

MOTHERHOOD SCENES ON ANCIENT GREEK FUNERARY STELAE*

EMAN A. ABDEL-AZIZ

Keywords: ancient Greek art, funerary *stelae*, motherhood scenes, ancient Greek women.

Abstract: Ancient Greek ideals about women were represented on stone no less than they were put down in writing, and Greek funerary *stelae* with motherhood scenes provide us with vivid glimpses of these ideals. Although these *stelae* were originally set up to commemorate dead women and carry messages which were particularly valued by them, their ideals were also shared with and understood by other (still alive) members of their communities. This paper studies ancient Greek *stelae* representing women during the classical and Hellenistic periods. It argues that most Greek women wanted primarily to be remembered as having been mothers. As such, they were mostly represented either as having died while giving birth to one, bidding farewell to their children or in familial scenes.

Cuvinte cheie: artă antică greacă, stele funerare, scene materne, femeie antică greacă.

Rezumat: Idealul grecilor antichi despre femei a fost reprezentat în piatră dar și în inscripții sau pe stele funerare, cu scene materne care ne oferă câteva frânturi despre acesta. Cu toate că aceste stele erau inițial puse pentru a comemora femei decedate și pentru a transmite mesaje pe care acestea le prețuiau în mod deosebit, aceste idealuri erau împărtășite și înțelese și de către alți membri (încă în viață) ai comunităților. Această lucrare studiază stelele antice grecești reprezentând femei din perioada clasică și elenistică. Ea susține, în principal, că cele mai multe femei din Grecia doreau să fie comemorate ca mame. Ca atare, ele au fost reprezentate mai ales mai ales ca decedate la naștere, luându-și rămas bun de la copiii lor sau în scene familiale.

At the beginning of her important study of Death, Birth, and Motherhood in Classical Greece, Nancy Demand has raised some questions about ancient Greek funerary reliefs which commemorate women. While one of these questions relates to the actual risk women faced during labor in ancient Greece, another asks: “*Why did families choose to portray scenes of labor on funerary memorials...?*”¹. This question, in addition to some others, provides the starting point of this paper; scenes of labor or childbirth constitute only a part of the topic I am discussing here. Funerary *stelae* also show women with their infants presented to them, or surrounded by children when these were old enough to walk. I shall attempt here to demonstrate that motherhood scenes constitute by far the most dominant scenes on women’s funerary reliefs and that the frequency and variety of these scenes reflect, above all, a public recognition of women’s primary role in the Greek world of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Moreover, the high frequency of these scenes, both in and

* This paper was originally delivered in the *Seventh World Archaeological Congress*, in Jordan 14-18th January, 2013. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Cristian F. Schuster and Professor Valeriu Sîrbu, who chaired my session, for their insightful comments and suggestions.

¹ Demand 1994, IX; where she notes that “*Greek commemorative tradition otherwise avoided references to suffering and illness*”.

outside mainland Greece during these periods, as we shall see, attests to the universality and importance of the ideal of motherhood in the ancient Greek world.

To demonstrate this point, I shall divide the scenes in which women appear into three groups: the first includes women who died during childbirth. The second group shows women accompanied by one or more children while the third includes familial scenes showing, in addition to the woman and her children some other members of her family. Although these groups include women in different stages of their lives, and probably also in different statuses as widowed mothers or mothers survived by their husbands, they all concentrate on a common idea: the deceased woman was either a mother or died on her way to become one. Needless to stress, however, that the divisions between the three groups of *stelae* are not clear cut, particularly since labor scenes often include some close relatives of the deceased. Considering the limited space available for this paper, I shall limit my discussion to some illustrative examples from each group.

Labor Scenes

A considerable group of funerary monuments show women in labor, apparently to emphasize the circumstances leading to the loss of their lives.