

Painted Memorials: White-Ground Lekythoi and the Classical Athenian Funerary Landscape

White-ground lekythoi were among the most pervasive grave goods produced and consumed in Athens during the 5th century BC. One particularly prevalent decorative motif, especially after the first quarter of the 5th century, was the depiction of mourners at the tomb. However, scholars have often noted the paradox that funerary white-ground lekythoi were produced primarily during the effective period of the so-called *post-aliquanto* sumptuary law, reported by Cicero, prohibiting the construction of tombs requiring more than three days' work for ten men or decorated by sculpted monuments acting as tomb markers (Cicero, *Leg.* II.64; Oakley 2004: 191-203). Accepting Cicero's account, scholars have proposed several theories for the identity of the monuments depicted on vases: they are imaginative pastiches of monuments or represent wishful thinking; or they do depict actual tomb monuments, whether from an earlier period, from a non-private or non-Attic context, or made from materials not surviving in the archaeological record.

Analyzing the corpus of the 555 known examples of white-ground lekythoi with depictions of grave stelae included in the Beazley Archive and *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, organized by date, stela type and subtype, and relevant secondary features (such as the presence of features that may represent the identity of the deceased), I sought the most common stela types within the corpus of Attic white-ground vases, to discern whether the popularity and frequency of certain representations of monuments corresponds with the ubiquity of similar stela types within the archaeological record. Some interesting patterns emerge as the popularity of white-ground representations increases. Within each type, there is a tendency to grow more ornate over time, thus anticipating the development of physical tombs and the reemergence of sculpted funerary types in the last quarter of the 5th century BC; just as tombs on lekythoi grow

more elaborate, so do the real tombs, albeit lagging by several decades. This data suggests that pre-sumptuary-law physical tombs may have inspired the first representations on lekythoi, which then developed on their own (perhaps looking to non-Athenian models as inspiration), becoming detached from the original source as they became more elaborate. When physical sculpted tombs returned, they started out more simple in form and then eventually became more elaborate in the 4th century BC, perhaps even taking inspiration from the lekythoi.

The documentation from white-ground lekythoi thus suggests that private grave stelae were not absent from Athens throughout the 5th century BC, and in fact archaeological evidence indicates that stone monuments for the dead continued to be set up by relatives throughout the course of the 5th century BC, although very few were sculpted. In particular, gravestones of non-Athenians, especially *proxenoi*, seem to have been particularly influential in the Attic funerary landscape at this time and may have influenced depictions on lekythoi. Perhaps the new influx of foreigners at the instigation of the Attic sculptural program of the second half of the 5th century enhanced the Athenian funerary landscape with private monuments for *metics* who served the Athenian state, drawing on their own traditions of relief and tomb monument types. In addition, altars, sarcophagi, public monuments, and Archaic tombs are all attested in the non-Attic archaeological record, and may have been visible influences for vase painters. It is not unlikely that some Attic vase-painters may themselves have been émigrés, taking cues from the artistic production of their homelands and drawing on the popularity of funerary objects in the Athenian market. Finally, some monuments, although not all, depicted on lekythoi may also very well represent public graves set up in honor of the war dead, especially lekythoi also showing warriors or armor. My analysis shows only about 7-8% of the lekythoi have such figures, with an interesting distribution among subtypes.

The analysis thus suggests that vase painters needed only to look at the contemporary landscapes around them for inspiration, while patrons sought ways to commemorate their dead with depictions of fancier monuments than the ones they were allowed to erect. Ultimately, only a study of the findspots of various lekythoi, revealing whether they were excavated from a public grave or private context, can shed more light on the motives of the purchasers in selecting vessels that might expressly articulate their concerns.

Bibliography

Cicero, *De Legibus*.

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