



Constructing Whiteness: The *Psimithion* of the National Archaeological Museum

Lecture by Dr. **Efi Oikonomou** (National Archaeological Museum, Athens; Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports)



National Archaeological Museum, Athens (13676α-β / A11332 KONTAKH)

The lecture will take place on **Wednesday, 22 November 2023, at 7:00** p.m. (Athens) at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, Tsami Karatasou 5, 11742 (the lecture will also be streamed online via Zoom)

Registration is required for both in-person and virtual attendance.

To attend in-person, please register at norwinst@uib.no

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<https://uib.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5Yqc-ytpjwqGdGkUNincHV0IjomInavDHjS>



Abstract

The term "psimythion" conventionally refers to white powdery substances, typically lead carbonate-based, discovered in ceramic vessels (such as skyphoi, pyxides, or lekanides) within female burials across mainland Greece from the 5th to the 2nd century BCE. These substances are believed to have functioned as cosmetics, contributing to the creation of an idealized, unblemished pale skin. The desire for fair skin appears to have been deeply ingrained in Greek culture.

Despite the evident association between cosmetics and the female body, the presence of psimythion in female burials from this period remains rare. Our comprehensive review of existing literature, coupled with an analysis of select samples from the National Archaeological Museum's collection, addresses several key questions. Firstly, we explore the societal necessity that drives the construction of the notion of whiteness. Secondly, we investigate the properties and methods involved in the manufacture of psimythion. Lastly, we delve into the analyses of psimythia to unveil insights into the understanding, by psimythion manufacturers, of the chemical reactions occurring within the pottery.

Biography

Efi Oikonomou was born in 1976 in Thessaloniki. She studied Archeology at the Department of History and Archeology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece). She obtained a Master's degree at the University of Southampton (England) and a Doctoral degree at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece). Her dissertation titled "The Iconography of Burial Monuments of Macedonia. Contribution to their Interpretation" was published in 2001.

In 2002, she worked at the IST Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities in the Prefecture of Kilkis. In 2003, she worked with the Directorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities as a Member of the Committee responsible for drafting a Memorandum of Collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and the U.S. Customs authorities for the protection of Greek cultural heritage. From 2003 to 2012, she worked at the Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions, and Educational Programs at the Department of State Archaeological Museums and Collections (in 2012, she worked with the Department of non-State Archaeological Museums, Collections, and Antique Shops). Since 2013, she has been working as a curator at the Department of Vases, Metalwork, and Minor Arts Collection at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Dr. Efi Oikonomou's research interests center around ancient burial practices and the examination of iconography (as a means and process for creating images within the context of mythmaking). Since 2018, she has participated in a European research project. This project investigates the utilization of cosmetic/medicinal minerals in antiquity, particularly during the 4th-3rd centuries BCE, emphasizing female burial contexts. The research delves into the extant material culture, namely pellets and powders recovered from ceramic or metal containers, providing valuable insights into ancient practices and beliefs.