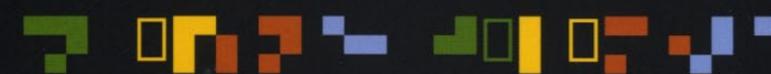




MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE
CURATOR · MARIANNA DÁGI
OPEN · 08. 12. 2009 – 28. 02. 2010
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PRINTING · MESTER NYOMDA



HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2009 SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS – COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

HELLENISTIC GRAVE RELIEF FROM RHENEIA

On the occasion of the centennial of the Classical Collection in 2008, the Ministry of Culture and Education presented an ancient grave stele to the Museum; the stele was bought on the art market, but had belonged to an English private collection for a long time preceding. There it was fixed to a wall with four iron bars, which have left traces of rust on the upper and lower edges; in addition to these post-antique traces, two kinds of modern paint from the adjacent wall, as well as remains of plaster to close an opening in a natural marble vein, testify to the long-term exhibit of the relief in that collection before it was acquired by the museum.

The relief, made of a greyish-blue Parian marble of medium-size grain, measures 94 cm high, including the tenon beneath to fix it in an ancient base. The layers of the marble run vertically and parallel to the front and back surfaces, a rather unusual practice (the norm was to have the veins running horizontally to the carved area) because it allowed rain water to penetrate the layers of stone, causing some vertical cracks.

The back side of the stele is roughly cut with a pointed chisel and partly covered with thick and very hard sinter; it must have fallen over onto its face and lain in the earth for a long time.

The whole stele takes the architectural form of a temple, consisting of a pediment and an arch supported on two pilasters. This architecture frames the figural image of the relief as well as the inscription below it.

In the relief we see on the left a small, broad boat with high sides and a high prow; the absence of a ram suggests that it is a trading vessel. The sea is indicated by a line with waves. Two figures appear in the boat: a small figure — his face is broken off but his head is still visible — looks over the railing and holds a sword in his raised right arm; the other figure stands on deck and thus his whole figure is nearly visible. He lunges forward on his left leg; he holds a sword in his lowered right hand, and his left is raised, holding a shield, to protect his body. This standing man wears a girt, sleeved chiton, and it is noteworthy that he fights with his right arm freed from his tunic to allow maximum freedom of movement, and thus his right sleeve hangs down in front of his body in a loose, large, v-shaped mass. This also leaves his upper body partly uncovered, and this nudity might be intended to characterize the warrior as ›heroic‹.



On the right side of the relief, another man sits on a high rock, which appears to be conceived as behind the boat's prow. The man wears a cuirass, and thus is a soldier. His left arm rests lightly on his raised right knee; his right arm is bent, he rests his head on his right fist, a typical gesture of mourning known from many grave monuments and other depictions. An inscription is incised below the relief:

Αὐλε Γράνιε Ἀντίοχε καὶ Πτολεμαί(ε) Λαοδικεὺ χρηστοὶ χαίρετε.

The iconography of the image appears on other grave reliefs like this, but in those instances, one sees either the seated man or the warrior in the boat, not the two motifs together; this relief offers the only known example of this combination. This juxtaposition raises the question of whether we should interpret this image as two separate, unrelated scenes meant to honor two men, or as one scene of a ›continuous narrative‹, depicting the manner in which the deceased met his end (maybe in a sea battle) and the commemoration of the same person, now dead, depicted on our right.

In principle both interpretations are possible. But this relief supplies a clue in the inscription as to the intention of the patron who most probably was a relative of the deceased. The epitaph names two men: one name is written on the left half, below the ship, the other appears below the cuirassed figure seated on the rock. The left is named Aulos Granios Antiochos, a name that indicates a Greek with Roman citizenship, while the right is Ptolemaios from the town of Laodikeia. Approximately eight towns of this name are known, the most important of which is in modern Syria, so it is likely that Ptolemaios is from the Levant. The name ›Ptolemaios‹ is derived from the kings of Hellenistic Egypt and suggests that this Ptolemaios of Laodikeia was named for the Ptolemaic kings. He traveled to Greece from far away, as at least 14 others from that town known from grave inscriptions of such funerary monuments. Ptolemaios might have been a slave of Aulos Granios or at least had some relationship to him. The third line of the inscription contains a formulaic greeting to both of them. The content and position of the inscriptions, which seems to refer to the two figures in the relief above, suggest that two individuals, not one, are intended in this relief. According to this reasoning, we might conclude that the one or both died while defending this trading vessel against an enemy, such as a pirate attack.

On the other hand, comparisons with other grave reliefs of this kind leave open the possibility that the depiction heroizes a single warrior, who served on a ship: he is depicted once in heroic action and again as the deceased soldier in mourning about his fate. The heads of both men have the same overall form, the hairstyle with short hair is similar, and both are beardless. But of course, the size of the depiction, the damage to details, and the general character of the faces do not allow a definite answer to the question if there are two portraits or only one.

The relief is typical of a large group of such funerary monuments, consisting of more than 500 stelai, found on the small island of Rheneia which served primarily as a cemetery, located near Delos in the center of the Aegean Sea, close to Mykonos. In antiquity, Delos was an extraordinary and important island: according to Greek myth, the goddess Leto gave birth to the twin gods Apollo and Artemis on Delos, so the island was one of the most important religious places for Apollo, Artemis, and Leto in ancient Greece, second only to Delphi. Archaeology indicates that sanctuaries existed on the island already in the Neolithic period.

In Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic times the Delian sanctuary was enlarged and received many impressive marble temples; buildings, such as stoas, a stadium, and harbour installations; and an imposing number of high-quality votive monuments. In the Hellenistic period, huge and lavishly decorated villas were built; these dwellings belonged to rich merchants and societies of traders (guilds) who used the island as base in the Mediterranean. Delos became the center of trade in this region, especially for the thriving market of slaves; ancient literary sources indicate that up to 10.000 people were sold daily. In 166 B.C., Rome, the newly established ruler of the Mediterranean, freed Delos from paying taxes, which fostered an economic boom that brought thousands of inhabitants to Delos from all over the ancient world. But since the island was still devoted to the gods, a sanctuary, it was not allowed to bury the dead on Delos, and the neighbouring island of Rheneia served as the necropolis of Delos. Grave stelai were found on Rheneia both before formal excavations and during them, and they were transported to collections in Greece and abroad. In the case of the Budapest relief, we can be certain that the stele was found on Rheneia, not only because of the type of the funerary monument, the type of marble, and the style, but also because of the one man named in the inscription: two other inscriptions found on Delos give the name of two different men named Aulos Granios, both donors of votive offerings, both living around 100 B.C. The relief's style, as well as the lettering of its inscription, indicate that the new stele in the Szépművészeti Múzeum should be dated to the same period, around 100 B.C., and it is possible that one of the two donors on Delos known as Aulos Granios is commemorated by this relief.

HANS RUPPRECHT GOETTE — ÁRPÁD MIKLÓS NAGY

