

The Depth of Death: Liminal Space on Classical Attic Grave *Stelai*

In 5th and 4th century Athens, stone *stelai* were displayed as grave markers and as memorials to the dead, often decorated with scenes of grieving families and life activities. However, it is possible to interpret them as the physical representation of a liminal space on the journey to the underworld. Previous scholarship has primarily focused on the emotional meaning and complex iconography of figures on grave *stelai*, but has neglected the wider context of the grave markers as a symbolic funerary space (Johansen 1951; Wassermann 1969; Davies 1985; Grossman 2001; Grossman 2013; Arrington 2018; Squire 2018). While classical-period grave *stelai* were stationary objects, they also expressed the idea of movement between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This paper examines grave *stelai* found in Attica which are dated c. 430-317 BCE, such as the *stèle* of Hegeso (Athens, National Archaeological Museum, c. 410-400 BCE) and the *naiskos* of Sime (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, c. 320 BCE). The time period, as shown by Forsén (2006, 68-71) and others, witnessed a revival of funerary *stelai*. On these sculpted stones, families displayed their loved ones in death as they were in life, using an extensive visual vocabulary to represent ideas of the afterlife and the journey to the underworld. By building on anthropological concepts drawn from Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991) and by examining the use and iconography of grave *stelai* and their relationship to ancient ideas and practices concerning death, the *stelai* placed at the grave can be interpreted as being closely related to the concept of death as a journey. They served variously as altars, where offerings of food and drink were left to sustain the dead; as doorways to the underworld, through which one began the journey to the afterlife; and as windows onto life below, showing the deceased as they were in life.

Through combining literary allusions to ideas of the underworld and the afterlife, known ritual practices, and funerary iconography, the symbolism of grave *stelai* can be interpreted as having a meaning that transcends a static decorative memorial. Instead of simply marking the final resting place of an individual or group and commemorating aspects of their lives, these grave *stelai* were an embodiment of the continuing importance of the deceased, giving residents of the afterlife a physical presence in and a line of communication to the world of the living. The *stelai* were, thus, a doorway between the living and the dead, a boundary between the overworld and the underworld.

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