

SILENT NARRATIVES: GENDER AND SOCIAL STATUS ON THE ATHENIAN GRAVE STELE OF HEGESO

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ABSTRACT

The Grave Stele of Hegeso, a funerary sculpture from Classical Athens, offers a rare and significant insight into the representation of women and social status in ancient Greek art. Depicting a woman, Hegeso, seated and examining a piece of jewellery handed to her by a servant, this sculpture is one of the few surviving examples of Athenian funerary art that centres on a female subject. Using a qualitative and historical approach, this research will analyse primary sources, including the stele itself and other funerary monuments. In addition to the direct examination of these artefacts, secondary data will play a salient role in contextualising and interpreting their significance. Scholarly analyses, art historical studies, and epigraphic research will provide essential frameworks for understanding how these monuments functioned within broader social and cultural narratives. This study explores how Athenian funerary art reflects gendered expectations—contrasting women's domestic roles with men's public/military identities—through classical artistic conventions like drapery, nudity, posture, and spatial hierarchy. It further examines class distinctions and the contrast between mortal and divine female forms to reveal societal attitudes toward gender and status. The stele's iconography conveys Athenian ideals of female virtue through visual emphasis on domestic roles, familial duty, and class-based markers of status and decorum. This study, hence, investigates how gendered expectations influenced artistic choices, such as the emphasis on the woman's attire, jewellery, and the domestic setting, which contrast with the more martial or civic depictions of men in similar funerary art. This study, thereby, aims to contribute to the broader understanding of gender dynamics and societal values in ancient Athens.

Keywords: Grave Stele, Hegeso, Gender, Classical Greece, Funerary Art

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Introduction



Figure 01: ATHENIAN GRAVE STELE OF HEGESO

Funerary art, which typically consists of items buried alongside a body laid to rest, including personal belongings, tomb decorations, grave goods, paintings and sculptures, has been a long-standing tradition related to funerary rites in many cultures. Among these, Classical Athens attests as a great example. Classical Athens dates back to the 5th–4th century BCE, a period also known as the Golden era of Athens, which saw the intellectual awakening and artistic heightening of Greece, among which art and architecture flourished to a great extent. Under various forms of art, funerary art gained its prominence during the period as well. Its salience lies in the fact that such a form of art gives a significant insight into how the ancient world, the Athenians specifically, commemorated the dead, reflecting on their social identity and the expression of their funerary rites and cultural values.

Such a funerary art that gives insight and the harnessing of knowledge on Athenian funerary rites is that of the Grave Stele of Hegeso, as seen in the above Fig. 01, which is currently located in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. This artefact showcases an image of a detailed depiction of a woman named 'Hegeso' seated while examining a piece of jewellery and accompanied by a young servant girl standing before her. The Grave Stele of Hegeso was discovered in the late 19th century during excavations in the Kerameikos cemetery of Athens and is dated back to 410–400 BCE. This funerary monument reflects the important aspects of gender and class representation in Athens, which

is represented in the form of art. Moreover, this raises important questions about the role and status of women in public memory and private life.

It is important to note here that while most other funerary reliefs and monuments discovered from the period feature men in civic or military contexts, the Grave Stele of Hegeso depicts a woman engaged in an activity accompanied by her servant. This image thereby provides valuable insight into social expectations placed upon Classical Athenian women who took on a role within the 'Oikos', which translates to household. Their roles centred around marriage, producing children and household management. While men actively participated in the socio-political activities of the state, which included civic life, politics, and warfare, women were shaped by their familial duties and their ability to uphold their household honour.

It is hence interesting to note how these expectations were in turn visually articulated in the form of art, notably in funerary monuments such as the Grave Stele of Hegeso. The Grave Stele of Hegeso embodies these ideals through its composition and iconography, which emphasise domesticity, wealth, and lineage. The seated posture of Hegeso, her interaction with a piece of jewellery, and the presence of a servant all serve as visual markers of her role within the Athenian social order.

Literature review

Donna Kurtz and John Boardman's 'Greek Burial Customs' (1971) is one of the first studies done with a focus on Athenian funerary art and thus provided great insight into this research. While Kurtz focuses more on the social and ritual aspects of funerary art, Boardman focuses on the artistic and stylistic representation of it. A salient insight gained by their work is how Grave Stelai did in fact function as status symbols that commemorated the elite in Athenian society. Both Kurtz and Boardman explain the revival of funerary monuments in the late 5th century BCE, which also gives an insight into the time period focused on in this study. They also go on to analyse the domestic and idealised imagery in such monuments and the various themes observed in these funerary reliefs. While they do not discuss the Grave Stele of Hegeso, Kurtz and Boardman do explore how Athenian women were represented in funerary art since they had limited public roles in life. Their monuments often depicted them in private, domestic settings, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Their study also shows the contrasts between women's stelai and men's stelai, where men were often depicted as warriors, athletes, or engaged in public activities, which helped further build this research's discussion on gender and social status depicted in funerary art, with a special focus on that of Hegeso. Thereby, while both Kurtz and Boardman discuss Athenian funerary art in general but do not analyse Hegeso's stele directly, this research builds upon their insights by providing a detailed case study of this specific stele, including its iconography, composition, and historical context.

John H. Oakley's *Picturing Death in Classical Athens: The Evidence of the White Lekythoi* (2004) also provides excellent insight into Athenian funerary art with a special focus on the white lekythoi, which were oil jars used for burial rituals in Ancient Greece. Oakley's work offers detailed analyses of funerary imagery, which includes the representation of women, household items and other funerary rituals. His work also discusses the depiction of women on white lekythoi who are often shown within a private and domestic setting, much like 'Hegeso', which reinforces the traditional gender roles of Ancient Greece that placed women primarily within the oikos. Oakley's analysis of how women's funerary representations contrast with male depictions further helped build the gendered portrayals in this study's Hegeso stele. Moreover, the iconographic parallels between the lekythos and stele show the position of elite women within the social context of the period. Nonetheless, Oakley's work primarily focuses on vase paintings and lekythoi. It does not engage with the archaeological context or the discovery of specific monuments, such as the Hegeso stele, which this research covers in detail as part of its

archaeological history. This helps broaden the research regarding Athenian funerary practices while also ensuring credibility.

Sheila Dillon's *The Female Portrait Statue in the Greek World* (2010) provides a wide-ranging exploration of female portraiture in Greek sculpture, including funerary art, which falls within the study area of this research. She also goes on to examine how female statues were used to convey a range of social, political, and cultural meanings. Dillon's arguments also align with the previous literature as she emphasises that while male statues emphasised civic identity and public achievements, female statues primarily reflected familial roles, modesty, and domestic virtues. This discussion also aligns with the depiction of the Hegeso Stele, which depicts Hegeso in a private setting rather than a public or political context. While Dillon's work provides a great insight into the gender dynamics that are depicted in funerary art, she does not analyse the Grave Stele of Hegeso specifically. Thus, this research adds to Dillon's work by offering an insightful case study that applies Dillon's theories on female representation in ancient Greek art.

Rachel Kousser's *Hellenistic and Roman Ideal Sculpture: The Allure of the Classical* (2018) is yet another substantial piece of work that gives an insight into the depiction of women in Classical Greece's funerary monuments. She goes on to explore how Hellenistic and Roman artists engaged with the Classical Greek ideals in their sculptural works while examining the process by which the Classical aesthetic was idealised and adapted in later periods, particularly the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Kousser's work is hence salient for this research as it highlights how idealised representations of women were maintained and transformed through time. Moreover, she argues that these idealised depictions of women in Classical funerary monuments were not necessarily reflections of real-life female agency, but rather carefully constructed images meant to uphold male-dominated familial legacies. This perspective of Kousser is most important in understanding the Hegeso Stele, as it helped build the theory that this monument served not just as a statement of patriarchal control over women but also as an authentic representation of the female experience in Classical Greece. While her work does give an insight into the gender dynamic of the period, Kousser does not deal sufficiently with the epigraphy of Greek funerary art, which is an essential component of this study. This research provides a more in-depth analysis of the gender dynamic noted in Ancient Athenian funerary art while delving deeply into the existing epigraphic evidence, which includes the inscription on the Hegeso stele.

Elizabeth P. Baughan's *Couched in Death: Klinai and Identity in Anatolia and Beyond* (2023) is a more recent piece of work that discusses funerary art and its symbolised depictions of the elite status and symposium culture of the Ancient world. While her work focuses on Anatolian and Eastern Greek funerary traditions, she provides critical insights into how artistic choices reflected social stratification. She emphasises the fact that funerary art across different regions of the Greek world was used to assert familial prestige, a theme that is also present in Athenian funerary stelae. Her work, however, does not focus on Attic funerary sculpture. Hence, while this study research incorporates her broader argument about funerary monuments as markers of elite identity, it applies it primarily to the Athenian context, showing how the *Hegeso* stele reinforces gender norms while also elevating the social standing of the family through the visual rhetoric of wealth.

Research problem

While there is extensive study done on ancient Greek funerary art and its stylistic and artistic representation, how gender and social status intersect with the representation of women, specifically in the case of the Grave Stele of Hegeso, remains rarely explored. Much of the existing scholarly discussion on ancient Greeks' funerary art is focused on the depiction of men engaged in civic or military activities, which leaves a questionable gap in the understanding of how artistic depiction reinforces the

social expectations of women, which is covered by this study's analysis of the Grave Stele of Hegeso as a case study. A significant concern in doing so was how the artistic choices of the stele, including the depiction of jewelry, clothing, posture, and the presence of a servant—serve to communicate Athenian ideals of womanhood which was examined in bringing to light how these various elements reinforce the broader Athenian social order, where women's identities were primarily defined by their ability to uphold the household's status.

Research question

How does the composition of the Grave Stele of *Hegeso* reflect societal expectations of women in Classical Athens?

Methodology

This research followed a qualitative paradigm by taking into account the archaeological evidence of the Stele of Hegeso itself, the inscriptions that regard the stele and secondary literature that discusses Athenian funerary art.

Under the qualitative paradigm, this research is structured around a combination of historical and iconographic analysis, given the fact that it deals with a monumental piece of history itself. In doing so, this research combined visual analysis of the Stele of Hegeso, comparative analysis with other Stele of Classical Greece and followed an overall contextual interpretation of Ancient Greeks' funerary art.

A detailed visual examination of the *Grave Stele of Hegeso* focused on the composition, posture, attire, gesture, and symbols such as jewellery and the presence of a servant to determine how these elements contribute to the representation of gender and social status. A comparative study of other funerary stelae from Classical Athens, particularly those depicting both male and female figures, helped identify the recurring artistic and thematic trends in gender representation. At the same time, an exploration of historical, social, and literary sources provided insight into Athenian gender norms, class structures, and funerary practices, incorporating references to legal texts, epigraphic evidence, and existing contemporary literature and research conducted on this area of study.

Since this study is based on an artefact rather than a human population, the primary focus is on Classical Athenian funerary sculptures, with the Grave Stele of Hegeso as the central case study. The sample includes the Grave Stele of Hegeso itself, housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, as well as other Athenian funerary stelae from the Classical period (5th–4th century BCE), including the Stele of Dexileos, which depicts a young Athenian warrior on horseback, the Grave Stele of Ampharete, which shows a woman holding an infant and reinforcing maternal ideals, and the Stele of an Athenian Woman, which portrays a domestic scene similar to Hegeso's. The comparative analysis of these artefacts helped provide a broader understanding of how funerary art reinforced gendered social norms. Moreover, this study utilised purposive sampling, selecting artefacts based on their relevance to gender representation in Athenian funerary art. The Grave Stele of Hegeso was chosen due to its detailed depiction of a woman in a domestic setting. At the same time, additional funerary stelae were selected to establish comparisons with male representations. The selection criteria include stelae from the Classical period, artworks that depict gendered roles in funerary contexts, and artefacts that have been extensively studied in existing literature, ensuring that the study captures both standard artistic conventions and unique features that distinguish the Grave Stele of Hegeso.

Results and discussion

Coming to the findings of this study, it is evident that the Grave Stele of Hegeso artistically depicts the gendered social norms and their dynamics in Classical Athens while reinforcing the expectations placed upon women not just in a domestic setting but also in a commemorative context. It is interesting how the seated Hegeso is seen examining a piece of jewellery and handing it to her servant, which also reveals the interaction between elite Athenian women and those of the lower class. While subtle, this imagery reflects social hierarchy within the confines of the Greek household. Not only does the presence of the servant reinforce the elite woman's status, but it also highlights the inequalities prevalent in ancient Athenian society. This demonstrates how lower-status slaves were an integral part of aristocratic households (Boardman & Kurtz, 1971).

Alongside the archaeological evidence of the stele itself, the inscription on the monument (IG II² 6753) provides further insight into its commemorative function. The inscription reads, "Hegeso, daughter of Proxenos," identifying her primarily in relation to her father, rather than through any personal identity. This reflects the legal and social reality in which women in ancient Greece were under the guardianship (kyrios) of their closest male relative and were identified as dependent members of the oikos (Kousser, 2018). Although women were responsible for managing the household, their public identity was fundamentally relational.



Figure 02: STELE OF DEXILEOS

Moreover, the Stele of Dexileos (IG II² 6217), as noted in Fig.02, dated to 394 BCE, further reinforces the stark contrast between male and female representations in Athenian funerary sculpture. The inscription in relation to the said stele states:

"Dexileos, son of Lysanias, of Thorikos, born in the archonship of Teisandros, fell in Corinth, in the archonship of Euboulides."

As evident by the above lines, not only does IG II² 6217 record the lineage of Dexileos, but it also denotes his participation in the Corinthian war, which emphasised his civic and military engagements. The stele itself depicts a young Athenian cavalryman on horseback, which shows a stark contrast with the more domesticated setting of the stele of Hegeso (Oakley, 2004). While men were often commemorated through active, martial, or civic roles—highlighting their contributions to the polis—women, as seen in Hegeso's stele, were consistently portrayed in a domestic setting, seen to be engaged in activities that emphasise beauty, refinement, and familial connections. This contrast, painted in artistic representation, reflects the broader Athenian attitude towards the role of men and women in society. Women's social value was primarily derived from their familial affiliations rather than individual achievements. This interpretation is supported by Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which details the expected duties of women within the household, and Aristotle's *Politics*, which categorises women as subordinate to men within the hierarchical structure of the city-state (Xenophon, trans. 1994; Aristotle, trans. 1995).

In *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon presents a dialogue between Socrates and Ischomachus, an Athenian gentleman, on the ideal roles of men and women in managing the household. Evidently, Ischomachus describes how he educated his wife on her duties:

"The gods, in their wisdom, have fitted the nature of woman for indoor work and man for outdoor work. The woman, by nature, has been given the task of rearing children and managing the household, while the man is responsible for earning a living and defending the home."

(*Oeconomicus* 7.22)

"So, it was necessary for one of the two to take care of work outside the home, and the other to be in charge indoors. Since the gods made the woman's body less able to endure cold and heat and travel, and assigned to her the nurture of newborn infants, they clearly designed her for indoor work."

(*Oeconomicus* 7.23–24)

These lines emphasise the expectation of a woman to be tied to the private sphere, rather than engaging in public life. Their identity and social value were closely tied to their roles within the household, with their primary duties centred around child-rearing, overseeing domestic labour, and preserving family wealth (Baughan, 2023). By stating that women were naturally suited for indoor responsibilities due to their physical and biological attributes, Xenophon both justifies and naturalises the gendered division that existed in labour (Xenophon, trans. 1994).

Aristotle, in his *Politics*, also explicitly ranks women below men in the natural hierarchy of society, as is evident in the quotations referenced below.

"The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; the one rules, and the other is ruled. This principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind."

(*Politics* 1.12, 1254b)

He also states that women, much like children and enslaved people, lack the full rational capacity necessary for leadership.

"For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority."

(Politics 1.13, 1260a)

As evident by the above quotations, Aristotle seems to be reinforcing the idea that while women were capable of thought, they were inherently subordinate to men and unfit for political or public roles (Aristotle, trans. 1995). Their exclusion from political participation, property ownership (except in rare cases), and legal independence reflects an entrenched hierarchy, where women's primary function was to serve the interests of the household and ensure the continuation of the *oikos* under male oversight.

As with many Athenian funerary monuments, the Grave Stele of Hegeso serves not only as a commemoration of the deceased but also as a visual assertion of social status and familial prestige. The emphasis on jewellery in the Grave Stele of Hegeso is exciting as it serves as a visual marker of wealth, femininity, and status (Dillon, 2010). The fact that the jewellery itself is missing—having been painted onto the relief rather than carved—suggests an added level of ephemerality, reinforcing the idea that material wealth, while indicative of status, remains transient in the face of death. The stele, therefore, does not merely commemorate Hegeso as an individual but serves as a broader statement on the wealth and prestige of her family.

The Grave Stele of Hegeso provides a rich insight into Athenian funerary practices of Classical Greece, telling us about art, social status, and gender. Despite the patriarchal nature of Athenian society, aristocratic women from the elite were sometimes represented in funerary monuments like this one, which helps to reveal their role in maintaining family honour, continuing the line, and representing domesticity, virtue and respectability. The portrayal of Hegeso in the stele can be seen as a visual testament to her high status in this framework (Kousser, 2018).

Along with the realistic representation of the stele, the architectural details of the stele, including its columnar shape and the positioning of a pediment, confer an air of timelessness and magnificence to the monument. These were designed to radiate the monumental aspects of temples and civic monuments, once more implying that the memory of the dead, as well as the monument, would withstand the test of time. The stoic beauty of Hegeso, frozen in stone, illustrates the Classical Greek ideal of plain beauty, in which self-control of feeling and noble bearing were virtues, especially among women of aristocratic birth.

Furthermore, the Grave Stele of Hegeso reflects the general cultural standards of Classical Athens. In a society where upper-class women were generally deemed outside the political realm, the funeral monument gave room for their histories to be recalled. The stele thus serves not just as a social and artistic declaration but as a powerful expression of gender relations in Ancient Greece, where women, even though excluded from the public sphere, were immortalised by the material culture of the family, claiming their roles as the symbolic custodians of private, domestic virtue (Oakley, 2004). Through the skilful balancing of art and iconography, the Grave Stele of Hegeso is transformed into a rich document of Athenian cultural and gender mores, providing insight of inestimable value into the lives and legacies of high-born women in this ancient society.

The Stele of Hegeso thereby provides insight into how Athenian women were remembered in a patriarchal society that was inclined to keep them out of the civic sphere. Women's memorials, unlike male funerary monuments that were inclined to honour individual achievements, highlighted women's roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, confirming their primary role within the *oikos* and not the *polis*. This study thus adds to existing discourse on the gender dynamics of ancient Greek art, confirming the view that while women were an integral part of Athenian society, their presence in visual culture was

carefully constructed to be consistent with prevailing social ideologies. While visual language in Athenian funerary art was strongly gendered, women were always set within the domestic setting and their social identity was set in relation to family and wealth rather than by personal accomplishment.

Conclusion and recommendations

Concludingly, the findings of this research emphasise the salient role Athenian funerary art takes on in depicting gender dynamics and social hierarchies in antiquity, which the Grave Stele of Hegeso exemplifies. While the stele was used as a private commemoration of an individual as part of his or her funerary rites, it functions as a public assertion of familial prestige, aligning with broader trends in Classical Athenian elite culture.

The depiction of Hegeso on the stele engaged with a piece of jewellery can be seen as both a personal adornment holding economic value, which symbolises her wealth and status. Moreover, it highlights the broader role placed upon Greek, specifically Athenian women, whose identity was largely defined by their relationship to material possessions, family lineage, and domestic roles. Additionally, the depiction of the servant accompanying Hegeso also reinforces the social status depicted in funerary art, showing both gender and class distinctions. Moreover, the fact that jewellery depicted on the stele was painted initially rather than sculpted reveals important attitudes toward material wealth and its impermanence. The use of paint to render jewellery—rather than carving it in relief—suggests an intentional visual strategy emphasising the fleeting nature of status symbols in funerary contexts. As Hurwit (1999) documents, traces of pigment have been found on numerous Athenian funerary stelae, particularly highlighting garments and accessories, which implies that colour functioned to visually enrich these features without permanently elevating their physical presence. This practice subtly communicates that while wealth and social rank were integral to identity in life, they ultimately lose their physical and symbolic permanence in death. Such interpretations, supported by archaeological and art-historical scholarship, deepen our understanding of how Athenian commemorative art negotiates the tension between social prestige and mortality.

Apart from its iconography, the Grave Stele of Hegeso also brings to light the artistic conventions of Classical Greece during which the concept of idealism was embraced. Even femininity was represented in a highly idealistic form sculpted in the image of the goddess Aphrodite, who was the goddess of beauty and love herself, which conveys the social values of the time. Many depictions of women, which were primarily those of Aphrodite, included gestures of modesty, which included the coverage of private body parts known as the Venus Pudica pose. This denotes that women were expected to be modest and chaste alongside their heavy duty to familial obligations within the *oikos*.

These familial obligations that were expected for women are also depicted in funerary art, as analysed in the above discussion. Unlike the funerary stelae denoting men engaged in either civic or martial activities, as noted in Hegeso's Stele, women were painted to be centred within the domestic sphere, which was the only area deemed appropriate for Athenian women, especially those who hailed from the elite and noble class.

This supports the already existing study outlined in contemporary literary sources, such as those in the works of Xenophon and Aristotle, as referred to in the discussion above. These works portray women as passive figures whose only expected role was to manage the *oikos* and ensure its stability. Thereby, the interrelation between art and social ideology is brought to light. The visual elements of the stele align tightly with the social doctrines that were pursued to maintain a strictly structured society. Thereby, the craftsmanship of the stele highlights that funerary markers as such were not mere artistic

pieces but also driving components of the social competition among the elite families of ancient Greece. Such stelae displayed their wealth and prosperity and reinforced their status within the Athenian polis.

Having analysed all of the above elements regarding Athenian funerary art with a special focus on that of the Stele of Hegeso, this research recommends future study to use a comparative approach in examining similar funerary monuments across different city-states of Greece. This will help determine whether the themes and ideology behind funerary stelae, including that of the Grave Stele of Hegeso, were indeed unique to Athens itself or part of a broader Greek funerary tradition. This would add to the existing study by providing a more inclusive context on how gender and status were visually depicted across different city-states of Greece during various times. Moreover, further archaeological analysis of surviving funerary stelae could help build a more effective understanding of how painted pieces of artwork, such as the missing jewellery, could contribute to the overall meaning of these monuments of antiquity. This would allow researchers to reconstruct whether and if so how colour and materiality played a role in highlighting a family's wealth and status, alongside femininity, including the social status of such women. Finally, this study would also like to emphasise the need to broaden the scope of inquiry beyond elite women and extend research on the visual representation of non-elite women, including metics and slaves, as much of the existing study on the gender dynamics of art is focused on elite women. This will help build a more inclusive perspective on the gender dynamic and social structures of ancient Greece. On a concluding note, it must be stated that this study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on gender in antiquity while emphasising the importance of funerary art, such as that of the Grave Stele of Hegeso, as a key medium through which social values, status and identity were visually brought to life.

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