinai*, see e.g. Hood 1978, 291; Feldman 2002; 2006; Galanakis 2009; Petrakis 2009. For references to a late Bronze Age metallurgical *koine* that included Sicily, Sardinia and the Iberian Peninsula, see Sherratt 2012, 160.

3 The Bronze Age: Papadopoulos 1995, but see also the critical comment in Dickinson 2006, 19; The early Iron Age: Coulson 1991: 44; Coldstream, 2008, 220. The Archaic period: Papadopoulos 2001. The Classical period: Petropoulos, 2005; Gravani 2009. For these regional styles, see also Coldstream 1983.

4 Barellò 1995, see also the review of the volume in Fischer-Hansen 1997. For the use of *koine* to describe similarities in Ptolemaic architecture extending to Rhodes, see Caliò 2010.

5 For the Euboean *koine*, see especially Lemos 1998; 2002, 212-7; Papadopoulos 2011. For further discussions and modifications of the Euboean *koine*, see Desborough 1977; Papadopoulos 1997; 2014, 186; Gimatzidis 2011, 958-9; Mazarakis Ainian 2010; 2012. See also Donnellan and Jacobsen, et al. *in this volume*.

6 A ‘pan-Cyprian’ *koine* has, for instance, been recognised, see Iacovou 1999, 150; 2008; Knapp 2012, 46. See also Dietler *in this volume*, 21-2.

more than just shared features in the material culture of an area, whether this is expressed in, for instance, pottery styles, architecture or burial practices.⁷ There has been a tendency in archaeological research to uncritically assume that some meaningful connection exists between shared material culture and, for instance, social values and forms of social organisation. The term thus carries with it concepts such as increased contact, influence, cultural and social integration as well as issues of common identity and aesthetic values. Such underlying connotations are, however, rarely examined in any detail, and explanations for the existence of shared material culture are often vague or ambiguous, as has recently been emphasised by some scholars.⁸

It is clear that standardisation in local production, adoption of foreign objects or practices, is central to the conceptualisation of the koine terminology, and from this point of view, Vladimir Stissi has put the implicit character of the broader issues this way:

“For obvious reasons, archaeological studies of standardization usually take a series of similar objects as a starting point, but in post-prehistoric Greek archaeology, analysis is rarely taken further than simply assessing to what extent one could or could not regard the studied items as standardized, and evaluating the implications of this solely for the case at hand. Wider social or cultural significance is hardly looked at let alone questions regarding the more general roles of standardization and variation in their social, economic and/or cultural context.”⁹

At the core of the use of the concept of koine is the malleable notion of ‘influence’. The identification of

foreign ‘influences’ plays a prominent role in many archaeological studies. However, merely pointing to stylistic influences, and thus, in these cases, a process of *koineisation*, has little interpretive power in itself. In 1991, James Whitley described this in the following way in his book *Style and Society in Dark Age Greece*:

“The terminology of ‘influence’ subtly avoids the difficult but important questions of why any community would wish to make use of another’s material culture, and why there have always been different degrees of acceptance of, or resistance to, the exotic.”¹⁰

The underlying assumption that similarities in material culture can be equated with, for instance, shared religious beliefs cannot be taken for granted, but must be substantiated by paying close attention to the contextual circumstances of the archaeological material. In a sense, by employing the koine terminology we face the risk of using the term as a heuristic device, much as the concept of ‘culture’ has been used in the past.¹¹ Critics of the use of the term ‘culture’ as a heuristic concept have vehemently emphasised that particular types of material culture do not *per se* equal groups or societies.¹² In fact, the analytical use of constructed entities such as ‘archaeological cultures’ may hide variations in the archaeological record and guide us away from investigating fundamental questions about the underlying social mechanisms that form and maintain social and cultural cohesion and homogeneity.¹³

The three-day conference, of which the chapters in this volume are the outcome, was held at the Danish Institute at Athens during the days 30th of January – 1st of February 2015. The ultimate aim

10 Whitley 1991, 45.

11 Galanakis 2009, 5-6. See also, Dietler *in this volume*, 23.

12 See Kotsonas 2014, 13. For a good recent overview, see Roberts & Vander Linden 2011, 2-3.

13 Roberts & Vander Linden 2011, 3, but see also Stark *et al.* 2008.

7 For an overview of the use of the term in relation to the Bronze Age period, see Galanakis 2009.

8 See e.g., Gimatzidis 2011, 958-9; Papadopoulos 2011, 127-9; 2014, 186. See also Dietler, *in this volume*, 21-2.

9 Stissi 2014, 115.

of the conference was not to transform the koine terminology from a heuristic device to a rigorous operational methodology. The rationale was rather to emphasise the need to look more closely at the underlying mechanisms that led to standardisations in material culture and societal practices, i.e., to look at the process of *koineisation*. Among the important questions that the contributors were asked to consider were which factors facilitated the transference of changes in the consumption and appropriation of material culture either in inter-regional or local settings, and how such changes could be viewed as reflecting the changing social values of communities?

In this connection, the term koine is to be understood as a broad and encompassing term that covers not only the broad adoption of similar objects across a larger geographical area, but also in terms of changing conventions that become the common way of doing things. For the purposes of this conference, therefore, the term koine was defined as a flexible term that can be used to describe the consumption of material culture to various degrees, both in terms of geographic and chronological extent. Thus, according to this definition, koine can also be used to signal changes in established norms of how people engage with material culture that became, for shorter or longer periods of time, the new way of doing things; that is, a new convention. In this way, the introduction of, for instance, new burial costumes, pottery styles, or dedicatory practices may be understood as new material koinai even though their uses remained rather limited in time and space. What is important is not so much the geographic or chronological extent of a particular type of object, but rather the process of profound appropriation of new objects or a new way of engaging with material culture. The central question in understanding the phenomenon of koine should then, in line with the quote from Whitley, be ‘*why do things become popular?*’ What were the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms or

dispositions that facilitated the incorporation of new things?¹⁴

Making sense of material culture is as much about looking at differences as looking at similarities, a major focus of the conference was therefore also to explain such differences and similarities. Connectedness is a word that is increasingly being used to describe the Ancient Greek world of the Iron Age and the Archaic period, and during the past two decades several scholars have approached the history of the ancient Mediterranean from the perspective of globalisation. The realisation that the ancient Mediterranean world was perhaps more connected than we are accustomed to believe emphasises the need to understand and explain regional differences in material culture.¹⁵ According to several studies, the world of the Greek early Iron Age can be divided into regional groups that were, although culturally interlinked, to some extent socially divided. These social differences can be expressed both in terms of the consumption of different objects and different consumptions of similar objects, each imbedded in their particular historical and social context.¹⁶ Specific demands for certain types of objects, styles or ways of engaging with material culture do not only depend on availability, but are just as much responses to the social needs of a community; it is the logic behind these needs that the conference participants were encouraged to uncover.¹⁷

Some good examples of studies that move beyond the mere recognition of what might be labeled material koinai (but incidentally were not) to investigate

14 Morgan & Whitelaw 1991 is one example of this type of investigation.

15 For the view that the ancient Greek world was well-connected, see e.g. Horden & Purcell 2000; Morris 2003; Malkin 2011; Vlassopoulos 2013.

16 Whitley 1991; Morris 1997; 1998. Feldman 2002 is a particularly good example of how a ‘superregional koine’ can exist in different local social settings, although, in this case, for the late Bronze Age period.

17 Such types of conspicuous consumptions are clearly described in Dietler 2010, 55-74.

the mechanisms that guide, promote or encourage the adoption of new objects exist in the archaeological literature. B. Powell, for instance, has suggested that the sudden popularity and persistence of mythological imagery should be understood in relation to early Greek writing. Near Eastern iconography, such as that of the Assyrian hero Ninurta, was assimilated with Herakles, and the imagery spread precisely because the tales were communicated in writing, thus facilitating and maintaining its popularity.¹⁸

Another example of the logic behind a community's specific consumption is provided by studies of late Geometric Argive iconography. The 'horse-leader' motif is a central pictorial representation in the Argolid in the latter half of the 8th century BC. As S. Langdon has shown, this motif had, like much of early Greek iconography, a Near Eastern religious pedigree, and its adoption in the second half of the 8th century BC can be associated with the importance of the horse to members of a newly established elite social group who were described by Homer as horse tamers, and who conveniently utilised an old iconographic motif as a visual expression of their social power.¹⁹

Numerous other examples of profound analyses that attempt to understand the social complexities of changes in the adoption and use of material culture can be identified in this period of Greek antiquity, but the purpose of the present conference was not to identify any universal processes that facilitate such changes (which are not likely to exist), but rather to attempt to identify the social and cultural logic behind such changes in a few selected cases studies through discussion. As M. Dietler noted in his opening address at the conference, the application of the term *koinai* should especially serve the purpose of revealing complexities, rather than simply pointing

to similarities, precisely because the identification of a material *koinai* has little explanatory power in itself.²⁰ It is important to remember that the processes that led to phenomena that can be described as material *koinai* could be very different from place to place and in various socio-cultural environments, as the examples mentioned above illustrate. If we do not explain the processes that guided the adoption of specific material culture and the mechanism that lead to change or divergent consumptions of material culture, we leave the door open for unfounded historical reconstructions. As Dietler also points out, focusing on aspects of consumption patterns may provide one suitable methodological approach. By drawing attention to, and unfolding, the mechanisms and processes that lie behind cases of conspicuous consumption of material culture, we hope to move beyond description to valid interpretations and thereby, ultimately, achieve a more profound understanding of the dialectic relationship between objects and social constructions.

Apart from Dietler's opening address, which presents a discussion of the use of the *koinai* term from an anthropological perspective, the papers presented in this volume have been grouped into three thematic parts:

- 1: Pottery Production and the Formation of Material, or Cultural *Koinai*.
- 2: Cross Cultural Connections, and Material and Cultural *Koinai*.
3. The Material *Koinai* of Wine Drinking.

18 Powell 1998.

19 On the horse leader theme in its social context, see first and foremost Langdon 1989, but see also Papalexandrou 2005, 129-32; Pappi 2006.

20 Dietler *in this volume*, 24.