

Re-examining Attic Death-in-Childbirth Funerary Monuments

Although images of childbirth are extremely rare in Greek art, a unique set of funerary stelai and lekythoi from Athens appear to depict women in the process of dying while giving birth (Clairmont 1993). The interpretation of these monuments as depicting childbirth scenes, put forth as early as the end of the 19th century (Wolters and Frederichs 1885), has been widely accepted by scholars on the basis of both literary and iconographical evidence (Vedder 1988; Demand 1995; Stears 1995; Stewart and Gray 2000). The *meaning* of these monuments, however, continues to elude scholars. Some have suggested that the tombstones served as a mark of honor for women who died honorably in their attempt to provide a male citizen for the state (Vedder 1988, Loraux 1995; based on Euripides, *Medea* 250-1 and the emended text of Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 27.2-3). Others note that the iconography of the tombstones is inconsistent with this interpretation, since it invariably emphasizes the weakness and suffering of the women as they die rather than honoring their glorious sacrifice for the good of the state (Stewart and Gray 2000).

The most perplexing aspect of these tombstones is undoubtedly the way that they foreground the act of childbirth itself rather than, as elsewhere in Greek art, the child that results. They differ markedly from the more common funerary stelai that depict a seated woman and a servant holding a swaddled infant, which have also been interpreted as commemorating death in childbirth (Clairmont 1993). The emphasis on the act of birth on these monuments is all the more striking in that childbirth was regarded as spiritually polluting and dangerous (Parker 1983, Cole 2004). The decision to depict an event that was regarded as both ritually impure and spiritually threatening is extraordinary in itself, but is even more so when we consider that it represents a moment of failure: the deceased is immortalized not as one who has successfully achieved the desired status of wife and mother, but in her moment of reproductive failure.

This paper explores the iconography of these unusual tombstones within their wider religious and social contexts in an attempt to understand their significance to a contemporary Athenian audience. In particular, I focus on the identity of the figures attending the deceased as critical evidence for our understanding of the scene. If the figures may correctly be identified as the parents of the deceased, as some have suggested (Vedder 1989; Clairmont 1993; the opinion is not unanimous, however: see Stewart and Gray 2000) this identification may help us to better make sense of the extraordinary iconography of the deceased herself, which flies in the face of known artistic convention and religious sentiment by depicting a moment of religious crisis and personal disaster.

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