In the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a clear interest among archaeologists in identity studies and the diversity of the meanings that the term captures. Social identity has been described as the way in which “individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations to others.” Moreover, it is argued that social identity encompasses categories such as age, class, sexuality, gender and ethnicity.

Studies in archaeology have been concerned with “archaeological cultures” that can reveal regional identities through artefacts and social practices. While this approach has been criticised, it can indicate the utilisation by groups and individuals of practices and objects to promote some “self proclamation”. Indeed, sustaining a distinct identity is a key goal for a person and by exploring social identity, insights can be gained into the values and behaviour patterns of the group/s under study. Studies in material culture could attest regional practices and ethnic identities, as well as conveying their social and political implications.

Following the above approach, the volume focuses on collective practices, such as religious, feasting, and burial rites, reconstructed from material evidence. The aim is to understand how collective practices were employed to articulate distinctive social identities in Early and Archaic Greece. The research was undertaken in the frame of a three-year joint project between the University of Oxford and ULB that brought together post-doctoral scholars from both these universities and beyond. Resulting from the research interests of the contributors, three important geographical regions, Laconia, Attica, and Macedonia are presented as study cases. These are: the Late Helladic III–Early Iron Age Amyklaion in Laconia, the Late Geometric “Sacred Houses” in Attica, and a number of Archaic necropoleis in Northern Greece. The geographical location and character of these sites provide representative examples of ritual practices. Taking into account new evidence, the three study cases also offer the opportunity to discuss important issues: the continuity of practices between the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age at the Amyklaion; the formation of social identities in feasting activities at particular buildings such as the “Sacred” houses in Attica; and finally the observed changes in the funerary rites at a number of culturally diverse contexts in Northern Greece.

Vicky Vlachou offers, in the first chapter, a diachronic interpretation of the significance of rituals and cult practices from the Mycenaean to the Archaic period by examining the archaeological remains at the Amyklaion sanctuary in Laconia. The author emphasises the importance of the performative aspect of ritual behaviour and its significance in this specific social context. In that framework, this chapter offers a new reading for reconstructing belief expression from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age at this particular sanctuary. Indeed, by focussing on specific finds, most without a precise archaeological context, Vlachou offers innovative insights regarding ritual performances and cult practices at Amyklai. Following the distinctive chronological span of the study, Vlachou clearly demonstrates in a contextualised analysis of the archaeological material that there were several continuities but also significant changes in the ritual practices at the Amyklaion. The main marker of ritual participation, however, was that of a chthonic cult, represented by a male-female pair, whose character was embedded in the social transformations that communities in the region experienced diachronically from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age.

In the second chapter, Alexandra Alexandridou focuses on buildings discovered in proximity to burials in Attica in the Late Geometric period (mostly

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1  Shennan 1994; Jones 1997; Meskell 2002; Hales & Hodos 2010.
2  Jenkins 2008, 29.
3  Hall 2002; Van Dommelen & Knapp 2010, 4 with bibliography.
4  Shennan 1994, 5-30.
the 8th century BC). Such edifices are often called “Sacred Houses” and were generally recognized as serving cultic functions. In her analysis, Alexandridou presents all the known examples from Athens and the Attic countryside, and offers a detailed study that combines archive research, based on the diaries of excavators, her extensive knowledge on the ceramics of the period and results drawn from recent excavations. In particular the opportunity to revisit the discoveries at Academy provided the occasion to discuss in detail this iconic site and reconsider its significance. This careful reading challenges earlier interpretations and raises questions regarding the assumption that the so-called “Sacred House” was associated with the cult of the hero Akademos. Instead, Alexandridou argues that the evidence supports that the “Sacred House” was part of a domestic complex, where feasting activities of secular character were performed but which were not addressed to the veneration of ancestors. The study further shows that most of the buildings under consideration did not necessarily serve for cult dedicated to ancestors but were mainly used for commensality rites. Indeed, Alexandridou demonstrates that communal banqueting was the focus of ritual activity in Attica in the Early Iron Age. Evidence also suggests that the investment of wealth especially in the case of the Academy, where the quality and quantity of banqueting equipment was high, implying that such activities were employed to enhance bonds between elite kin groups.

The third and last chapter emphasises the importance of collective practices for the creation of Macedonian identity in the Archaic period. In particular, Vivi Saripanidi focuses on burial customs that provide sufficient evidence to address the elaboration of mortuary rituals during the Archaic period in the region. The author offers a valuable comparative analysis of six cemeteries serving as the burials grounds of different groups of peoples active at the time in the region. These are Greek colonists (buried at the cemeteries at Adbera and Akanthos), Thracians (at the Mikro Doukata and the Amphipolis Early Iron Age burial grounds), and finally Macedonians buried in the two foremost cemeteries at Vergina and Archontiko. Her detailed analysis and nuanced approach reveal that diverse funerary rituals were performed by the different groups and remarkably that around 570 BC, a great transformation is evinced in Macedonia with the appearance of “princely” burials. Cultural similarities in the burial arena are according to Saripanidi the result of a selective appropriation of practices known from early periods in southern Greece. It is also roughly in the same period that a specific “funerary kit” appeared at Vergina and Archontiko characterised by a distinctive feasting set, which is not visible, however, in the burials rituals employed at the cemeteries of the Greek colonists and the Thracians. The author suggests that the ideological messages reflected in the new mortuary rituals imply that the Macedonians signified with their introduction, fresh ideologies and the formation of their identity. This identity entailed both differentiations from the rest of the Greek world and at the same times a connection with it through the perception of a common Greek origin.

The present volume will be complemented by the publication of the proceedings of the international symposium, “Beyond the Polis. Ritual Practices in Early and Archaic Greece”. The publication of the conference will offer supplementary studies of a number of geographical regions, as well as theoretical and archaeometric approaches to the study of ritual practices from the 12th to the 6th centuries BC.