FOUR ATTIC GRAVE RELIEFS

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If one looks in the sculpture galleries of American museums for Greek original marbles one soon discovers that most of them are Attic grave reliefs, which to modern collectors have been the richest single source. Few of them, to be sure, are complete, many, in fact, are mere fragments, and all have suffered some damage. But the student of Greek sculpture and the visitor to museums have long been taught not only to accept the broken condition of ancient art but also to appreciate the beauty and power of Greek sculpture in a fragment, no matter how unfortunate the breaks are.

In recent years the Museum has placed on view four more Attic stelai of the fourth century B.C. Three of these are here on loan and the fourth, purchased last year, is currently shown in the Room of Recent Accessions. It is said to have been found at Athens in 1911 and was for a number of years in the collection of the Vicomte du Dresnay in the chateau du Dréneuc. The stele, of which we have four pieces, represents a woman seated on a chair. A baby in swaddling clothes rests on her lap. She wears a chiton and a himation, which is drawn up over the head with its left edge pulled forward and held by the tips of her fingers. The left breast and both shoulders are missing but the left arm seems to touch the main fragment in one point and in attaching it the angle has been conjectured. The gaze is not level or downward, but upward, probably directed at a standing figure now entirely lost save for part of her drapery, which appears to the right of the seated woman’s mantle below her knee. This second figure could have been either a servant or a surviving member of the family, joined here with the dead in that union of life and death which is the keynote in most Attic grave reliefs. Babies in swaddling clothes occur occasionally on the reliefs, but only one other example is preserved in which one of them is on the lap of the mother, a fragment in the Kerameikos at Athens (4123). More commonly they are held by the attendant. The top of the relief with the crowning pediment is gone, and thus we have no names, but the names (which would have figured on the epistyle or cornice) are hardly needed in a relief that so eloquently brings before us the sad death of a mother and her child.

More complete, though smaller in scale, is a grave relief lent by El Conde de Lagunillas. The staff the seated man held in his left hand was added in paint and has disappeared. He extends his right hand to the woman who...
Attic grave relief. Mother and child. Early IV century B.C. Total height of fragments as placed 33\frac{1}{8} inches. Shown in the Room of Recent Accessions. Rogers Fund, 1952
stands before him. But the handclasp is no mere sign of a last greeting on departure; this is not a farewell scene but the symbol of a union that is not limited by time and space. On the cornice of the pediment above, the names are inscribed, but the name of the man has been deliberately hacked away so that only an O is left; that of the woman reads [M]nesikrite, with the first letter missing. Thus the relationship of the persons eludes us. Are they father and daughter, or husband and wife? Which of the two has died? Or are both thought of as being dead? The representation is as if deliberately vague. Since the name of the man has been removed it may be presumed that the stele was commissioned for the man but later used for the woman, who may have preceded him in death. Or the slab may have been reused and the woman’s name added at that time.

In the fragment of a stele lent by Alastair Bradley Martin the handclasp, δεξίωσις, again figures prominently. The relief is larger in scale than any of the others described. The composition of the fragment can be made out on the analogy of other reliefs, notably one in the Piraeus Museum (Diepolder, pl. 23). A young man is standing on the left, wearing the himation over the left shoulder, bunched under his arm to cushion the staff on which he leans. The left knee is bent, and part of his left ankle shows behind the right leg in the lower left-hand corner of the fragment. The standing youth clasps the hand of a seated figure. An oblique fold in the background must belong to a third figure standing behind. There is much movement of lines in the relief, and even without any of the heads preserved the prevailing mood is well conveyed for a fragment of such fortuitous breaks. The owner tells me that when he first saw the relief he was reminded of the Parthenon frieze with its rhythmic flow of bodies and drapery. It is later, to be sure, than the great frieze, but in style such reliefs are inseparably linked to the artistic achievement of the Parthenon.

These three reliefs show the dead and surviving members of their families. Death itself has been lifted to a higher plane with the emphasis not on the agony of dying but rather on an existence after death in which, as Aristotle remarks, the deceased have become better and more powerful. Thus there is little difference in the attitudes struck by mourner and mourned; tears, one feels, are held back, there is sadness but no despair, and the living approach the dead with something of the reverence reserved for gods and heroes, while the dead themselves show some of the solemnity befitting their new stations. Nor is this reverence confined to the immediate members of the family, it is also shared by the servants and attendants. A good example of this is furnished by a fragment of a relief, lent by El Conde de Lagunillas. Here a servant girl with cropped hair approaches from the left, gazing at her dead mistress, who must have been
seated on the right. The right arm is bent at the elbow: perhaps the girl held a toilet box or jewel casket as on the contemporary relief from the Piraeus, now in Athens (Diepolder, pl. 26), while a curved line in the background suggests the raised arm of another figure. A scene from daily life, one would therefore say, were it not for the expression on the girl's face, which transports the scene to a world that cannot be reasoned but only believed in.

*The accession number of the relief with a mother and child is 52.11.3. It was first published by P. Perdrizet, Antiquités grecques de la collection du Vicomte du Dresnay (1918), pl. 6. The fragment of a servant girl has been illustrated in Collection Hirsch, (Première Vente) Hôtel Drouot, 30 juin—2 juillet 1921, pl. 10, no. 343. On Attic grave reliefs see A. Conze, Die attischen Grabreliefs, Berlin, 1893-1922; H. Diepolder, Die attischen Grabreliefs des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr., Berlin, 1931. On their interpretation see K. Friis Johansen, The Attic Grave-Reliefs of the Classical Period, Copenhagen, 1951, to which this article is very much indebted.*

Fragment. Height 21 inches. Lent by El Conde de Lagunillas, 1951