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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/5653>

DOI: 10.4000/perspective.5653

ISSN: 2269-7721

Publisher

Institut national d'histoire de l'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2014

Number of pages: 246-252

ISSN: 1777-7852

Electronic reference

Caroline Vout, « The end of the “Greek Revolution”? », *Perspective* [Online], 2 | 2014, Online since 30 June 2016, connection on 01 October 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/5653> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/perspective.5653>

The end of the “Greek Revolution”?

Caroline Vout

– Jaś ELSNER, “Reflections on the ‘Greek Revolution’: From Changes in Viewing to the Transformation of Subjectivity,” in Simon Goldhill, Robin Osborne, *Rethinking Revolutions Through Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 68-95. ISBN: 978-0-52186-212-7; £ 79 (100 €).

– Richard NEER, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2010. 288 pp., 10 color plates, 130 halftones, 12 line drawings. ISBN: 978-0-22657-063-1; \$70 (55 €).

– Andrew STEWART, “The Persian and Carthaginian Invasions of 480 B.C.E. and the Beginning of the Classical Style: Part 1, The Stratigraphy, Chronology, and Significance of the Acropolis Deposits,” in *American Journal of Archeology*, 112.3, July 2008, pp. 377-412.

– Andrew STEWART, “The Persian and Carthaginian Invasions of 480 B.C.E. and the Beginning of the Classical Style: Part 2, The Finds from Other Sites in Athens, Attica, Elsewhere in Greece, and on Sicily; Part 3, The Severe Style: Motivations and Meaning,” in *American Journal of Archeology*, 112.4, October 2008, pp. 581-615.

Roman art has undergone something of a Renaissance in recent years. Condemned by Johann Joachim Winckelmann as “second rate,” the sculpture of the Roman Empire now rejoices in this “secondary” status, appreciated rather than denigrated for the various ways in which its reliance on, and (we now realize) often witty appropriation of, Greek cultural production helped to define classical style.¹ But “the classical” in classicism remains enigmatic,² with art historians having to work harder than ever to identify what it is about the painting and sculpture of fifth- and fourth-century BC Greece that gives it its primacy, even in the eyes of Pliny. This is not just about accounting retrospectively for the emergence of “classical style” or about bypassing Rome, ancient and sixteenth century, to go back to the moment when sculpture broke free of the block after over a century of kouros (fig. 1). It is more fundamental than this – about how to describe the very nature of this “emergence” and the visual material that counts as evidence for it,

and what these choices say about the current, sometimes fractious, relationship between classical art and classical archaeology, not to mention philology.

For Ernst Gombrich, writing in 1959, the emergence of classical style was an emergence or awakening born of rupture, a “Greek Revolution” no less, the very language of which spoke of dramatic and widespread change, whispering as it did so of the Greek War of Independence and the politics of liberation that came with it.³ Whether Gombrich’s terminology is appropriate or not, Anglo-American scholars are caught in its revolving door, seeking to pay due diligence to *Art and Illusion* and to a shift in representational practice that Winckelmann had already pinpointed as shaped by Athenian democracy and shaping of Western art. How do classicists do this without reinventing the wheel? Not simply by advocating an innovative answer as to why Greek art departed from the schemata that governed it and became more “naturalistic” (for this is to work within existing parameters) but, as Roman art historians have done, by rewriting the formula, or developing a new language that posits continuity within change and focuses on transformations in how the objects concerned ask to be viewed and used.

Jaś Elsner and Richard Neer, both of them based for part of the year at least in the University of Chicago’s Department of Art History, lead the way here. No one has done more than the former to ensure that visibility and the subjectivities of viewing are now an important lens for examining the meaning of ancient art, Greek and Roman.⁴ Elsner’s emphasis on modes

1. The Anavysos kouros, ca. 530 BC, National Museum of Athens.

of consumption over and above the technicalities of production and patronage is of a piece with trends in art history more broadly, trends that have leant on Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and literary theory to replace connoisseurship with visual culture. But it impacts rather differently when the discipline in question is classical art, a discipline that is arguably the handmaiden of classical archaeology. Although classical archaeologists accept that objects are not finished but born when they leave the studio, and enthusiastically embrace the idea of "object biographies," their emphasis is on material rather than visual culture, with "art" just one part of this broader material-culture totality.⁵ Rather than engage with classical literature, as Elsner does, to tap ancient ways of seeing and representing the world, their priority is on how material evidence can access historical questions that classical literature cannot reach.

Of course, this dichotomy between classical art and classical archaeology is a bit crude: the third author whose contribution is discussed in this article, Andrew Stewart, has a curriculum vitae that includes the influential *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece*,⁶ a book invested in the French theorists mentioned above and in the scholarship on "the gaze" that followed in their wake, and excavations in Israel. In opposition to Elsner, however, to whose work we return presently, Stewart's latest contribution to the "beginning of the classical style" is written from an avowedly archaeological perspective. When Neer devotes much of the introduction of his *Emergence of the Classical Style* to denying a distinction in art-historical and archaeological method, his insistence on aesthetics and interdisciplinarity only underlines that the fault line is active.

The "severe style" of the "Greek Revolution"

So what does the "beginning of the classical style" look like today from an archaeological perspective? If there is a revolution in Stewart's eyes, it is synonymous with the appearance not of naturalism but of the ensuing "severe style," a term first coined in Germany but made popular by Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway⁷ and epitomized in the lost Tyrannicide Group (the most complete version of which is in Naples; fig. 2) from

the Agora in Athens, dateable by means of the Parian Chronicle to 477/476 BC.⁸ What else counts as "severe style" may be self-evident to Stewart, but his reluctance to engage in detailed stylistic analysis consigns us to trusting him and his impressionistic criteria of "simplicity, strength, vigor, rationality, self-discipline, and intelligent thought" (STEWART, October 2008, p. 602).⁹ With his specimens assembled, not just from Athens but from Aigina, Sicily and so on, the question turns to chronology: few of his examples come with the kind of data that pins the Tyrannicides to a specific time period. The implication is that if we can determine *when* exactly the "severe style" emerges, we will indeed have a new, or at least better focused, lens through which to reexamine art's role and function in society.

As long as change is what is at issue, fixing the tipping point is an obvious imperative. Yet publications on the "Greek Revolution" offer little consensus. For all Gombrich's revolutionary language, his revolution was a *process* begun in the sixth century BC and climaxing only in the fourth. For Elsner, the most radical gear shift was in the first quarter of the fifth century, and for Neer, "High Classical" (as opposed to "Early" and "Late" classical) was the key, coming into being

2. The Tyrannicide Group, Roman copy, Naples, National Archaeological Museum.

3. Fallen warrior, east pediment, temple of Aphaia at Aigina.

shortly before the middle of the fifth century and flourishing in the final decades of that century (NEER, 2010, p. 1). Traditionally, some “severe style” or “early classical” sculpture has been dated as early as 525 BC. Students’ heads must be spinning: if it is explanations one is after, a few years can make a difference. “When” and “what” are often crucially connected.

Stewart’s contribution is a demolition job of publications that place “severe style” sculpture in *Perserschutte* or other archaeological contexts which have been directly associated with the Persian and, in Sicily’s case, Carthaginian invasions. Much of this debunking builds on recent stratigraphic, numismatic, pottery and sculpture studies to question nineteenth-century excavation reports of the Athenian Acropolis and affirm that the “kore pit” to the northwest of the Erechtheion is the only properly sealed pit of debris resulting from the Persian sack of 480-479 BC. Four “severe style” sculptures were discovered on the northern side of the Acropolis, though none in that assemblage. As with the other “severe style” sculptures from the citadel, a case can be made that they were found not in destruction deposits, but in construction fills made in the Kimonian and Periclean periods. Similarly, none of the sculptural fragments used in the Themistoklean wall of 479/478 BC fall into the “severe style” category.

A similar story can be told for Eleusis and Sounion. At Aigina, meanwhile, the latest pottery research leads Stewart to assert that the second Temple of Aphaia was erected in its entirety after the Persian Wars, within the 470s (STEWART, October 2008, pp. 593-597). Visually, this conclusion is one of the most difficult to

countenance. Even if we do as Stewart advises and accept the similarities Norbert Eschbach sees between the figures in each group, as well as his explanation that the west pediment was simply by a more conservative workshop than the east (fig. 3),¹⁰ all of the figures are worlds away from the seer on the east pediment

of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, a figure that does not just act but thinks (fig. 4). His wrinkled brow, half-open mouth and dramatically introspective gesture script the scene, theorizing almost what it means to see a story spelled in marble. In Olympia’s west pediment, in contrast, Apollo’s “Blond Boy”-ish face combines with his frontal body to give him an old-fashioned air that allows him to be both there and not there – not part of the action, but a god in judgment over it. Are they really only a decade later than their counterparts at Aigina?¹¹

Such is Stewart’s insistence on a post-Persian date for the “severe style” that the answer has to be affirmative. None of the archaeological data contradict the contention that it began on the Greek mainland after 480 BC, with sculptors on Sicily (as we discover in an ensuing section) gradually catching on some ten years later. With this *terminus post quem* established and Athens’ sculptural development rooted within a broader picture of artistic change that stresses that the

4. Figure N, the Seer from the east pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.

"severe style" was Panhellenic, Stewart is free to come up with a more historically contingent reason for the "Greek Revolution" than Gombrich's "narrative".¹² Winckelmann's emphasis on democracy is dismissed (if Sicily's tyrants are not to be dismissed also) and weight given to two convergent factors: the premium put on "sophrosyne" by Greeks anxious to define themselves against the Persians in the wake of the wars, and the innovation and influence of Kritios and Nesiotes, the sculptors of the Tyrannicides. The "death of the artist" is "greatly exaggerated" writes Stewart, and the developing discourse of Orientalism, as epitomized in Aeschylus' *Persae*, is something that shaped Greek dress, funerary practice and art in opposition to the East. The "selection and simplification" characteristic of the "severe style" are a direct result. After the Persian and Carthaginian invasions, "everything looks utterly different" (STEWART, October 2008, pp. 599-610).

Stewart's conclusion nigh on denies post-structuralism altogether, but it shares more with Gombrich than we might think, for he too glossed Greek art's departure as a break away from the Oriental (in his case, the Egyptian, with all of the perfume of the Ottoman Empire that the phrase "Greek Revolution" still brought with it). Stewart's conclusion also appreciates that "severe style" sculptures do not just look different from their Archaic predecessors but attest to, and invite, a different way of looking at the world, requesting, or even demanding, attention.

Reflections on the "Greek Revolution"

This invitation to see differently is the subject of Elsner's article "Reflections on the Greek Revolution," which pays homage to Gombrich's "intellectually honest" account by putting the emphasis not on the objects (as does Stewart) but on the spectator's relationship with them. The biggest achievement of post-Revolution art is not what it looks like, but a new kind of viewing. Elsner's first plate is Gombrich's first plate, and compares and contrasts three examples of freestanding sculpture: the Apollo of Tenea, the Louvre's Apollo Piombino (now regarded, as Elsner acknowledges, as an Archaizing statue most likely from the first century BC

rather than as a rare sixth-century bronze) and the "cover boy"¹³ of the Greek Revolution, the Kritian Boy (fig. 5). Although attuned to the problems of putting these images side by side, each scholar is less concerned with the particular date or function of any one of them than they are with what they say, en masse, about the development of representation, which for Gombrich is about how artists see the world and for Elsner about how spectators see statues. In Elsner's hands, the differences between the statues, routinely summarized as "the development of naturalism," are not about the relationship of image and model but rather that of image and beholder.

Pushing at this open door has enabled Neer and indeed Jeremy Tanner at the Institute of Archaeology in London to go further still, the second of these recently highlighting how "naturalism," like the male nude with which it is inextricably linked, is a stylistic language or cultural system parading at being natural.¹⁴ What distinguishes this system to Tanner's mind is how it affects the viewer; and sculpture's affect (especially that of religious sculpture) is what drives his argument. Already influenced by the philosophical and sociological scholarship of Charles Sanders

Peirce and Talcott Parsons, Tanner's emphasis on the agency of artworks has since taken him from semiotics and systems theory through the anthropology of Alfred Gell to comparative approaches.¹⁵ By focusing on what statues in society do, rather than (as art history traditionally has done) on what individual statues mean,

5. The Kritian Boy, Athens, New Acropolis Museum.

he can weigh, for example, Greek and Chinese art, without the problems of translating between iconographies.

Compared to Tanner, Elsner focuses on the visual level of analysis. In Elsner's eyes, the artifacts of the Archaic period spurn the specificity of narrative that defines Gombrich's classical art in favor of an indeterminacy of meaning that offers the viewer less a story to enjoy than a direct address or confrontation.¹⁶ Seen like this, the frontality of the Anavysos Kouros or the Medusa in the Corcyra pediment promises/threatens an exchange of gazes that is intrusive and immediate. Classical statuary, on the other hand, glances rather than gazes, so absorbed in its own experience as to sever this hotline to the viewer and stand in a strange, parallel universe. The viewer is now a voyeur, free to observe, unobserved, and eager to read emotion and motivation into statues in an attempt to bridge the distance. Small wonder that it is at this moment that we see the emergence of the written discourses of representation that inform Western art history, discourses about the nature of art and about mimesis, not to mention Polyclitus' *Canon*. As a result of Elsner's analysis, the commensurability, characterization, narrative charisma, "vigor, rationality" and "intelligent thought" long attributed to classical art are finally properly theorized.

Elsner does not stop here, however. Once naturalism is seen from this viewer-centered perspective, it is not simply inspired by the rise of theater or democratic rule in Athens, but is paralleled by changes that were happening on the stage, when the introduction of a second and then third actor, and, slightly later, of complex scenography, similarly broke the link between the poet or performer and his audience, freeing the latter up to judge the action in front of them. So too in the writings of Herodotus and Plato, where the presentation of various sources and dialectic reasoning, respectively, showcased a shift away from a voice of authority to a more dialogic model for understanding the world; and in the law courts and assembly, where the drama unfolded before an audience paid with state funds to attend. All of this shows that Gombrich was justified in

thinking that "narrative" became important in the fifth century BC, even if storytelling in the form of epic had long been popular, and that Winckelmann was right in assuming that stylistic change was inseparable from, if not caused by, the mechanisms of democratic politics. From ca. 480 to 460 BC, there was a fundamental shift in Athenian subjectivities that subsequently lent themselves to non-Athenian and then Renaissance uses.

Elsner's conclusion is as elegant as it is convincing, but confines itself largely, as it is well aware, to accounting for the changes in free-standing sculpture.¹⁷ What about painting? For although there are differences, it is as easy to see the theatricality and absorption that define Elsner's classical style in pictures on the Dipylon Vase, made in Athens ca. 750 BC (Dipylon Vase National Museum, Athens, inv. 804), the Eleusis amphora of ca. 660 BC (Eleusis Amphora, Archaeological Museum, Eleusis, inv. 2630) or in Exekias' work. Here Richard Neer's contribution becomes crucial. As a scholar whose first monograph was on style and politics in Athenian vase-painting, he is excellently placed to redress the balance.¹⁸

The art of wonder

Like Elsner, Neer knows naturalism to be in the eye of the beholder. However, his *modus operandi* is more "nuts and bolts" than that of Elsner or Tanner; his aim is to draw attention to how viewers were (and still are) induced to see pictures on Greek pots as vivid, clear and natural – to the possibilities for increased self-consciousness, play and ambiguity in pictorial representation supplied by, and encouraging of, technical developments such as the shift to red-figure, and foreshortening. Fuelled by the wine of the symposium, these developments ensure that the images concerned delight ancient drinkers by having them worry about what representation is, and is not. Naturalism becomes a way of thinking about the "ambiguity and difference" of depiction.

Neer's interest in the ways in which images delight and tease the viewer leads him in this second book, *The Emergence of the Classical Style*, to make *thauma* or "wonder" his key term of

analysis. Implicit in this wonder is the twofoldness of viewing that we have already encountered – that the statue, in this case, is seen as “alien and familiar; far and close; inert and alive, absent and present”. It is artists’ ongoing efforts to make works that are “a wonder to look at” that drives Neer’s understanding of stylistic change. Seen like this, mid-fifth-century craftsmanship embodies neither harmony nor perfection, but an amplification or expansion of (what for Homer already is) an artistic objective. There is no “Greek Revolution.”

Jean-Pierre Vernant is to Neer what Gombrich was to Elsner.¹⁹ Critiquing Vernant’s ground-breaking work on the emergence of the *eikon* or “image” enables Neer to lay his cards on the table: no matter how intact the archaeological context, we can only understand how an object was conceptualized, specifically in relation to visual culture, by exploring the ontology of images in Greek thought. Hence his claims, earlier in the introduction, to be seeking “a new critical vocabulary, a new way of conceiving ‘presentation and unveiling’” (NEER, 2010, p. 2). This can only be done in Neer’s view in two ways – by examining ancient texts and their terms of description, and (distinct from Vernant’s philology) by analyzing “individual artworks based on these historically specific terms of praise”.²⁰ Although he admits to finding Vernant’s view of Archaic sculptures overly black and white, pushing its visual implications and testing the “presence-as-absence” supposedly embodied by them on the Anavysos Kouros arguably gets him further than Elsner, allowing him to approach even the technicalities of material and carving from a new angle. Certainly, by the end of chapter one, never did a “sign” seem so sensuous.

Sensuousness is at the heart of Neer’s project as, in a bold move, knowledge of sixth- and fifth-century sculpture is made inseparable from aesthetics, and sculpture is analyzed to show how the relationship of the real and unreal is gradually intensified so that in the classical period, a statue’s surface effect, open pose and conquest of space are key to its drama and its status as a wonder worth looking at. In the case of the Attic grave stelai erected after the start of

the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC, such formal qualities are evidence not of a groping towards a Winckelmannian ideal but of a deliberate harking back to the language of the pre-democratic city. At stake are ideologies of gender, modes of subjection and power-relations.

Where Neer seems initially at odds with Elsner – in both this book and his more general survey *Art and Archaeology of the Greek World c. 2500-c. 150 BCE*²¹ – is in maintaining that classical statuary is integrated and engaging, offering an interaction with its audience that stands in marked contrast to the aloofness of the *kouroi*.²² Yet this is less troubling than it sounds, for both of them see classical art as “an art of spectacle.” They are simply doing what, according to Elsner, classical sculpture enables: judging this spectacle differently (after all, Neer’s *kouros* “holds nothing back, but shows itself entirely to its audience” at the same time as it “snubs its beholder” [NEER, 2010, pp. 51–52]). Crucially, together, they are reconfiguring the territory, developing a new language for the transition from schematic forms to those that fueled the Renaissance.

New terrain

Jeremy Tanner, Verity Platt and Michael Squire, among others, are already exploring this territory in pursuit of issues concerning the invention of art history and ancient religious experience.²³ It is hard to think that scholars of Greek religion more broadly, with their current interest in cognitive approaches, will not follow²⁴ – all of which provides a context for understanding Greek sculpture and painting as much, if not more, embedded in antiquity than that provided by digging or survey. Time will tell whether the three-dimensionality of statues and the relative flatness and framing of painting and relief need separating out here, or whether classical art historians and classical archaeologists can realize their common ground. But as Stewart sifts the rubbish for the missing jigsaw piece, the puzzle in question is now a new one.

1. See e.g. Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication in Roman Imperial Art and Culture*, Cambridge, 2011; Miranda Marvin, *The Language of the Muses: The Dialogue Between Greek and Roman Sculpture*, Los Angeles, 2008; Klaus Junker, Adrian Stähli, *Original und Kopie: Formen und Konzepte der Nachahmungen in der antiken Kunst (Akten des Kolloquiums in Berlin, 17.-19. Februar 2005)*, Wiesbaden, 2008; Ellen Perry, *The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome*, Cambridge, 2005; Elaine K. Gazda, *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity*, Ann Arbor, 2002.
2. Salvatore Settis, *Futuro del « Classico »*, Torino, 2004, and James I. Porter, *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome*, Princeton, 2006.
3. Ernst H. Gombrich, "Reflections on the Greek Revolution," in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Oxford, 1959, pp. 99-124.
4. See e.g. Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity*, Cambridge, 1997, and *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*, Princeton, 2007.
5. See e.g. James Whitley, *The Archaeology of Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, 2001; Michael Squire, Caroline Vout, "A Place for Art?" in Susan E. Alcock, Robin Osborne, *Classical Archaeology*, Malden (MA)/Oxford, 2012, pp. 439-500.
6. Andrew Stewart, *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, 1997.
7. Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, *The Severe Style in Greek Sculpture*, Princeton, 1970.
8. See Museo Nazionale, Naples, inv. 6009, a pair of statues which is more heavily restored than archaeologists often acknowledge, and Vincent Azoulay, *Les Tyrannicides d'Athènes : vie et mort de deux statues*, Paris, 2014.
9. See also Andrew Stewart, *Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*, Cambridge/New York, 2008, and the review by Pamela E. Webb in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2010.04.32; note how these criteria owe a lot to Ridgway (cited n. 7).
10. Eschbach's unpublished *Habilitationsschrift* as cited by Stewart.
11. Pediments: Archaeological Museum, Olympia, ca. 470-457 BC; "The Blond Boy," Acropolis Museum, Athens, inv. 689.
12. For the "rabbit out of a hat" that is Gombrich's suggested catalyst for naturalism – "story-telling" or "narrative" – see Mary Beard, "Reflections on 'Reflections on the Greek Revolution'" (first published in *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 4.2, 1985), in *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2, 2010, pp. 207-213.
13. Nigel Spivey, "Defining the Greek Revolution," in Nigel Spivey, *Greek Sculpture*, Cambridge, 2013, p. 23.
14. Jeremy Tanner, "Rethinking the Greek Revolution: Art and Aura in an Age of Enchantment," in Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation*, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 31-96.
15. E.g. Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits and Agency: a Comparative View," in Robin Osborne, Jeremy Tanner, *Art's Agency and Art History*, London/New York, 2007, pp. 70-94.
16. In this respect and others, Elsner is heavily influenced by Robin Osborne, "Death Revisited: Death Revised. The Death of the Artist in Archaic and Classical Greece," in *Art History*, 11.1, 1988, pp. 1-16, which offers a view of kouros that has been criticized by Stewart.
17. Although note his contrast between the gazes in the pediments at Corcyra and Olympia (ELSNER, 2006, p. 77).
18. Richard T. Neer, *Style and Politics in Athenian Vase-Painting: The Craft of Democracy, ca. 530-460 BCE*, Cambridge, 2002.
19. See e.g. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Figures, Idoles, Masques*, Paris, 1990; also Richard T. Neer, "Jean-Pierre Vernant and the History of the Image," in *Arethusa*, 43.2, 2010, pp. 181-195.
20. If there is a weakness in Neer's work, it is that his handling of texts is sometimes less convincing than his reading of images.
21. Richard T. Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology: A New History, c. 2500-c. 150 BCE*, London, 2011.
22. Neer's gloss and his emphasis on "wonder" make it arguably easier to integrate Pheidias' chryselephantine statues and their spectacle into the story of mid-fifth-century sculpture.
23. Verity J. Platt, Michael Squire, *The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, (*Arethusa*, 43, 2010); Verity J. Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*, Cambridge, 2011. In this same issue, see the review of *Facing the Gods* by Sandra Nessah.
24. See already Rubina Raya and Jörg Rüpke, *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, Malden (MA)/Oxford, 2015.

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