



# Athenian Funerary Sculpture Intro Guide

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## Archaic funerary sculpture

Late 7th – 6th century BCE:

Funerary statues of Kouroi (youths) and Korai (maidens)

Funerary statues of animals and horsemen

End of 7th century BCE – c. 487 BCE: Attic grave *stelai*

## Archaic Attic grave *stelai*

- Decorated shaft on rectangular base, crowned by a finial.
- Relief, painted or incised decoration, figured scenes.
- Inscriptions naming the deceased, usually on the base.
- High artistic quality, expensive, small number of *stelai* because they could only be afforded by the wealthy.
- c. 610-530 BCE: grave *stelai* with capital surmounted by a sphinx.
- Subject: a single male figure (the deceased), usually a naked youth or a man in his prime, most often standing in profile to the right, frequently represented as nude athlete or warrior.
- After the middle of the 6th century BCE: gradual introduction of two-figured scenes, female figures, seated figures.

- End of Archaic *stelai*: “post aliquanto” funerary legislation curbing the extravagance of the Athenian elite, probably by Kleisthenes in 508/7 BCE. Prohibition reinforced by Themistocles in c. 487 BCE.

## Classical Attic funerary reliefs

Revival of Attic funerary reliefs: third quarter of the fifth century BCE, probably as a result of the large number of Athenian casualties during the Peloponnesian war and especially the plague of 430/429 BCE.

Earliest Classical examples date to c. 430 BCE.

Large number of funerary reliefs, various levels of artistic quality (and prices), so that they could be afforded by the less privileged citizens – Athenian democracy.

## Grave stelai

- Shorter and broader than the Archaic.
- *Stelai* finial types:
  - Rounded finial
  - Palmette finial
  - Shaped as pediment with antae (pillars) flanking the *stela* shaft (architectural setting).
  - Such stelai were called *naiskoi* (small temples), very popular in the 4th century BCE.
  - From middle of 4th century BCE: *naiskoi* in the form of deep niches with sculpted figures in very high relief or in the round

## Marble funerary vases

- From the late-5th century BCE: besides the grave stelai, marble funerary vases (usually *lekythoi* and *loutrophoroi*) are used as grave markers.
- They bear relief and painted scenes and share the same iconography as grave *stelai*.

## Classical Attic funerary reliefs (*stelai* and marble vases)

- Name inscriptions, epigrams
- Scenes depicting a single figure, two figures, three or more figures (rarely exceeding four). After the middle of 4th century BCE: multi-figure reliefs became very popular.
- Figures of both sexes and all ages in a variety of poses are portrayed.
- Standard repertoire of themes, usually bought ready-made from sculptors' workshops.
- Difficulties in identifying the deceased in two- and multi-figured scenes.
- Subjects:
  - o Children:
    - Infants (held by female figures – mothers, relatives, servant maids)
    - Toddlers: squatting or seated on the ground
    - Boys and girls usually shown alone with their toys and pets (more often dogs and birds)
  - o Women:
    - Females of all ages (maidens, young adult women, mature / older women).
    - Maidens and young females usually standing, older women standing or seated.
    - Holding feminine objects: mirrors, pyxides (boxes holding cosmetics or jewelry), jewelry, etc.
    - Holding birds
    - Girls and maidens holding dolls
    - Accompanied by servant girls and servant maids
    - Women dying in childbirth
    - Dead mothers (the presence of their infants or children indicating motherhood)
  - o Men:
    - Males of all ages (young, mature, elderly, old)
    - Young males: unbearded, standing, often nude, frequently depicted as idealized athletes or hunters
    - Mature and older males: bearded, standing or seated, often with stick, dressed
    - Males of all ages accompanied by servant boys

- Youths holding birds
  - Warriors and riders: war casualties. Battle scenes or family scenes in which they are in full armor, the riders accompanied by their horse.  
In battle scenes, the deceased is always portrayed triumphant.
  - Professionals (i.e., priests, poets, actors, etc.)
  - Accompanied by hounds and horses
- o Family scenes:
- Males and females, children, servants, dogs.
  - Idealized depiction of family.
  - Gestures:
    - Dexiosis* = handshake. Extremely popular.
    - Mourning gestures
    - Gestures of tenderness and affection
    - Speaking gestures

## **Classical Attic funerary statues**

- Animals (dogs and lions are particularly popular)
- Sirens playing music or mourning
- Human figures

Between 317/6 and 307/6 BCE: Demetrios of Phaleron introduces legislation prohibiting elaborate funerary monuments. End of classical Attic funerary reliefs series.

Funerary reliefs of very modest quality were still being produced in Athens during the Hellenistic period, but never in great numbers.

## **Bibliography:**

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- Richter, G. 1961. *The Archaic Gravestones of Attica*. London: Phaidon Press.
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Vermeule, C. 1972. "Greek Funerary Animals, 450-300 B.C." *American Journal of Archaeology* 76: 49-59.

## Appendix



Funerary *kouros* statue, c. 590-580 BCE, New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 32.11.1



Archaic Attic grave *stele* crowned by a Sphinx, depicting a youth and his little sister, c. 530 BCE, New York - Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 11.185a–d, f, g, x

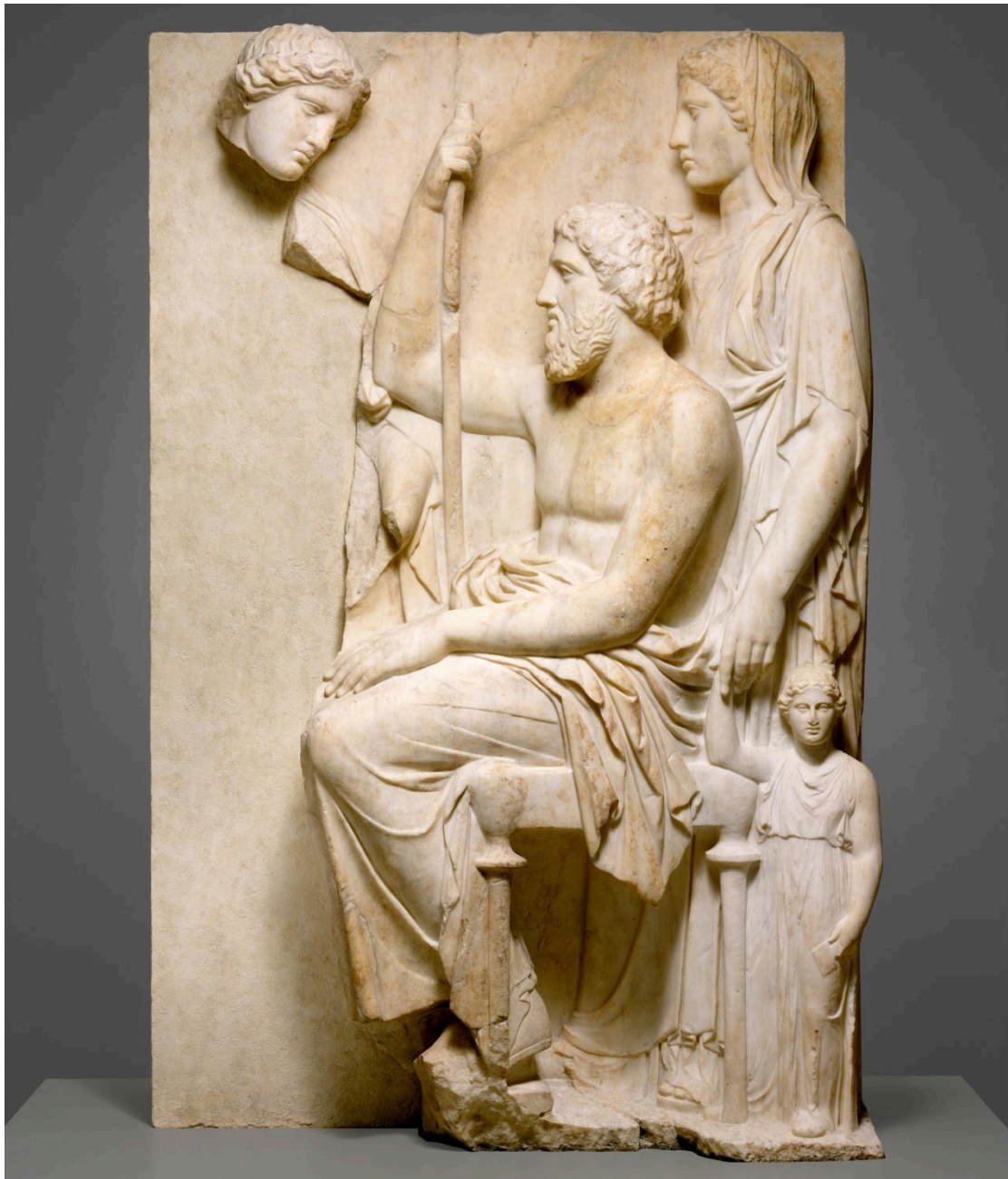


Classical Attic grave *stèle*, c. 400-390 BCE, depicting the deceased young female with her maidservant, New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 36.11.1

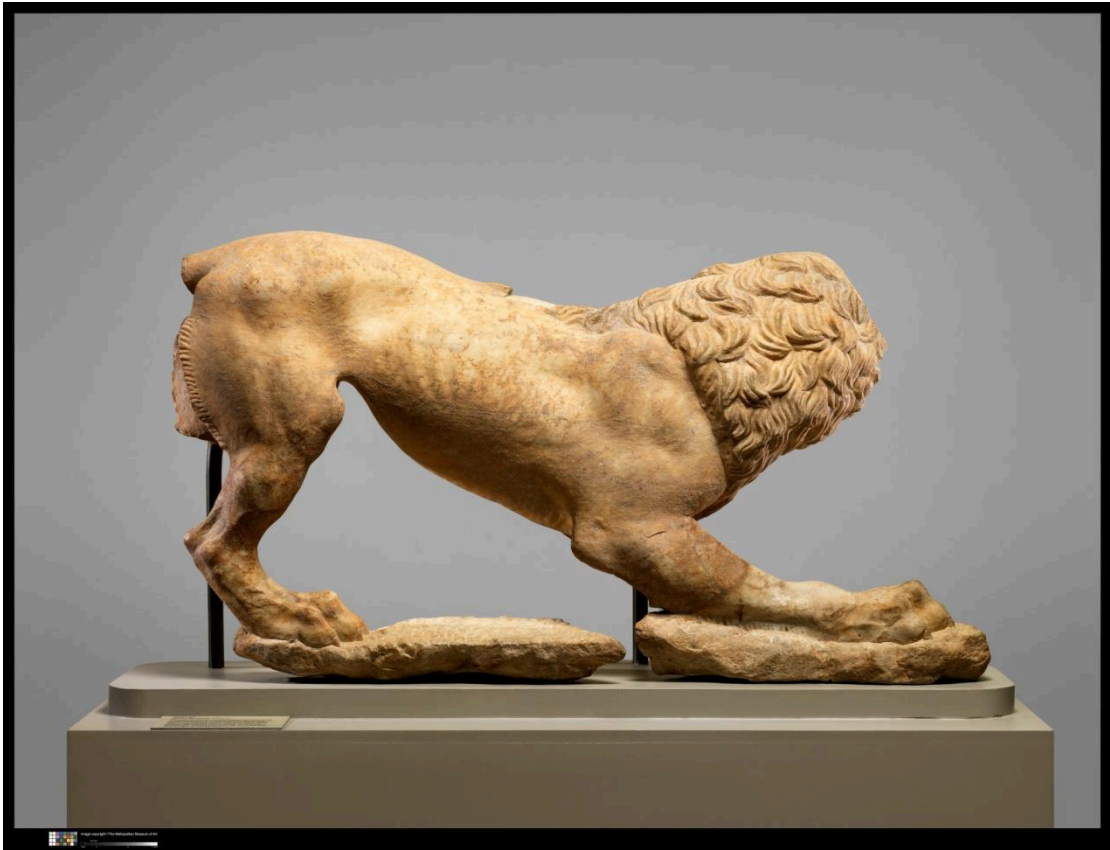




Classical Attic grave *stele*, c. 390 BCE, depicting a battle scene, New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 40.11.23



Classical Attic grave *stele*, c. 360 BCE, depicting a family scene, New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 11.100.2



Funerary statue of a lion, middle of the 4th century BCE, New York –  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 09.221.9