Strictly Economic?
Ancient Serial Production and its Premises
An Introduction

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Making Sense of Repetitive Material Culture

Since its infancy, Classical archaeological scholarship has been the recipient of an immense increase of new materials, thanks to numerous excavations in the Mediterranean and to new identifications of existing collections. Already in the 18th century (and perhaps earlier), it became clear that Ancient art (primarily statuary that had survived mostly in the form of marble sculptures in Italy) included repetition.[1] A convincing explanation for this fact was soon found and agreed upon: the multiple identical versions actually date to the Roman era and thus are 'just' copies of older Greek artworks that the Romans loved to imitate.[2] This urge for repetition and seriality was thus characterized as a diachronic phenomenon, in contrast to the many synchronic repetitions in the 'minor arts'. For a long time, exceptions to this rule only seemed to exist in the form of 'Werkstattwiederholungen' (lit. 'workshop replicas'), which denoted a kind of self-quotation by the artist or his collaborators.[3] The notions of copy as a whole became hotly disputed in the later 20th century.[4] Today, not least because of the high influence that modern concepts of art exert on ancient scholarship, multiple copies with an identical date and origin no longer surprise scholars in ancient art. Indeed, it seems correct to stress the phenomena of replicas as a characteristic feature of all Classical Art.[5]

Regardless of the pros and cons of this paradigm shift, there remains a somewhat divided approach to the repetitive material culture of Classical Antiquity. This is, I suppose, because some of the old premises from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century traditions of writing art history have implicitly survived. One such division between 'minor arts' and 'real art' had a perspective which focussed more squarely on the production side than on the reception side of the art in question. According to this reasoning, the repetitiveness of toreutics and ceramics is not so surprising, since both crafts rely upon processes of impression and use the same basic technique (namely molds, at least from roughly the Dark Ages onwards).[6] Therefore, repetitiveness and seriality easily present themselves as questions of predominantly technique, division of labour, trade and commerce.

Of course, no-one would deny that these questions should not form important aspects of marble statuary too, or that bronze and marble statuary should be free from these semi-mechanical phases of work.[7] Nevertheless, ancient statuary provokes questions to a greater degree at the level of reception, for instance by asking what connotations would have been attached to the common statuary type of the 'Small

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Herculanean Woman',; it also investigates how contemporary viewers engaged with the multiple copies of this scheme that were present at many places in the Roman Empire.[8] Even if my thoughts are bound to remain sketchy here, it becomes clear that the 'natural approach' to a Sigillata vessel or to a copy of the 'Small Herculaneum type' traditionally differ. The one typically privileges 'practical' questions, and the other focuses on prestige and values. This is the case, even though the two artefacts once existed in multiple versions and were naturally shaped by both 'sides of the coin', namely production and reception, and their mutual interaction.

Now, what is this all about in terms of the topic chosen for this 19th AIAC conference? To my mind, both fields of research are less remote from one another than one might first think. The reason for this is that both current visual studies, which takes art-historical archaeology as its traditional predecessor, and the modern archaeology of ancient economies have one major thing in common. They both offer explanations for the repetitiveness of ancient material culture. Of course, their perspectives, premises, and objectives are quite different. But they both give essential importance to ancient repetition.

Serial Production as one Pillar of Ancient Repetitive Material Culture

Surely, this statement is possible only from a very etic view point – one that regards the preserved material culture as a self-contained 'result' or 'sum', and thus probably overemphasizes the 'what' in place of the 'how'. It is a serious perspective, but still the question of the emic position remains open and this is needed to learn more about the multiple and often diverging ways that finally led to the circumstances we know today. When Session 3 offered the opportunity to take a close look at "Systems of production: land use, industry, technology, artistic production", it made sense to emphasize the internal, or emic, perspective. One step in this direction would first be to scrutinize the repetitive nature of ancient material culture in terms of serially produced artefacts;[9] a second step would characterize and scientifically evaluate this serial production in general as a form of producing material culture in Antiquity. Panel 3.18 attempts to undertake this task, whilst remaining aware that it will be possible only to shine a small light onto such a huge topic. But even if it cannot stake a claim to completeness, it has the explicit aim of responding to the constellation described above by combining both 'sides of the coin', namely the levels of production and reception. When reading the following five contributions of Panel 3.18, the reader will notice a constant shift between questions of production and questions of reception.

One final word concerns the chosen thematic emphasis. During the research for my doctoral thesis, it occurred to me that research on serial production as a topic in its own right (as presumably one of the major forms of production) seemed

relatively rare.[10] However, there is little doubt that many surviving ancient artefacts were once produced in large numbers. One reason for this lack of concentrated interest in serial production might be that it feels very familiar to our modern consumer society. When we find ourselves to be the consumers of many identical artefacts, it would seem absurd not to assume that they were produced because many people demanded them (i.e. as the logical conclusion of a certain division of labour, standardised working processes, etc.). So, on the one hand, serial production seems to be a very common thing, and perhaps it is not deemed worthwhile to filter out single series from the preserved 'pool' of ancient material culture and to characterize them. But on the other hand, relatively few attempts seem to have been made in order to approach the topic from the opposite side, namely reception.[11] For instance, one could query the whole range of possible motivations and influences that could have stimulated ancient serial production. On a case-by-case basis, it would be interesting to learn more about situations in which the production of multiple artefacts was motivated or dominated by set terms of content, ideology, and/or aesthetics.[12] How and where can we prove a close connection between a series of identical artefacts and a single commission in order to demonstrate a 'deliberate choice' behind serial production as an applicable mode of production? Of course, questions such as these are to be evaluated in the long run. For now, I hope that, by directing the focus as described, we will take one step further towards a multi-layered and comprehensive understanding of ancient serial production poised as an interplay between production and reception. A warm thank you to the contributors for engaging with interest in this perspective.

Notes

[1] A good example are the three 'Herkulanerinnen' from Herculaneum found in the early 1700s; two of the three 'Herculanean women' are replicas of the same type: Trimble 2011, 18–25; Daehner 2008.

[2] Cfr. Marvin 2008, 121–167.

[3] Cfr. Strocka 1979, 143 f.

[4] The literature on this topic is vast. Due to the very limited space, I only refer to Gazda 2002, 3–24 here.

[5] See the successful exhibition SERIAL/PORTABLE CLASSIC in Milan and Venice in recent years: Settis et al. 2015.

[6] E. g. Heilmeyer 2008, 244 f.

[7] See, for example, Mattusch 1996 and Landwehr 1985.

[8] See Trimble 2011 on this topic and Marvin 2008, 243.

[9] This bottom-up approach would require one to browse the preserved corpus and to look for identical objects of homogenous 'manufacturing origin' and date; see the approach by the author in: Reinhardt 2019, 60–65. 134 f.

[10] An important exception is Strocka 1979.

[11] Cfr. the example in footnote 8 and, at a more general level, Bartman 1988 for the related phenomenon of companion pieces in the display of copies.
[12] There are numerous material groups that fit this argument, such as portraiture, coinage, seals, etc. the question of written sources also remains interesting, see e. g. Plut., Numa 13.

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