

# Taking Mirrors as Mirrors in Greek Archaeology

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## Abstract

With Eduard Gerhard's *Etruskische Spiegel* (1843–1897), bronze mirrors come to be among the earliest classes of objects to have been published in a systematic and extensively illustrated corpus within (classical) archaeology in the mid-nineteenth century. By making available archaeological material to scholars who had hitherto based their knowledge of ancient cultures mainly on written sources, such illustrated corpora constitute a kind of 'material turn' *avant la lettre* within classical scholarship. At the same time, however, these same corpora also initiated a process of de-materialisation of their objects: by substituting them for two-dimensional depictions, they often focused exclusively on areas with pictorial decoration, thereby turning functional material objects into sources for ancient art history. In a first part of this paper, I would like to follow these inherent dialectics in the publication of archaeological material by examining the example of bronze mirrors. In a second part, which is focused mainly on a mid-fifth century BC Greek caryatid mirror in New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1972.118.78), I try to 'restore' to these Greek mirrors the material aspects that were neglected in past scholarship, using these sophisticated instruments of female cosmetics mainly as sources for the reconstruction of the history of Greek sculpture. Without forgetting the place of mirrors in Greek literature and philosophy, the discussion shall focus on the material affordances of mirrors, and above all their power of reflection and ability to *produce* an image. The (syn-) aesthetic experience of seeing oneself, put back on centre-stage, will thereby shed new light on those mostly erotic iconographies with which mirrors were adorned.

## Introduction

### Material-Based Archaeology and the Discipline's Dialectical Progress Towards Dematerialisation

Archaeology is the discipline which is engaged with the study of the material remains of past cultures. For this simple reason, there was in principle no need in this field for any material turn in order to posit material objects as the starting point for thinking about culture. We may therefore say that the progressive rise of archaeology as an intellectual endeavour from the eighteenth century onwards until its establishment as an academic discipline in the later nineteenth century<sup>1</sup> itself marked a kind of material turn within the humanities. However, to present the rise of archaeology solely as a story of emancipation for material things from the guidance of texts as the most trusted bearer of meaningful discourse on past cultures would tell only one side of the story. As I would like to show in the first step of this discussion, the systematisation and professionalisation of archaeology as an academic discipline in the course of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century not only assigned intellectual value to things, but also brought about, perhaps as a necessary side-effect, what may be called a dematerialisation of its objects. This dialectical progress of the material-based hermeneutics of archaeology towards the dematerialisation of its approach was fuelled especially by what may be thought of as the most basic and fundamental task that this new discipline had to undertake in its scholarly development: the task of publishing its materials.<sup>2</sup> Bronze mirrors provide a perfect example of these dynamics. Already Eduard Gerhard, who was responsible for the Berlin *Altes Museum* and who is known as one of the 'founding heroes' of archaeology, initiated the systematic collection and publication of all known Etruscan bronze mirrors in a five-volume corpus entitled *Etruskische Spiegel*,<sup>3</sup> with the first volume being published in 1843. Arguably, what mattered most for all those involved in this large-scale publication project (and even more for its later users!) was not the accompanying texts – although their editions stood at the height of contemporary scholarship – but the plates. It is the illustrations in simple but clear engravings, such as that of plate 121 (to choose but as a random example; fig. 1) that make each of these physical objects bound to the place where they are kept available to the scholar's eye wherever s/he is. It is the 'transportable' form of the engravings that allows them to be paired with any other object in the trial-and-error game of comparison, which arguably constitutes the most important method of archaeology. Even, if from the perspective of intellectual history, the 'invention of archaeology' may still be credited to the eighteenth-century neo-classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann – from the perspective of material culture, it is the proliferation of systematised image-corpora such as Gerhard's *Etruskische Spiegel* in the nineteenth century that laid the foundations of archaeology as a method of cultural analysis.



Figure 1: Plate 121 from Eduard Gerhard's corpus of Etruscan mirrors (second volume from 1845). By showing the fleeing Perseus after his decapitation of Medusa, the monster whose sight turns the viewer into stone, this image engraved on the mirror's back has much to do with vision. Repro from Gerhard 1845. Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg/C 5638 Folio: 2/Plate 121

Yet the role of illustrations in integrating material culture into scholarly debates was nevertheless ambivalent. Indeed, the engravings published by Gerhard in his compendium might have made Etruscan mirrors available to the scholar's eye, but at the same time they largely reduced these material objects to the status of merely *visual* artefacts. As Gerhard himself owned several of the published mirrors in his private collection, he was able to experience these objects in various ways. He could hold them in his hands, feel their weight (which must have greatly exceeded that of a modern hand-mirror!) and their 'cold' metallic materiality, and detect the engraved image through close scrutiny (which must have been much harder to see than on the clear linear illustration). Aware of its old age, he would handle the item in question with care. His relation to the object would thus have been a much more broadly embodied one, if compared to the clean visual relation between the published illustration and the scholar's eye. Once translated into an engraved illustration, the bronze mirror has turned into a flat linear drawing, with only the shadowed depiction of its handle retaining some of the object's three-dimensionality. In this way materiality no longer interferes in the scholar's relation to his/her object of interest, we may say, and therefore the path is cleared for the material object to enter and potentially revive a hitherto logocentric scholarly discourse.

The exclusivity of the private owner's relation to the objects in his/her collection – as opposed to the published objects in the typological catalogue, which we may take as a wholly new kind of collection – is clearly elitist in nature. But there are also scholarly arguments against any nostalgic longing for restoring this intimate object-relation of pre-academic archaeology. Indeed, the private owner's more plurisensorial experience would not necessarily bring him/her closer to an ancient experience of the bronze mirror, most of all because the object's main function of serving as a mirror is irretrievably lost. So let us instead accept the dialectics of scientific progress and look for other ways to come to terms with ancient mirrors as *mirrors* (in this case).

## Publishing Ancient Mirrors: Turning Things into Sources

To start frankly: if what we see on fig. 1 is not a mirror, what is it instead? To stress the fact that it has become a mere linear drawing on paper is equivalent to treading the thin line between a deep insight and a straightforward banality. In order to leave this dangerous path, I may correct myself a little. What fig. 1 illustrates is indeed a mirror, but instead of showing its front side with its – no longer functional – mirroring surface, it shows its *backside*. Here, as in many other (though by far not all!) cases, this backside is decorated with an engraved image. Since ancient art history was the primary focus of archaeology in the nineteenth century, it was such image-bearing backsides that made bronze mirrors an interesting category of objects for the archaeologists' study.<sup>4</sup> By showing the object's image-bearing backside and making it the front side to the scholar's eye, the illustration turns a mirror into a source for the study of ancient art history.

As justified as this may be when measured by nineteenth-century research agendas, this operation amounts to a phenomenal disempowerment of the very special, and indeed somewhat magical object, of the 'mirror'. By its capacity to produce an image, a mirror is the prototype of an object with proper agency. It is not only the passive object of another's activities, but within these activities it is itself an agent: whenever someone looks into the mirror, the mirror looks back. The relation to one's own mirror is thus reciprocal. Often, the image offered by the mirror does not obey the viewer's desires and gives answers that are hard to accept. The evil queen from Snow White knows this from painful experience, and so do we all.

A mirror may primarily serve cosmetic ends as an instrument for its owner's efforts to enhance or restore one's beautiful and desirable appearance. However, it sometimes defies such an instrumental use by telling the ugly truth instead of serving the beautiful façade. This is what eventually made the famous courtesan Laïs decide to get rid of her mirror and give it to Aphrodite as a votive offering, once age had destroyed her beauty. This, at least, is the fantasy described in an epigram from the *Anthologia Graeca*<sup>5</sup>, which mimics a votive inscription on this very object:

Laïs, her loveliness laid low by time, hates whatever witnesses to her wrinkled age. Therefore, detesting the cruel evidence of her mirror, she dedicates it to the queen of her former glory. 'Receive, Cytherea [= Aphrodite], the circle, the companion of youth, since thy beauty dreads not time'. (*Anthologia Graeca* VI 18, translated by W. R. Paton)<sup>6</sup>

For modern archaeologists continuing Gerhard's project, the images with which a mirror may be decorated make them interesting. Unsurprisingly, ancient epigrammatists such as the author of this would-be votive inscription rather focus on the image produced by the mirror within the face-to-face engagement with its owner. While the beauty of the decorated mirror is as eternal as that of Aphrodite herself, the beauty reflected on the mirror fades away when its owner grows old. As long as the ephemeral beauty reflected by the mirror still matches the precious object's own lasting beauty, the relationship of Laïs and her mirror is akin to a friendship. Indeed, she calls it the 'companion of her youth' (νεότητος ἑταῖρον). Yet once age has disrupted this perfect match of Aphrodisian beauty between both the mirror and its owner's face, this friendship turns into hatred, and the mirror reverts, as a votive offering, to the ownership of the eternally beautiful Aphrodite who initially made Laïs the gift of beauty. In this epigram's story of disrupted friendship between Laïs and her mirror, the object is granted the status of a person. Both the initial friendship and the present hatred between the two attest to the intimacy which prevails in this face-to-face relationship.

The French scholar Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux took this epigram as the starting point of her wonderfully rich and insightful study of the anthropology of mirrors in ancient Greece from 1997.<sup>7</sup> For her interpretative efforts, both Greek literature and philosophy, in which the mirror (in Greek mostly designated as κατόπτρον: 'the thing to be looked upon') proves to have an astonishingly wide metaphorical potential, and Greek painted vases with images of women handling mirrors were of great use. By contrast, the very numerous 'real' Greek bronze mirrors themselves had much less to offer for her specific interests. An archaeologist such as myself may well deplore this apparent uselessness of archaeological finds of 'real' mirrors for understanding the mirror's cultural entanglement as a practical tool in Greek life and as a metaphorical tool in Greek thinking. But we have to admit that this is consistent with the way in which the process of systematic publication and illustration of ancient mirrors since Gerhard has turned them into de-materialised image-bearers, which function ideally as sources for ancient art history, but which are divested of their – concrete and metaphorical – powers of reflection.<sup>8</sup>

## Mirrors as Mirrors: Reinstating the Affordances of Things

As already said, over time ancient bronze mirrors lost their (concrete) powers of reflection long before archaeologists started to collect them. This holds true even for the most well-preserved Greek bronze mirrors, such as a mid-fifth century BC exemplar from the New York Metropolitan Museum (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2: Greek bronze mirror on a caryatid stand, mid-fifth century BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum 1972.118.78. Licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.

Accordingly, any attempt to re-evaluate mirrors as mirrors inevitably starts with a failure: we are not able to reproduce the ancient experience of the mirror simply by looking on its bronze surface, since we have been deprived of the high polish which was responsible for the mirroring effect. Reinstating the affordances of this mirror, which shall serve as a case-study for the remainder of this chapter, is therefore a speculative exercise. But even if we were able, through the approximations of experimental archaeology, to look at this mirror in its still reflecting state, this would not really solve our problem. Indeed, as an interaction of a (wo)man<sup>10</sup> and a material object, the ancient experience of the mirror is forged not only by the crafted object itself, but also by the viewer's eyes<sup>11</sup> and all which made them what they were: a certain visual culture, ancient patterns of behaviour, the social context of cosmetics, and the cultural semantics of seeing oneself. In focussing on the bronze mirror alone, we take our cue from nothing more than a small material fragment of a complex network of humans and things. The fact that it does not return the gaze anymore is therefore only a memento of this fundamentally fragmentary nature of our knowledge.

Let us therefore concentrate on what this no longer reflecting mirror still discloses of its former state as a functional object. With a total height of about 40 cm, a quite considerable weight of 0,9 kg and a stable three-legged base, this exemplar was presumably made to be positioned on some flat support such as a table. These basic material characteristics already give us a clear indication of its main context of use. Although the owner may well use the mirror's caryatid stand as a handle and hold it in her hands while beholding herself, it lacks the mobility of a modern pocket mirror. This restricts it to mainly domestic use. As a precious object, this mirror testifies to the owner's wealth, as would the jewellery with which she would adorn herself in front of the mirror. But while jewellery and precious clothes would magnify her appearance in the eyes of *others*, the mirror would not leave the private realm. In contrast with other luxury goods, this mirror as a sign of wealth is not oriented towards the outside and the public: it rather serves as an instrument of self-identification.<sup>12</sup>

As heavy as this mirror might be, its rich decorative design rather emphasizes lightness. With a siren sitting on top and two 'loves' (*erotes*) flying around the bottom, the mirroring disc is encompassed by winged, weightless figures. On both sides, a dog is chasing a hare around its perimeter, and speed in Greek thinking is associated with lightness. In significant contrast to the modern sprinter packed with heavy muscles, Homer speaks of 'light-footed Achilles' when relating to the incredible speed of this hero. By means of a supporting cradle composed



of slender palmettes and floral tendrils, the mirroring disc is attached to the head of a female caryatid figure shown in a relaxed stance. She does not seem to carry any burdens. The bronze disc is rather floating over her head. Materially speaking, this heavy mirror is not very nimble, but its decorative design fosters other ideas, and the countless images of women's toilette that we find on Greek painted vases treat mirrors as light objects that may easily be held in one hand.<sup>13</sup> This discrepancy between the mirror as a material object, on the one hand, and the mirror as it is conceived in its aesthetic design and as it is – literally and metaphorically – imagined on painted vases, on the other hand, is telling of its intrinsic ambiguity as a cultural object. As a female object, the mirror is bound up with the interior space and immobility. As an instrument of beauty serving the ends of Aphrodite, the mirror is light. The desire it helps to inspire cannot be withheld within closed boundaries, in a like manner to winged Eros.

To explore this heavily gendered object further, and in particular to obtain an idea of the experience which these (no longer mirroring) Greek mirrors may have afforded, it is worth looking to the other side of the gender opposition. As Frontisi-Ducroux has shown, there is a widespread moral ideal which holds that men ought to not reflect themselves in the gaze returned by the mirror, but rather in the gaze returned by other men.<sup>14</sup> We might put this in the following way: whereas the mirror, an object used in the private realm of the house, is the proper 'medium of self-reflection' for women, men shall learn to know themselves through confrontation with their male counterparts in the public sphere. However, unlike the modern concept of the public as an anonymous mass, the public of the small world of the Greek city-state (*polis*) is conceived as a network of personal relations between individuals. Or, as Aristotle puts it: friendship holds together the political community.<sup>15</sup> The idea that men shall function as one another's mirrors in their personal interactions can even take a strikingly intimate character. In Plato's *Alcibiades*, Socrates guides his interlocutor's attention to the phenomenon that on looking closely into the eyes of another person, you would recognise your own reflection.<sup>16</sup> Another passage in Plato imagines this mirroring situation as a face-to-face between (homoerotic) lovers.<sup>17</sup> The beloved boy's eye as the 'perfect mirror' builds on reciprocity and on a loving gaze. In this ideal setting, the eye is both what sees and what returns the gaze, or, put differently: there is a perfect match between how your lover sees you and how you see yourself.

This ideal 'mirroring setting' is a same-sex setting, and it is a male setting. The 'mirroring setting' that we adduced between our exemplary bronze mirror (when it still 'worked') and its owner is obviously a same-sex setting too, but it is a female setting, and, more importantly, it does not involve two human beings but a woman and an object. As we shall see in the following, there is a striking degree of similarity despite this seemingly unavoidable difference. The modern mind tends to see a categorical difference in ontological status between a wo/man and an object. But the Greeks may have drawn more fluid borders between them, at least when dealing with an object which was capable of such far-reaching embodiment as a mirror.<sup>18</sup>

What are these similarities? In a face-to-face exchange with the mirror, the reciprocity is just as perfect as in Plato's setting of two lovers. As we all know from our own experience, looking at oneself in the mirror inextricably means being looked at by the figure 'in' the mirror. In the case of our Greek mirror, however, the effect of reciprocity must have been stronger in at least two respects: the polished bronze disc's form and size concentrate the gaze on the sole face, and its lesser reflecting power calls for a still 'deeper' gaze. The experience that our bronze mirror would have afforded is that of a rather close and intense face-to-face encounter, in which there is not much room left for the surrounding world to enter the picture. This again recalls the face-to-face exchange of lovers. However, to project intimacy into the relation with one's bronze mirror may seem excessive. But we may take the above-cited fictive votive epigram as a witness that such emotional loading of a woman-object relation finds its counterpart in the Greek cultural imagination. The story of love turned into hate between Lai's and her mirror clearly conceives this relation as an intimate one.

The wide spectrum of metaphorical uses of the mirror that we find in Greek language and literature<sup>19</sup> hints at the extent to which the Greeks assigned to mirrors qualities that largely transcend the passivity of an object and sometimes come close to personhood. In a fragment of the Archaic poet Alcaeus, we are told that "wine is for men a mirror"<sup>20</sup>, with a sense similar to the famous expression *in vino veritas*. Already in this comparison to the 'active substance' wine, the mirror is conceived as a more than passive object. It is something that has the peculiar power of making apparent things that are otherwise invisible. As an important contextual remark, we might add here that one's own appearance used to be much closer to the category of the invisible than it is in today's culture, with selfies available in every cell-phone and mirrors in every bathroom. When the early Classical poet Pindar calls poetry a mirror of great deeds,<sup>21</sup> this metaphorical use relies again on the mirror's power of making reality apparent. In the erotic novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* by the Imperial Age Greek author Achilles Tatius, the

mirror metaphors are particularly numerous. The clothes of the beautiful Europa, although covering her, are called “the mirror of the body”, meaning that they make the covered/invisible body apparent and palpable as a mirror would.<sup>22</sup> But the metaphor of the mirror expands to mental matters too, e.g. in saying that the face is addressed as the “mirror of the mind”.<sup>23</sup> Even the soul itself – the property of living beings, as opposed to dead matter – is addressed as a mirror in which (bodily) beauty seen through the eyes is impressed.<sup>24</sup>

The metaphorical potential inherent in the mirror as a material object in Greek literature is thus prodigious. For example, in the case of Achilles Tatius’ novel, the metaphor of the mirror proves particularly effective when it comes to eroticism. The same may be said of Greek mirrors as material objects such as the one shown in fig. 2. Whereas mirrors found in, for instance, the elevators of modern office buildings have the primary function for those on their way to a business meeting to ensure one’s *correct* appearance, this mirror as an instrument of bodily self-care serves one’s *desirable* appearance. Its decorative apparatus leaves no doubts. The flying *erotes* are a case in point here, but they are not alone in pointing towards desire. The siren sitting on top of the disc alludes to those mythical ‘monsters’ from the *Odyssey* that exercise an irresistible attraction to all (male) sailors passing by.<sup>25</sup> The dogs pursuing hares around the disc from both sides also point in the same direction. Indeed, the hare hunt is a common pictorial metaphor of erotic pursuit in the imagery of that time.<sup>26</sup>

But who is the caryatid figure who supports the mirror? There has been quite a lot of discussion in previous scholarship of the identity of these female figures which we find in almost all mirrors of this type.<sup>27</sup> Given the two *erotes* flying around her head, most scholars regarded the figure as Aphrodite herself. This would of course fit the mirror’s general focus on eroticism. But it fails to acknowledge one basic fact, namely that this figure is a mere subsidiary piece of decoration in the design of such mirrors: a somehow insulting position assigned to the venerable goddess of beauty and sex! Moreover, this misreading (as I think) is symptomatic of a misconception in previous scholarship that bronze mirrors are mere sources for Greek art-history, or, more specifically, for Greek statuary as the most esteemed genre of Classical art. Indeed, many studies of the category of so-called caryatid mirrors used these tiny artefacts as a kind of substitute for those Classical bronze statues which are praised in ancient literature (e.g. by Pliny the Elder and others) and later in Winckelmann-inspired art-historical literature, but which are almost nonexistent in our material record.<sup>28</sup> By including such bronze mirrors in the grand history of Greek sculpture, the scholarly tradition has moved their centre-piece – the mirroring disc – to the periphery. The mirrors became blind, and accordingly, assigning to their anthropomorphic handles the divine identity of Aphrodite seemed a reasonable proposition for something as venerable as Greek statuary.

But the mirror is not (or better: was not) blind. Therefore, we have to take the reflected face of its (female) user as the most prominent image that our caryatid mirror presented to the viewer. The caryatid needs to step back to the second line, together with the other pieces of figurative decoration mentioned above. However, this does not resolve the question of whom these female caryatid figures may have represented. Strictly from the point of view of iconography, this question has to remain open. Indeed, in Greek images of the period, *erotes* may surround any kind of desirable female figure, either divine or human. Nor does the attribute of a bird provide any definite clue for determining her identity.<sup>29</sup> The way she holds it in her outstretched right arm is reminiscent of the numerous archaic statues of young maidens set up on graves or (more frequently) as votives in sanctuaries. These so-called *korai* are well-known for their steady resistance to any attempt to assign them a definite identity. In their graceful and smiling address to the viewer, by presenting some meaningful object (alias attribute) in their outstretched arm, they mimic an exchange of gazes and gifts and oscillate between the divine identity of the goddess in the sanctuary and the human identity of a charming young maid. These *korai* hold both parties of the votive gift in balance: the divine side of the receiving goddess and the human side of the offering individual. Identity is here a matter of the viewer's projection rather than one of iconographic definition.<sup>30</sup>

The same logic of open identity, which is ready to receive, by way of projection, either the divine identity of Aphrodite herself or the identity of a mortal woman blessed with Aphrodisian charms, applies, I suggest, to our caryatid figure, too. In the mirroring situation with its exchange of gazes between the woman and herself, one projected identification of the caryatid figure strongly suggests itself. The woman cultivating her own desirability in front of the mirror may simply recognise herself in the attire of Aphrodite. Within the large spectrum of specified identities which lie within the affordances of the caryatid figure's un-specific iconography, the options 'the mirror-owner herself' and 'Aphrodite' seem diametrically opposed to one another, but they might be easy to reconcile. Indeed, cultivating and experiencing one's own Aphrodite-like desirability in the face-to-face exchange with the mirror is *being* Aphrodite, at least for that short-lived moment. Not the Aphrodisian desirability itself but its ephemeral possession by women who do not enjoy divine immortality draws the non-transgressible line between the human and the divine domains.

Here, it is useful to recall the short epigram on Laïs' mirror, the courtesan whose once divine beauty faded away. From the moment when she was no longer able to reproduce the experience of enjoying her own Aphrodisian desirability, she began to resent her mirror. But before, it was love! In the Greek cultural imagination of which both this epigram and our material bronze mirror are an offspring, the mirroring situation is conceived as a pleasurable one. This cosmetic self-care in front of the mirror involves, of course, the sense of vision. But it involves other senses too. Obviously, smell is activated in connection with perfuming one's own body. A similar caryatid mirror conserved in the Louvre was found even with a perfume flask attached to it with a chain.<sup>31</sup> The figure of the siren participating through her frontal pose in the face-to-face exchange between woman and mirror also incorporates, by her mythical reference to the irresistible beauty of her singing, an auditory element as another important component of desire. Finally, cosmetic self-care in front of the mirror goes together not only with touching one's own physical body, but also with handling the beautiful, heavy yet fragile, bronze artefact. One part of it was apt to be taken in one's hands, namely the caryatid figure that also functions as a handle. Of all pieces of figural decoration encompassing the mirror disc, this image-body is also the one most suitable to receive the projection of one's own identity.

Of course, the joyful experience of one's own desirability, which the mirror may provide to its owner in a multisensory way, is ultimately meant to culminate in an erotic interaction outside this closed circuit, whether imagined or real. As it has already become clear, Greek mirrors are an instrument of gender segregation to an extent that is hard for the modern mind to accept: a man with a mirror is an effeminate, as we learn from the comedies of Aristophanes!<sup>32</sup> However, a fundamental discontinuity between ancient and modern ideas on gender is in any case what we would have expected. Yet the notion that Greek mirrors are also (what we would call) 'sex-positive' to an extent that would create some discomfort even to the most neutral of modern commentators is a much greater surprise. For any liberal mind, the problem would not start with such explicit depictions of sexual interaction as we find on an infamous box-mirror in Boston (fig. 3a).<sup>33</sup> It is not representative of the overall standard for the decoration of this new type of precious bronze mirrors that appear in late Classical times and replace the older type of caryatid mirrors. Most common for the relief decoration of the boxes in which the mirroring discs are kept continue to be images of Aphrodite and other desirable women.



Figure 3a: Lid of a Greek box-mirror with a copulating couple being crowned by Eros, around 340–320 BC. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts RES.08.32c.2. © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

But the copulating couple who is crowned by Aphrodite's messenger (*eros*) for their beautiful worship of the goddess of love only spells out what the more standard imagery of mirror boxes would have alluded to in less explicit ways. In opening up the box, the mirror on the reverse side of this relief would appear side-by-side with an even more explicit engraved image of sexual intercourse (fig. 3b), which is focused on a more specific moment (the penetration) rather than the timeless happiness which features on the boxes outside. In contrast to the calm woman, who seems to have things under control, the appearance of the man's agitation characterises him as overwhelmed by desire: a state which would earn him moral criticism from the philosophers who preach equanimity. If she was able to awaken such desire, then her mission is accomplished, she has won, and the mirror as her partner in cosmetic self-care has demonstrated its due service.

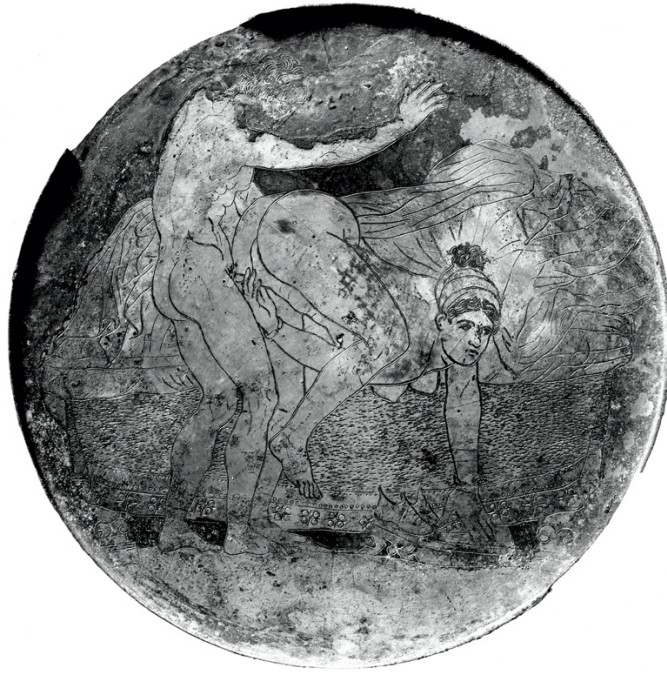


Figure 3b: Engraved image from the inside of the same box mirror.  
On opening the box, this image would appear side-by-side  
with the actual mirroring disc.

This same logic which regards the mirror as an effective instrument for awakening irresistible desire is at work in another, this time fairly frequent, subject-matter for the figural decoration of mirror boxes: the rape of Auge by the drunken Herakles (fig. 4).<sup>34</sup> As in the previous picture of love-making, in which the man is quite driven by his erotic desire, Herakles is overpowered by wine and sexual lust. He gives a bad example of a lack of self-control, signalling the victory of female attraction over Herculean strength, even if the raped Auge ends up being the victim of her own victory. As a decoration of the lid that is visible only when the box is closed, it mirrors (in the Greek metaphorical sense of 'making visible') the effectiveness of the polished bronze disc which is still concealed in the box and thereby participates in the mirroring action of that key object in the women's powerful arsenal. Or, to put the point differently, in order to tease out the inherent ambivalence: the image of a rape was apparently seen as a suitable decorative addition to an object of female erotic self-empowerment. At this point, Greek bronze mirrors' radical 'sex-positivity' does start to create discomfort.<sup>35</sup>





Figure 4: Lid of a Greek box-mirror, decorated with a relief picture of the rape of the priestess Auge by the drunken Herakles, around 330 BC. Athens, National Museum St. 312. Photo by George E. Koronaios. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Let us end our discussion which is about to take a more closely iconographic turn, at this non-conclusive point. Whatever direction a further exploration of the pictorial decoration of Greek mirrors should take, the next step ought to be to return to those corpora that put together and make available our accumulated knowledge of this material. However, the de-materialising dynamics of such archaeological publications should be countered by re-centralizing the mirror and the experience that it affords. In this way one may (hopefully) enter the Hegelian 'synthesis phase' within the dialectical progress of archaeological research.<sup>36</sup>



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of archaeology, Schnapp 1993 is still fundamental.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of illustrated publications of archaeological material in nineteenth century, see recently Lehoux 2018.

<sup>3</sup> An open access digitisation of this five-volume corpus issued in 1843, 1845, 1863, 1867 and 1897 has been produced by the Heidelberg University library:  
<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gerhard1843bd1/0109>;  
<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gerhard1845bd2/0016>;  
<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gerhard1863bd3>;  
<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gerhard1867bd4>;  
<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/gerhard1897bd5> (accessed January 29, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, Gerhard's corpus collected and depicted only those mirrors that had an engraved image on their back.

<sup>5</sup> The *Anthologia Graeca* is a collection of epigrams dating back to Byzantine times. The present epigram is also already of post-antique date, but neatly follows an ancient tradition. The epigram is an important genre of short poems in Greek literature. The epigram (*epi-gramma* = something 'written on') often plays with the idea of being written on an object, as for example a statue or a votive offering of any kind. Such votive epigrams have been compiled in book VI of the *Anthologia Graeca*. While most of the epigrams in this anthology only build on the fiction of being inscribed on the respective object, some likely copy real statue epigrams. The epigram cited above by the sixth century AD epigrammatist Julian of Egypt is known to belong to the former category.

<sup>6</sup> Several other epigrams from the *Anthologia Graeca* deal with the mirror of Laïs and reiterate similar themes. On the series of Laïs-and-her-mirror epigrams, see e.g. Ypsilanti 2006.

<sup>7</sup> F. Frontisi-Ducroux in Frontisi-Ducroux and Vernant 1997, 51–250.

<sup>8</sup> For Etruscan mirrors, Gerhard's pioneering corpus is being renewed by the much more large-scale international corpus-project *corpus speculorum etruscorum*, with volumes published from the early 1980s until the present. Concerning the Greek material, the two major types of image-bearing mirrors, namely caryatid mirrors (see fig. 2) from the archaic and early Classical period and later box mirrors (see fig. 3 and 4) from the late Classical and Hellenistic periods, have been published in catalogue-like monographs by, respectively, Lenore Congdon (Congdon 1981) and Agnes Schwarzmaier (Schwarzmaier 1997, replacing the older Züchner 1942). Both monographs focus primarily on the images which decorate those mirrors, and attempt at the regional and chronological ordering of the material. In doing so, the authors perform the preparatory work for making these images available to ancient art history and, as an unwanted side-effect, 'detach' them from the mirrors to which they are materially bound.

<sup>9</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 1972.118.78, around mid-fifth century, of Argive (?) workmanship. See Congdon 1981, 191–2, cat. no. 83; Mertens 2006.

<sup>10</sup> On the mirror as a gendered object, see recently Lee 2017.

<sup>11</sup> See the recent book edited by Michael J. Squire on sight and the ancient senses: Squire 2016.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the context of use of mirrors (here centered on later box-mirrors), see Heinemann 2019, 350–3.

<sup>13</sup> A good sample of these images is depicted and discussed in Frontisi-Doucroux and Vernant 1997, fig. 5–29. See also the short overview in Lee 2017, 150–7. On depictions of mirrors with their reflected images in vase-painting, see Balensiefen 1990, 20–38.

<sup>14</sup> See Frontisi-Doucroux and Vernant 1997, 59–65. Even though this becomes a dominant theme only in Roman times, one cannot but think of the myth of Narcissus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III 402–510), whose falling in love with his own mirror-image in the water has tragic consequences. See Frontisi-Doucroux and Vernant 1997, 225–30; Elsner 2007, 132–76.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a 22: εἰκοι δὲ καὶ τὰς πόλεις συνέχειν ἡ φιλία ("friendship seems to hold together also states"). See also Plato, *Gorgias* 508a.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades* 133a. See the discussion in Bartsch 2006, 41–56.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 255d. We are entitled to think here of the modern phrase that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'.

<sup>18</sup> On embodied objects in the Classical world, see e.g. Bielfeldt 2014 and the special issue of *Art History* edited by M. Gaifman and V. Platt (Gaifman and Platt 2018, with a useful introduction to this growing field of classical scholarship on pp. 404–8). R. Bielfeldt's work on lamps and their relation to vision is of particular interest in the present context. See e.g. Bielfeldt in Squire 2016, 123–142.

<sup>19</sup> See F. Frontisi-Doucroux in Frontisi-Doucroux and Vernant 1997, 112–32.

<sup>20</sup> Alcaeus fr. 333: οἶνος γὰρ ἀνθρώπῳ διοπτρον.

<sup>21</sup> Pindar, *Nemean* VII 14. This metaphor applies particularly well to the kind of poetry for which Pindar was famous in antiquity, namely songs in praise of winners in athletic contests (as e.g. in Olympia or, here, in Nemea), in which the deed of the praised winner is set in parallel with the deeds of the heroes of mythology.

<sup>22</sup> Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* I 1.12. In this passage, we actually deal with the description (*ekphrasis*) of a painting of the abduction of Europa by the bull (alias Zeus).

<sup>23</sup> Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, VI 6.2.

<sup>24</sup> Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, V 13.4.

<sup>25</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* XII 39–54.

<sup>26</sup> On hunting and eroticism in ancient Greece in general, see Schnapp 1997.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief summary of these discussions, see Congdon 1981, 13–8. Recent descriptions of the caryatid figure tend to leave open the question of identity, see e.g. Lee 2017, 147–9.

<sup>28</sup> Most of them were later melted down later due to the high re-use value of the metal.

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<sup>29</sup> As a general rule, attributes in archaic and Classical Greek art do not function as unequivocal signifiers of identity, as art-historians would like them to function, and as they do much later in Christian art. On this aspect, see Dietrich 2018a.

<sup>30</sup> On the agency of the viewer in the identification of figures in archaic and Classical Greek art, see Dietrich 2018b.

<sup>31</sup> Paris, Louvre Br. 1687, around 470–60 BC. See Congdon 1981, 158–9, cat. no. 43. On smell and the ancient senses in general, see the recent book edited by M. Bradley: Bradley 2015.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 136–140.

<sup>33</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts RES.08.32c.2, around 420–340 BC. See Schwarzmaier 1997, 266–7, cat. no. 79. An important discussion of this mirror is Stewart 1997, 177–81.

<sup>34</sup> Athens, National Museum St. 312, around 330 BC. See Schwarzmaier 1997, 252, cat. no. 43; Stewart 1997, 171–7.

<sup>35</sup> A. Stewart concludes his study of this iconography on Greek box-mirrors with the following remark: “The more apparently gynaikecentric the image, the more it actually reinforces the patriarchy and helps to oppress the woman who enjoys it.” (Stewart 1997, 177).

<sup>36</sup> To what kind of interesting results an iconographic-cum-material perspective on Greek mirrors may lead may be seen in Heinemann 2019.