

Introduction

The gravestone of **Hegeso** (ca. 410-400 B.C.) is one of a series of tomb markers (*stelai*) created in Athens in the 6th-4th centuries B.C., with occasional interruptions in manufacture due to war or civic legislation. In antiquity, as today, carved tombstones were expensive, and served as indicators of wealth and status, in addition to commemorating the dead. Because Greek society was patriarchal, public roles for women were bound by social custom. Women, however, were responsible for tending individual and family tombs, and women were appropriate subjects for representation in funerary art. The tombstone (*stèle*) was found in the Kerameikos Cemetery, Athens, in 1870. National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Inventory no. 3624. Pentelic marble. H. 1.56 m., W. 0.97 m (5 ft. 1 in. x 3 ft. 2 in.)

Description

Two figures, mistress and servant, are framed within a simple temple-like facade (*naiskos*) consisting of upright piers supporting a shallow pediment with plain palmette acroteria at the corners and peak; the name of the deceased woman, HEGESO PROXENO (Hegeso [daughter of] Proxenos), is inscribed on the architrave. This framework serves as a backdrop rather than as a

picture-frame, for both figures partially overlap the piers, and were the seated figure of Hegeso to stand, she would be taller than the architrave. Hegeso sits at right on a simple but accurately rendered Greek chair (*klismos*), a type which later regained popularity in classicizing 18th and 19th c. reproductions in "empire" style. Her feet rest on a small, ornate footstool. Women in similar poses are common on contemporary white-ground oil flasks (*lekythoi*) offered at tombs. Our two carved figures presumably represent Hegeso as mistress with her servant or maid. The maid, left, wears an unusual long-sleeved unbelted tunic (we do not know its ancient name), and offers with both hands a small (?jewelry) box with an open lid. Hegeso faces left and extends both hands, one above the other, with thumbs and forefingers touching to grasp a fillet or piece of jewelry (this must have been painted, since no carved traces survive). Painted details may have enhanced other parts of the stèle as well, such as the sandal straps (only its sole is carved). Hegeso's importance is emphasized by the fact that she occupies 2/3 of the scene, and she wears a complicated costume. Her undergarment is an Ionic *chiton* with buttoned sleeves, but she wears a short mantle over it, one hanging corner of which shows a teardrop-shaped dress-weight - a common

classical detail. Note that the sculptor has not quite mastered some details: the right breast appears in profile, with the left compressed and nearly frontal. Over the head she wears a thin, almost diaphanous veil draped over her wavy hair; lower edges of this veil are visible at shoulder level. When viewed from the side, it becomes clear how the sculptor worked (see the way the nose is attached to the background): first, the slab of marble is prepared flat, and then the design is drawn in outline, probably in charcoal or crushed iron oxide (*miltos*); then the sculptor carves away the background leaving the design in relief like a cookie from a cookie-cutter. Finally the details are sculpted.

Interpretation

Like many grave *stelai*, the Hegeso relief presents problems of interpretation. Is the maid making an offering at the grave or sculpted image of her mistress, as some have argued, or do both figures inhabit the realm of the dead? A third possibility is that we, the spectators, are supposed to recall the dead by looking at a generic scene from daily life. The apparent reference to jewelry or adornment (*kosmos*, from which we get our term "cosmetics") could even refer to the duty of a wife and mother to keep her belongings, and her home, in good order (*kosmein*). Even the servant's

presence underscores Hegeso's role as good mistress. These ambiguities in interpretation are useful because they help us reevaluate ancient - and modern - attitudes toward gender.

For more information...

You can learn more about ancient women in **CLSX 515 & 516: Gender & Sexuality in Ancient Greece / Rome** and more about Greek tombstones in **CLSX 526/HA 526: GREEK ARCHAEOLOGY & ART.**

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Study Pamphlet #13

cast:

TOMB RELIEF OF HEGESO

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