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Companions in Death: Animal Imagery on Ancient Greek Funerary Stelae

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Abstract

The stelae that lined the necropoleis of Classical and Hellenistic Greece were abundant with portraits and figures framing the resting places of the deceased. This imagery, however, was not exclusively human, but included limited animal types. The presence of these animals alongside humans raises an interesting question: what do these animal companions represent and what made them significant enough to be featured on funerary stelae? The presence of domestic animals, mainly birds and dogs, speaks to a larger connection between humans and animals, not only in life but also in death. Yet it is not always clear whether these animals are meant to be viewed literally or symbolically. Focusing on these connections through material evidence, this thesis seeks out patterns within the extant stelae and considers standard and unconventional compositions and relationships between animals and children, on whose gravestones animals appear most frequently. This paper argues that the appearance of domestic animals on these stelae connects the viewer more intimately to the imagery as these stelae attempt to capture a shared adoration of pets and invoke empathy within the viewer. Through careful analysis of material culture and scholarly discourse on the subject, this thesis presents the complications of inscribing definitive meanings to motifs within ancient artwork while

highlighting many of the suggested interpretations of these stelae and their significance. With the elements of grief surrounding children and pets—society's most fragile and precious members—these stelae allow a glimpse into the humanity of the ancient Greeks, as well as the inherent difficulties that emerge from viewing these intimate sculptures from such a large cultural distance.

Introduction

Commemoration of the dead in the ancient Greek world often focused on figural representations of the deceased. As such, the stelae of the necropoleis of Classical (510–323 BCE) and Hellenistic (323–30 BCE) Greece were abundant with portraits and figures framing the resting places of the deceased. These figures, however, were not exclusively human. While the large majority of funerary stelae centered around images of the dead, many included portrayals of animals. The motivation behind the appearances of these animals remains highly debated. Many theories have been suggested to explain these animals, ranging from representing the pets of the deceased, acting as guardians of the dead, representing the soul of the deceased, acting as a symbol of the divine, to representing the role of the deceased held within life. It is notable that animals are seen most frequently on the graves of children. Additionally, there is a clear preference towards certain types of animals on these funerary monuments. Dogs, for example, are rather common, and are possibly linked to the inherently domestic life children led, in addition to possibly representing beloved pets.[1] The innocence of domesticity is associated with children due to their inexperience in life and trusting nature, while animals are similarly innocent in their lack of awareness of the nuances of humanity, thus both were 'innocent' to the larger complexities of life. Innocence remains an important component in modern understanding of childhood, and is thought of as something to be treasured and protected, yet it was likely not viewed through the same lens in the ancient world. The animals most abundant in stele decoration are birds. Birds may also fit into the explanation of representing pets of the deceased, as domestic fowl were common. Alternatively, there is precedent from within ancient Greece of birds representing the soul.[2]

This paper seeks to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the presence of animals on ancient Greek funerary stelae. Because animals most commonly appeared on the graves of children, this research is intimately intertwined with the large child mortality rate

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[1] Francis Lazenby, "Greek and Roman Household Pets," *The Classical Journal* 44, no. 5 (1949): 299–307, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3292469. Lists the variety of animals that were kept in Ancient Greek households, including dogs, rabbits and birds.

[2] Tina Ross, "Winged Representations of the Soul in Ancient Greek Art from the Late Bronze Age through the Classical Period" (master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2006).

of antiquity and its culture of commemoration. Consequently, this paper also focuses on how parents coped with these losses and presented the deceased young.[3] Focusing on these connections through material evidence, this thesis elucidates patterns within the extant stelae and considers standard and unconventional compositions and relationships between animals and humans. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the multiple theories and symbols associated with these stelae, as well as the multiple ways these animals are represented in artwork in relation to the deceased, to try to create a more complete picture of what the presence of animals on grave stelae meant. Yet to focus exclusively on the graves of children containing animals would leave a large amount of the stelae unaddressed—namely the stelae of young adults that also contain animal companions. Both the stelae of children and adults are necessary in order to fully comprehend why these animals appeared on funerary stelae, and so, this thesis will also analyze stelae of adults that contain animals.

The artworks cited within this paper are mostly a selection of stelae that are both available to view online and contain animals, and are thus limited by how museums choose to publish their artworks. While most of the works researched in this paper are likely sourced from Athens, there is also an array of stelae from the islands pulled in order to show that the motifs were utilized across Greece as a wider culture, and were not exclusive to the mainland. The main museums whose collections are cited within this paper are the National Archeological Museum of Greece, the Metropolitan Museum, the Getty Museum and the British Museum. While the National Archeological Museum of Greece does not have a comprehensive collection of its artworks accessible online, the vast importance of their works for this topic dictated that they be included regardless. However, there are likely artworks within the National Archaeological Museum of Greece's collection that, while relevant, are inaccessible and are thus excluded from this paper.

In many ways, it is through analysis of how people throughout history have grieved and subsequently, how this grief is seen in the design of funerary stelae, that we gain a stronger understanding and empathy for the deceased children and their families. This intention of invoking feelings of grief within the viewer becomes so very apparent when looking at the smiling, innocent faces adorning the graves of children. Furthermore, the element of domestic animals on these gravestones connects the viewer more intimately to the scene through the commonality of humanity's adoration of their pets and the empathy that it evokes within us. With the elements of grief surrounding children and pets—society's most fragile and precious members—these graves allow a glimpse into the humanity of the ancient Greeks.

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[3] Katia Margariti, "The Sombre Smile of Melisto: Grave-Reliefs of Prepubescent Girls in Classical Athens," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 31 (2018): 27-28.

Burial customs in ancient Greece

The ancient Greeks held a strong belief in the importance of respecting the bodies of the deceased, as proper funerary rites were thought of as vital for the deceased to be able to enter the afterlife.[4] There were multiple ways to conduct proper funerary rites, and while burial was common, cremation remained an alternative option throughout all periods of ancient Greece.[5] The cultural importance of these monuments also puts more focus on the artwork depicted on them. These decisions weren't made on a whim, and as such, the meaning and symbolism of the artwork on them was significant to the commissioners. That is not to say every aspect of these stones was made custom, as stones were likely purchased with the composition of the scene already carved. Archeologist Katia Margariti describes the purchasing of pre-carved funerary reliefs and how images were customized to the deceased after the purchase of the stone:

> For the most part, the Classical-period Attic grave reliefs were purchased ready-made by the family of the deceased upon visiting a sculptor's work-shop. The iconography follows a standard repertoire of themes. After the family chose a relief to mark the tomb of their loved one, one or more inscriptions, and sometimes an epigram, were added. The personalization of inscriptions and epigrams transformed a funerary relief into the *sema* of a specific person.[6]

The fact that these stones were bought pre-carved speaks further to the importance of motifs as trends, as sculptors would attempt to keep a backstock of commonly appealing compositions. This implies the imagery of these stelae was generally less personalized, with only specific elements of the stones, such as the face, being customized to embody the *sema*—or mark—of the deceased.

While it is currently debated if commoners could afford funerary monuments, the more elaborate stelae analyzed in this paper almost certainly came from wealthy families.[7] Additionally, the original setting of these monuments cannot be stated for certain due to large-scale looting of Greek artwork, but likely came from larger burial sites. Ancient Greek funeral grounds were largely varied, but most were organized to keep family graves together. There are however exceptions to this in specialized graveyards, which contained

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[4] See *infra* 15.

[5] Frank Pierrepont Graves, *The Burial Customs of the Ancient Greeks: Exploring Ancient Greek Funeral Rites and Religious Beliefs* (Good Press, 2019).

[6] Katia Margariti, "Lament and Death Instead of Marriage: The Iconography of Deceased Maidens on Attic Grave Reliefs of the Classical Period," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 87, no. 1 (2018): 93-94.

[7] Graham Oliver, "Athenian Funerary Monuments: Style, Grandeur, and Cost," in *The Epigraphy of Death: Studies in the History and Society of Greece and Rome*, ed. G. J. Oliver (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 59-80.

only specific groups such as soldiers, or in some cases after the Peloponnesian War, children.[8]

Funerary stelae changed throughout ancient Greece, with the Archaic and Classical periods showing more of a focus on family, while later periods tend to focus more on individuals. If a grave stele was to represent only the deceased individual, it is typically a male figure, as female graves tend to emphasize the deceased's role in their family. Both trends, while common, are far from absolute. While family remains a crucial part of our perception of women and children's graves, many focus on only the deceased individual. In these more individualistic stones, the presence of animals may allude to the home and family being left behind by the deceased, in lieu of their families being represented alongside them.

This more familial-based iconography is seen in the Grave Stele of Archestrate from 370 BCE (Fig. 1). This stone, dedicated to Archestrate, a young mother, contains three figures: the deceased, a young woman, and the deceased's young daughter. Archestrate sits to the right of the stone on a chair, facing left. Leaning on her legs, Archestrate's young daughter eagerly holds out a bird to her mother, yet her mother does not meet her eye. Instead Archestrate looks to the young woman, possibly a servant, who stands to the left, holding a jewelry box out to Archestrate, which she reaches into. While Archestrate's daughter is smaller to represent her age, the servant is sized down in hierarchical scale, visually representing the deceased as the most important figure in the scene. All three figures wear their hair in braided crowns around their heads. This domestic scene between mother, servant, and daughter further sets the motif of animals within the context of the home.

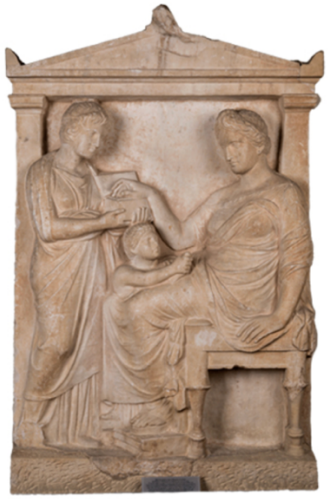

Figure 1. *Grave Stele of Archestrate* (370 BCE), National Archeological Museum, Greece.

[8] Sanne Houby-Nielsen, "Child burials in ancient Athens," *Children and Material Culture*, ed. Joanna S. Derevenski (Routledge, 2000), 155.

Stelae often fall into artistic motifs due to the production process of the stones, where they were bought with the body of the artwork already carved. It is important, then, to see what these motifs are and how they were widely appealing to mourners. Most commonly, birds are portrayed held in one hand by the representation of the deceased. Another version shows the bird being exchanged, often between the child and an adult, in a gesture that is reminiscent of the handshake motif, a common portrayal of unity in families, even after death. There is also a common motif seen where the deceased holds a bird out to a dog, allowing the canine to sniff the smaller animal. Dogs are most commonly seen standing on their hind legs, seemingly begging the deceased for something, portraying a high level of subordinance. Interestingly, the birds on these stelae are almost always held without movement, staying completely still in the grasp of the deceased person, which could either represent calmness and trust or suggest the bird is also dead and being grieved.

Attitudes towards the death of children

Child mortality rates were high in ancient times, and accordingly, it is easy to make the assumption that mourning a child was uncommon. Sadly, there is a classical precedent that fueled the idea of uncaring parents. An example of this is found in Cicero's *Tusculan,* a widely respected author of the ancient period, who cites a supposedly popular opinion of the time: “If he dies in the cradle, one doesn't even pay attention.”[9] Still, it is important to acknowledge the flaws in this context. Cicero spoke primarily to the upper class of ancient Rome, not the everyday person in ancient Greece, and thus this concept of childhood cannot be considered universal. This does, however, speak to the idea of child mortality causing high apathy towards the death of infants within the ancient world.

Another element fueling the idea of this lack of care for deceased children and the overall dismissal of parents' love for their children is the concept of infanticide. Classicist Mark Golden suggests infanticide itself was likely committed in an act of desperation for funds and concern for the already living family, not unlike modern-day abortions.[10] In these cases, infanticide does not dismiss the care families felt towards their children, especially the children whom they did decide to raise.[11] The most common form of infanticide was to abandon the child in the woods, allowing nature to kill them, which is also called exposure,

[9] Cicero, *Tusculan*, book 1, line 93.

[10] Mark Golden, “Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?” *Greece & Rome* 35, no. 2 (1988):157-158.

[11] Golden, “Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?” 158.

rather than to directly kill them.[12] In some way, this could be seen as a way to alleviate the guilt felt by parents through not killing the child directly. Still, the ritual of leaving unwanted children in the woods to die is, rightfully, extremely upsetting to modern viewers and our moral standards.

Modern perceptions of childhood have their origin in Protestant focus on the value of innocence and youth as a virtue, rather than seeing children as young adults.[13] Ancient Greek religion did not share this central virtue of innocence, and instead focused on the importance of fulfilling one's societal roles.[14] Because of this, children's lives would focus on preparing themselves for their roles as adults, rather than living in a unique social niche as children. This difference in values makes it safe to assume the ancient Greeks had an entirely different perception of what it meant to be a child. In looking towards Greek historical perceptions of childhood, there seems to be a similar focus on the importance of youth in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War in Classical and Hellenistic Greece.[15] Still, this turn towards viewing children as valuable focused primarily on children as the next generation of adults, not children as inherently valuable in their current life stage.

The presence of funerary monuments proves that these ancient children were mourned in some aspect, and made an impact on their loved ones. However, considering how practically children were viewed in this period, it comes into question if this mourning was for the children themselves or the lost potential they represent. Golden speaks to how practicality and sentiment often overlap, and that, while parental care may start purely out of the practicality of having heirs, sentimental love for these children almost certainly follows.[16]

It is both irresponsible and impossible to claim ancient Greeks all shared the same relationships with their children, as a large variety of parental relationships can be seen within Greek epics and literature, which likely reflects even more variation in reality. Euripides' *Heracles* speaks directly to the love parents feel for their children; "[a]ll people are in this respect the same—they love their children, whether they are better off or paupers. Money creates differences among them—some have it, some do not. But every

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[12] Golden, "Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?" 157.

[13] Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, (Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1985).

[14] For more information on Greek social roles, see Joseph M. Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics* (State University of New York Press, 1996).

[15] Vicky Vlachou, "Children and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece," in *Children in Antiquity: Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean,* ed. Lesley A. Beaumont, Matthew Dillon, and Nicola Harrington (Routledge, 2021), 473.

[16] Golden, "Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?" 153-154.

human being loves his children." Through this quote, Euripides expresses the universality of parental love.[17]

Looking at the material evidence, however, proof is in abundance that the importance of children was especially emphasized during the Classical and Hellenistic periods. This trend led to specific funerary markers and stelae, but that is not to say there is no evidence of intentional and loving burials of children before this. This is seen most prominently in the pot graves of the Archaic period, where young children were buried inside of *enchytrismoi*—ceramic vessels containing inhumated remains.[18] While these graves are often regarded as less significant than the cremation burials of adults in the same period, children were buried in the same cemeteries and given similar grave goods as adults through child-sized vessels that are often regarded as toys.[19] While the large majority of pot burials contain children's remains, it wasn't completely exclusive to them. These pot burials show the first steps towards memorializing the deaths of children, something that is mostly unseen in earlier periods.[20] If nothing else, this shows a rising importance of children and their mortality within Greek society which likely evolved into the funerary markers of the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

Another element of grief found in these graves, specifically those from Athens, is seen in the burial of a small chous, a ritual vessel that the child would take their first drink of wine from in their third year of life. This ritual was performed at the Athenian springtime festival of Anthesteria, dedicated to Dionysus, and gained greater importance as a maturity ritual after the Peloponnesian War.[21] The chous vessel was used throughout the festival of Anthesteria, not just for this ritual, and thus not all choes show scenes of childhood; many instead focus on the festivities of the wine god and theatrics (Fig. 2). Other than the difference in imagery, we see the vessels that were used for this ritual are far smaller, intentionally sized down for the children.

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[17] Euripides, *Heracles*, trans. Ian Johnson (2022), lines 634-6, https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/euripides/herakles.html

[18] Vlachou, "Children and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece," 482.

[19] Olga Kaklamani, "Pot Burials in Ancient Thera: The Presence of Infants in the Cemeteries of the Ancient City from 8th to 6th Century BC," in *Mortuary Variability and Social Diversity in Ancient Greece: Studies on ancient Greek death and burial*, ed. Nikolas Dimakis and Tamara M. Dijkstra (Archaeopress Archaeology, 2020): 88-89.

[20] Vlachou, "Children and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece," 474-475.

[21] Greta L. Ham, "The Choes and Anthesteria Reconsidered: Male Maturation Rites and the Peloponnesian Wars," *Bucknell Review* 43, no. 1 (1999): 201. https://login.proxy177.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/choes-anthesteria-reconsidered-male-maturation/docview/201689274/se-2.

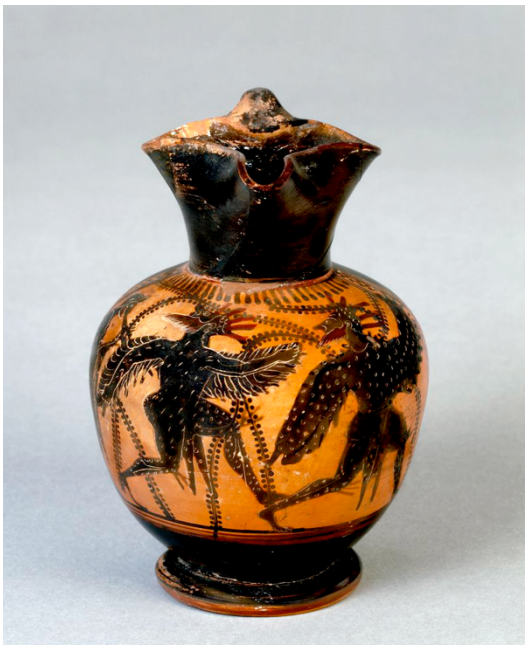

Figure 2. *Black-figured chous (wine-jug) showing men dancing in bird costume*. 510-490 BCE. 16 cm x 10.50 cm x 12.30 cm (6.2 in x 4.1 in x 4.8 in), pottery, The British Museum, England. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1842-0728-787.

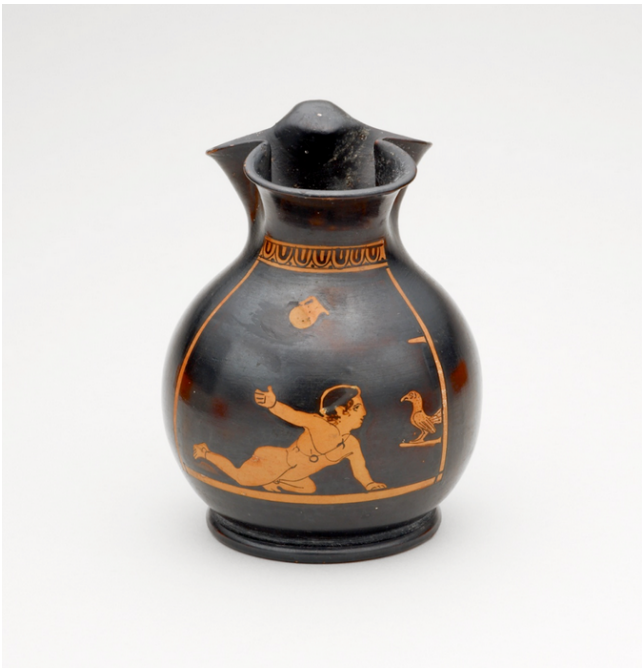

Figure 3. *Red figure chous (wine-jug) showing a young boy crawling towards a bird*. 430-410 BCE. 9.2 × 6.8 × 6.8 cm (3.6 in × 2.7 in × 2.7 in), terracotta, Art Institute of Chicago. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/87658/chous-toy-pitcher.

The smaller choes often display scenes of childhood, many of which interestingly also include dogs, birds, and similar motifs to those found on stelae. One vessel shows a young boy crawling towards a perched bird (Fig. 3), the stance of the child speaks to his youth, still crawling as his main form of transportation. Above the crawling child, a representation of a chous falls towards him, which may signify the abrupt end of childhood that the ceremony represents. This chous defies the standards of earlier artwork and shows a child doing childish things, rather than acting like a small adult.

While scholar Greta Ham speaks to the importance of this ritual for male children, there is evidence the ritual wasn't exclusive to them, as another vessel shows a young girl playing with a dog (Fig. 4).[22] The playfulness and youth that lead the scene of this chous acknowledges the fun-loving nature of children, as the young girl represented cheerfully dances with a small domestic dog. There is also evidence that burials of young children who had not yet undergone this ritual were buried with these decorated pots, perhaps so they could undergo this ritual in death.

Figure 4. *Red figure chous (wine-jug) showing a young girl playing with a dog*. 425-375 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 1322. BA 4188.

The burial sites of children in ancient Greece were almost always treated with special care. Even in the circumstances of mass burials, children were rarely cremated.[23] Furthermore, these burials were often emphasized in order to push the importance and value of surviving children, as seen in the child-only cemeteries found near the city gates of

[22] Ham, “The Choes and Anthesteria Reconsidered: Male Maturation Rites and the Peloponnesian Wars."
[23] Vlachou, “Children and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece,” 476.

Athens.[24] Most of the funerary imagery surrounding children's burials speaks to the lost innocence and potential of the deceased, often including toys and animals being played with. These elements of children's funerary imagery are often incorporated into the gravestones containing animals, with different motifs amplifying the message of childish innocence.

Animals and gender

Animals are present on the stelae of multiple age groups—with meaning shifting alongside who is paired with the animals—although they are most common on the stelae of children. This creates more nuance in what they could have symbolized, as it is less likely a young adult would be represented with pets to show their youth in a domestic scene. The presence of these animals on children's and young women's stelae is often connected to the domestic sphere and is thought to reflect their innocence in showing the deceased's connection to the household and youth. The same animals on men's graves are seen as hunting dogs and prey, a far more utilitarian view. This more literal interpretation made from the far fewer male graves is often projected onto those of children and young women, with the animals being seen exclusively as more practical elements of these people's lives that the commissioner chose to include, often ignoring alternative and more symbolic explanations.

The perception of domesticity within the grave stelae of women and children comes from the art itself, which intentionally builds on the pre-established gender roles of the period by showing men at work in contrast to women and children at home.[25] This is especially clear in the way representations of dogs vary, with the ones on the large majority of children's graves being small, long-haired, domestic breeds, as pictured in the grave stele of Melisto.[26] These household dogs are in contrast to the large, sleek-coated hunting dogs present on men's graves.

Pets in ancient Greece

According to faunal archeologist Micheal Mackinnon, both birds and dogs were common pets in ancient Greek households.[27] Beyond the field of archaeology, ancient literary sources speak to the domestic roles of dogs. Dogs' role in the household is seen in

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[24] Houby-Nielsen, "Child burials in ancient Athens," 155; Vlachou, "Children and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece," 473.

[25] Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece.*

[26] See *infra* 17.

[27] Michael MacKinnon, "Pets," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life* ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell (Oxford Academic, 2014): 269-281.

Plato's *Republic* book one, where he quotes Socrates' comments on the wise and gentle nature of a domestic dog: "[y]our dog is a philosopher who judges by the rule of knowing or not knowing; and philosophy, whether in man or beast, is the parent of gentleness."[28]

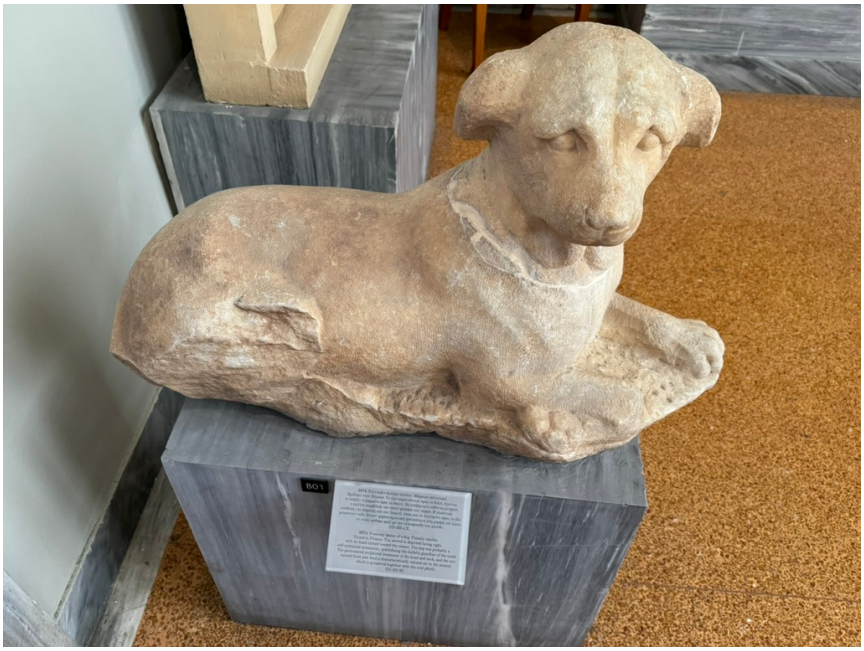

Figure 5. *Funerary statue of a dog.* 375-350 BCE. Marble, National Archaeological Museum. Athens, Greece. (Photo taken by the author).

The fact that the animals seen on these stelae were also kept in domestic spaces has led some scholars such as Louise Calder to explain the presence of these animals on funerary stelae as representations of beloved pets.[29] This theory is aided by the existence of funerary markers of pets by themselves, which, while rare, are poignant markers of the love felt towards their animal companions, such as the Funerary Statue of a Dog (Fig. 5). The dog lies on its stomach with its hind legs tucked at its sides, and its front legs stretched out. The dog's head is turned to the right with its ears tucked back, portraying a more submissive position, almost restful. The dog's eyes are downturned, perhaps communicating sadness at the thought of leaving its owner. While it is unclear if the stone was meant as a funerary monument for a dog or a symbol of protection over a larger tomb, the stone speaks to the importance dogs held in the life of the ancient Greeks. This clear connection and love the ancients had for their animals could be tied to the domestic animals present on funerary monuments. Once again, it is crucial to focus on which stelae

[28] Plato, "Book one" *Republic*, 375 BCE.

[29] Louise Calder, "Pet and Image in the Greek World: The Use of Domesticated Animals in Human Interaction," in *Interactions between Animals and Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* ed. Thorsten Fögen and Edmund Thomas (Walter de Gruyter, 2017): 66-67.

animals were present, namely that these domestic animals are most often seen on the funerary monuments of young children and maidens, who were mostly limited to the domestic sphere.

Birds as representations of the soul

While dogs remain mostly in the domestic sphere, the imagery of birds carries multiple layers of symbolism, specifically within funerary contexts. Since the Bronze Age, Greek authors have described the psyche—the physical representation of the human soul—with avian qualities.[30] These avian descriptions of the soul are seen in Homeric texts, with the souls of the deceased described twice as "fluttering free" from their mortal bodies.[31] Archaeologist Tina Ross suggests that the popularity of avians on Greek funerary stelae is directly associated with this phenomenon, and that the birds seen on these graves are representations of the deceased's soul.[32] However, as the multiple elements of the soul became one, there was a push to humanize these depictions. Within the Classical period, avian depictions of the psyche were mostly human figures with wings, not full birds.[33] An example of a more humanoid figure with avian traits representing the soul can be seen in the Attic vase portraying the Death of Prokris (Fig. 6), where a winged figure is seen floating above the dying Prokris, who was shot by her husband after he mistook her for a wild animal in the bushes. This more humanoid portrayal of the soul only creates more confusion, as it is extremely hard to differentiate between these supposed portrayals of bird-like souls and depictions of sirens and harpies.[34] This confusion is seen in the scholarly debate surrounding the vase, where some scholars such as Ross consider the winged figure to be Prokris' soul leaving her body; the British Museum instead labels this figure as a harpy, waiting to collect the soul of Prokris. Alternatively, author John Pollard suggests that the winged figure on this vessel represents a siren, and the presence of bird-like humanoids on graves are harbingers of doom, not the souls of the deceased.[35]

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[30] Ross, "Winged Representations of the Soul," 12, explains that starting in the Bronze age, Greek philosophers argued that the soul (psyche) had to be separate from the body, or else it would die with the body. Ross argues that the avian language in descriptions of the psyche developed into it being represented as a bird in funerary art.

[31] Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, 2011, book 16, line 856 & book 22, line 361.

[32] Ross, "Winged Representations of the Soul," 2.

[33] Ross, "Winged Representations of the Soul," 75.

[34] Ross, "*Winged Representations of the Soul,"* 73; "Colum Krater," *The British Museum*, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1772-0320-36-.

[35] John Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (Thames and Hudson, 1977), 189.

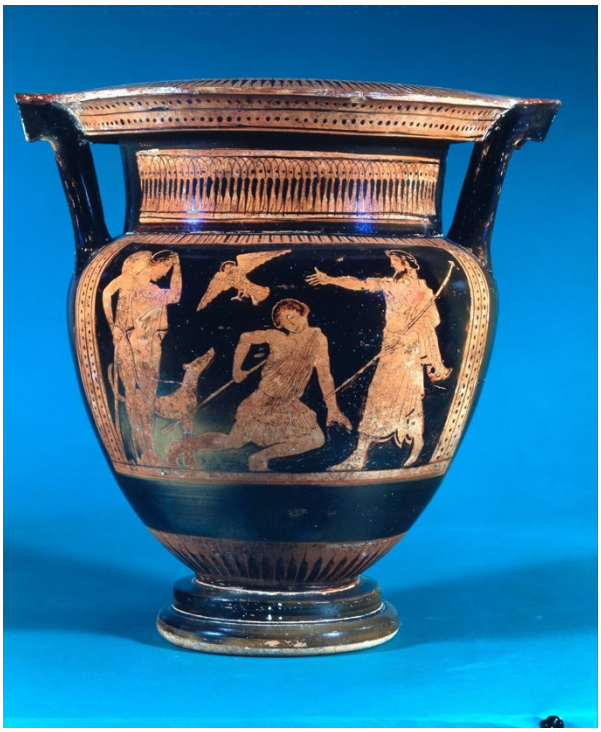

Figure 6. *Attic red-figured krater showing the Death of Prokris*. 460-430BCE. 38.10 cm x 35.70 cm x 31.90 cm (15 in x 14 in x 12.5 in), pottery, British Museum, England. *https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1772-0320-36-?selectedImageId=278540001*.

Birds and dogs in mythology and literature

Dogs represent an important duality within Greek culture. On one hand, they were valued as both domestic companions and partners in hunting and herding, but on the other, in many of the Greek stories that survive, dogs also play the role of vicious scavengers pillaging the dead. Classicist Emily Wilson speaks to the role of animals as scavengers of the dead in her introduction to her translation of the *Iliad*: "[t]he terrible alternative to these humanizing rites is for the dead to become food and prey for dogs and birds, who will never speak the names of those whom they devour."[36] The looming presence of this scavenging is not only seen as a threat and dishonor, but also a curse on the soul of the deceased, as funerary rites were seen as necessary for them to be able to move on to the afterlife. This belief drives the central conflict of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Kreon wishes this dishonor on his nephew whom he believes betrayed the city: "I have proclaimed to the city that no one is to honor him with burial or mourn him, but

[36] Emily Wilson, "Introduction," in *The Iliad*, Homer, trans. Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023), 31.

instead, to allow his body to be eaten by the birds and dogs, a disgrace."[37] Antigone is outraged towards this treatment of her brother's corpse and considers the refusal to bury her brother a dishonor to the gods by refusing them the right to judge her brother's soul: "[a]nd I did not think that your proclamations would override the unwritten, natural laws of the gods, for surely they are not here today and gone tomorrow, but endure always; no one knows when they first appeared."[38] The difference in this association seems closely tied to who the dogs are paired with: in the presence of birds they are seen as wild and dangerous things, but in humans' presence, they are calmed and tamed.

Scholar John Savoie argues that within the Homeric epics, dogs provide a symbol for the lower, lesser traits of humanity, in contrast to the gods representing the perfect ideals humanity strives for.[39] Yet this duality is not fully set, as in later books of the *Iliad* the two switch, with dogs representing humanity's sense of community and peace in contrast to the conflict the gods create.[40] Dogs are far more present in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*, often speaking to the human nature of Odysseus' struggles. Historian Jeremy McInerney expands this claim by stating that the divine, humanity and animals are "entangled" and "recursively linked… the three classes of living beings were actually in a constant state of flux" within ancient Greek thought.[41]

In contrast to dogs, birds are more present in the *Iliad* and less in the *Odyssey*, possibly speaking to dogs as closer to human conflict, the main theme of the *Odyssey*, and birds closer to the divine and their conflicts in the *Iliad*.[42] This connection to the divine is seen throughout the *Iliad*, as gods take avian form in order to watch over the affairs of the mortals: "[a]nd then Apollo of the silver bow and great Athena went to perch like vultures high in the oak tree sacred to their father who bears the aegis, Zeus."[43] This passage is significant because it states the two gods have taken on avian forms, and also, in that the vulture is not specifically a sacred animal to either Apollo or Athena: rather, the form of the vulture is specific to the scene, as the two gods watch over the battle not unlike a vulture waiting for its next meal. The gods' ability to choose their form based on the situation rather than being stuck in the form of their holy animals speaks to a more general connection between the avian and the divine.

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[37] Sophocles, *Antigone*, scene 2, lines 15-17.

[38] Sophocles, *Antigone*, scene 3, lines 39-41.

[39] John Savoie, "Homeric Dogma: Of Dogs and Men in the Iliad and Odyssey," *Literary Matters* 17.2, (2025).

[40] Savoie, "Homeric Dogma," 2025.

[41] Jeremy McInerney, "The 'entanglement' of gods, humans, and animals in ancient Greek religion," in *Animals in Ancient Greek Religion*, ed. Julia Kindt, 2021, 17.

[42] Savoie, "Homeric Dogma," 2025.

[43] Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Emily Wilson, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023), book 7, lines 57-60.

Even with more separation between the divine and birds, there are accounts from ancient Greece of gods using their holy animals to enact their will. A prime example of this is seen in an Athenian tradition starting after the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, where the sight of an owl flying overhead during battle was seen as a blessing from the Goddess Athena, which guaranteed her sacred city's success.[44] "There goes the owl" later became a saying in Athens to predict success.[45] A similar example of the gods sending birds down to enact their will is seen in the *Aeneid*, as Aphrodite sends doves down to guide her son on his journey to the underworld: "[h]e had barely spoken when by chance a pair of doves came flying down from the sky, beneath his very eyes, and settled on the green grass. Then the great hero knew they were his mother's birds, and prayed in his joy."[46] This passage can also be seen as a connection between birds and the afterlife, with these doves acting as guides towards the right path.

Aphrodite's doves leading Aeneas is far from the only association birds have with the afterlife, as birds and their role as intermediaries between the mortal and immortal worlds are seen in multiple ways. The prominence of birds in imagery of death has led to two main theories: birds acted as guides to the afterlife or they represented the souls of the deceased. The doves leading Aeneas to the underworld may speak to a larger belief of birds acting as *psychopomps*, leading the dead to their new place in the underworld in ancient thought. This idea is further seen in accounts of Roman rituals for the burial of emperors, where birds were released so they may "conduct his soul aloft."[47]

Stelae of children

As the majority of these graves belong to young children, one of the most popularly discussed theories examines the possible symbolism of these animals representing the innocence of youth.[48] An example of this motif is seen in the Grave Stele of Melisto from around 340 BCE (Fig. 7). The image of young Melisto is framed within a house or chapel-shaped stone, which culminates into a roof shape with columns surrounding the niche. This setting speaks to the domesticity of children, still in the home even in death. Under the roof of the grave stands Melisto, facing to her left and glancing down at a small dog while wearing a slight smile on her face. Compared to other graves from the same period, Melisto's head is enlarged, likely speaking to her youth. The head contains the most detail

[44] Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism*, (University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 116.

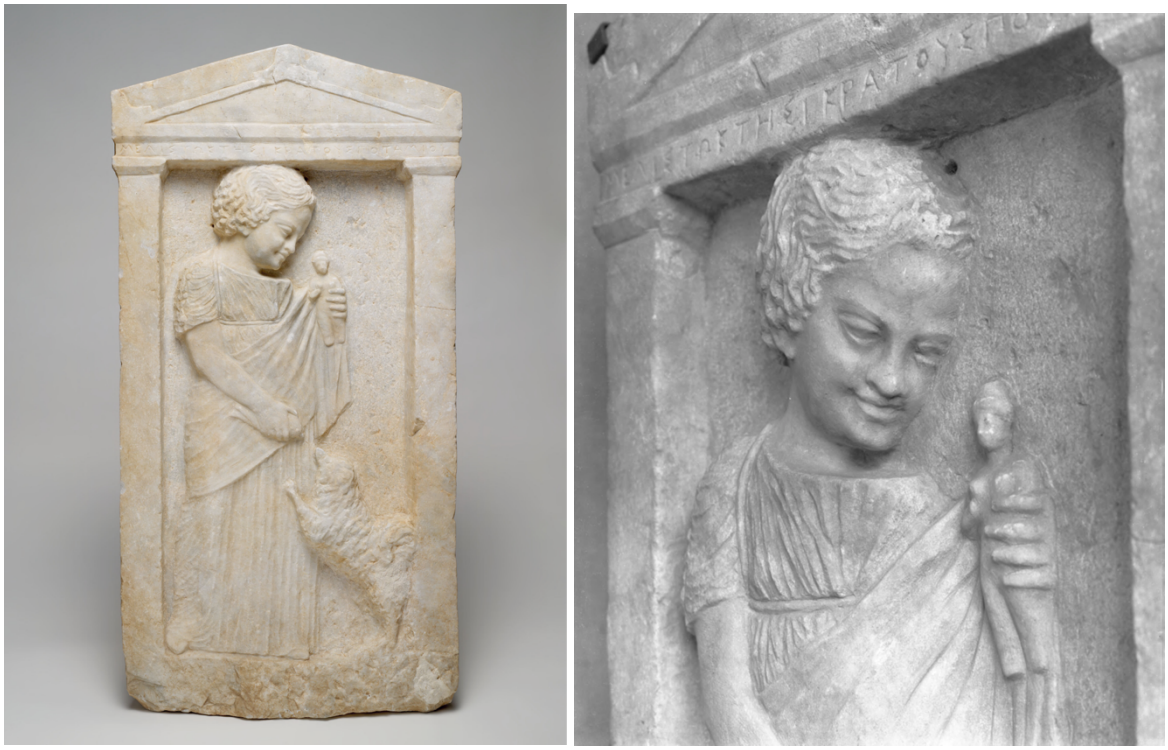
[45] Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls*, 116.

[46] Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. A. S. Kline (Roman Roads Media, 2015), 107.

[47] Hare, (1962): 71-72; Ingersoll (1923): 148. Quoted in Christopher M. Moreman, "On the Relationship between Birds and Spirits of the Dead" *Society & Animals* 22 no. 5, (2014): 7.

[48] Margariti, "The Sombre Smile of Melisto," 27-28.

within the piece, and stands in high relief that slopes into lower relief towards the bottom of the stone, creating strong shadows (Fig. 8). In her hand Melisto holds out a bird to the dog, who stands on its hind legs to get a sniff at the small creature. The dog has a curly coat, with its tail ending in a fluffy curve, suggesting a household dog rather than the sleek coats conventionally shown on hunting dogs. In her opposite hand, Melisto holds a small doll close to her head, yet her eyes remain focused on the dog. The closeness between the young girl and the dog suggests a strong relationship between the two, speaking to a familiarity between them within the domestic sphere. Additionally, the lack of chaos between the bird and dog speaks to the calmness idealized within the Greek home, contrasting the many portrayals of these animals that show them in conflict. Control and order are essential elements of the idealized Greek household—as seen in Aristotle's *Politics*—and suggesting the child has such a strong hold over these animals' natural instincts may have been done to show the virtuous order within her family's household, with the animals acting as her subordinates.[49]



Figures 7-8. *Grave Stele of a Young Girl, "Melisto"*. 340 BCE. 95.5 cm x 49.2 cm x 10 cm (37 5/8 in x 19 3/8 in x 3 15/16 in), marble, Harvard Museum. https://hvrd.art/o/288045.

This motif is not unique to Melisto's grave; others, such as the Grave-Stelae of Kallipe (Fig. 9), and Aristokrateia (Fig. 10) utilize the same motif. Additionally, the Grave Stele of an unnamed girl (Fig. 11) shares much of the same posture and dress as Melisto. These graves

[49] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Batoche Books, 1999), 19-20.

all range from between 400-340 BCE, suggesting the motif was specifically common in this period, but vary in the location of where the deceased were buried. Melisto herself was from Potamos, a district southeast of Athens. The commonality of this motif suggests the body of the stele was bought pre-carved and more personalized details such as the face were added on later. Visually, this can be seen in the fact that the girl's faces are in a far higher relief than the rest of the stone, likely carved by a different sculptor who specialized in faces.

Figure 9. (Left) *Grave Stele of Kallipe*. 375–350 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 748. Cat. no. 21. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund, National Archaeological Museum, Athens. **Figure 10 (Right).** *Grave Stele of Aristokrateia*. 400–375 BCE. 13062. Cat. no. 12. Eretria, Archaeological Museum.

Figure 11. *Grave Stele*. 400–375 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 776. Cat. no. 9. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Archaeological Receipts Fund, National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Contrasting the one-handed hold Melisto has on her bird companion, the Grave Stele of an Unnamed Girl (Fig. 12) shows a far more intimate moment between a child and her pets. The young child stands in profile facing her left and looks down at two birds. Similar to Melisto, the unnamed girl has an enlarged head, showing her youth. The bird to the girl's right rests on the girl's chest, held up by her curved arm, and looks up at her, its beak close to her mouth. The second bird rests on the girl's left hand, and faces away from her, but bends its neck towards her—unfortunately, its head has fallen off with age. The girl is dressed in a loose, unbelted peplos, which dramatically drapes around her. Her hair is mostly pulled back into a bun, but some is left out of the tie, cascading loose down her neck. She stands with her right leg straight, but bends her left leg, creating a more dynamic posture. The stele emits a sorrowful feeling, the girl seemingly saying farewell to her beloved birds, a strong contrast to the playful nature of the stelae of Melisto, Kallipe, and Aristokrateia. The imagery of farewells is common on ancient funerary stelae, many of which show the deceased's family sending them off; however, this focus being centered on an animal instead of a family member is unique. Looking at this artwork through the lens of the soul birds theory, it could be argued that these birds represent her family, who are about to guide her to the afterlife. Alternatively, the girl may have been very attached to her pet birds in life, and so her family thought memorializing the love she held for them as essential when commissioning her funerary monument.

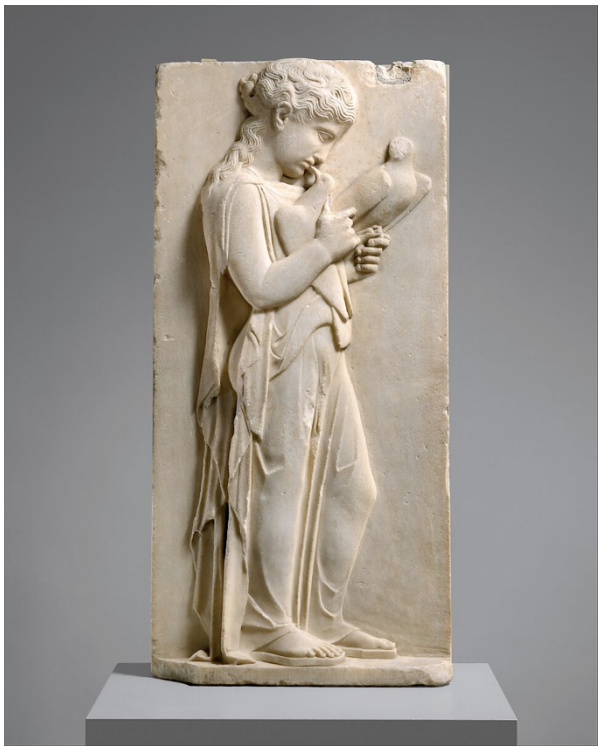


Figure 12. *Grave Stele of a Little Girl*. 450–440 BCE. 80.6 cm x 37 cm (31 3/4 in x 14 9/16 in.), marble, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252890.

Stelae of Young Adults

Iconography of maidenhood

The theory that animals on funerary stelae represent the innocence of the deceased for children may also be applied to the graves of adolescent women, perhaps suggesting the deceased passed before they were married or had children and thus did not fully move past the stage of youth. Inscriptions and literature, such as *Antigone*, speak to the fact that these maidens, also known as *parthenoi,* were highly mourned.[50] One of the most identifiable symbols of deceased maidens is the *loutrophoros*—a ceremonial vessel specifically for carrying water for brides and the deceased—both with the vessel acting as a funerary marker and in inscriptions on stelae.[51] However, the most conclusive iconographic evidence of maidenhood on Greek funerary stelae is the dress of the

[50] Sophocles, *Antigone*; Margariti, "Lament and Death Instead of Marriage," 91-92

[51] "Terracotta Loutrophoros (Ceremonial Vase for Water)," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed March 18, 2026, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252948.

deceased, as the Attic peplos was considered the "special attire of unmarried females".[52] Through this garment, multiple funerary stelae with animals are easily and undeniably identified as belonging to maidens.

Maidens and canines

While most animals on maidens' stelae are birds, there are a few containing canine companions, as seen in the Grave Stele of an Unnamed Woman (Fig. 13). This stele mirrors the composition seen so commonly in children's stelae: the unnamed woman stands to the side, holding a bird out for the dog to sniff while standing on its hind legs. Unlike the children who share this motif who hold dolls, the woman instead holds back part of her dress with her other hand, showing more maturity. While the top half of the dog is missing, it is clear from the fluffy back legs that remain that it looked similar to the ones seen on the stelae of children. The woman herself stands facing to her right with her head in profile and her body angled towards the viewer. She wears an Attic peplos, along with a shoulder-pinned back mantle. Her wavy hair is pulled away from her face with a *tania*—a traditional Greek headband—and held in a low ponytail flowing down her back. As the face of this stele is blurred with age, her gaze at her companion is mostly expressionless.

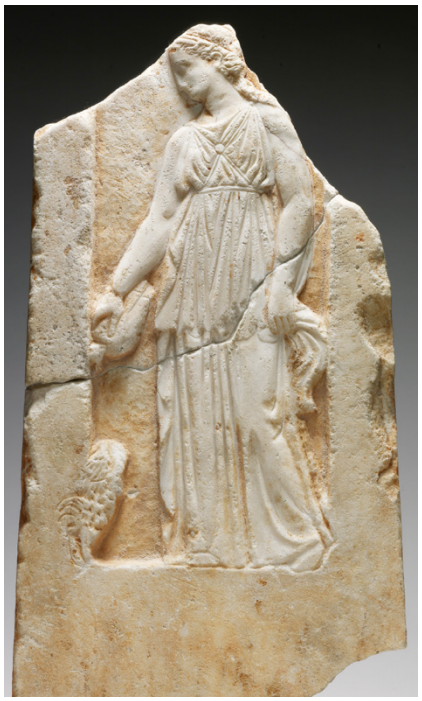


Figure 13. *Grave stele (43)*. 350–330 BCE. Co.459. Photo C. Baraja; courtesy Musée Rodin, Paris.

[52] Margariti, "Lament and Death Instead of Marriage," 92.

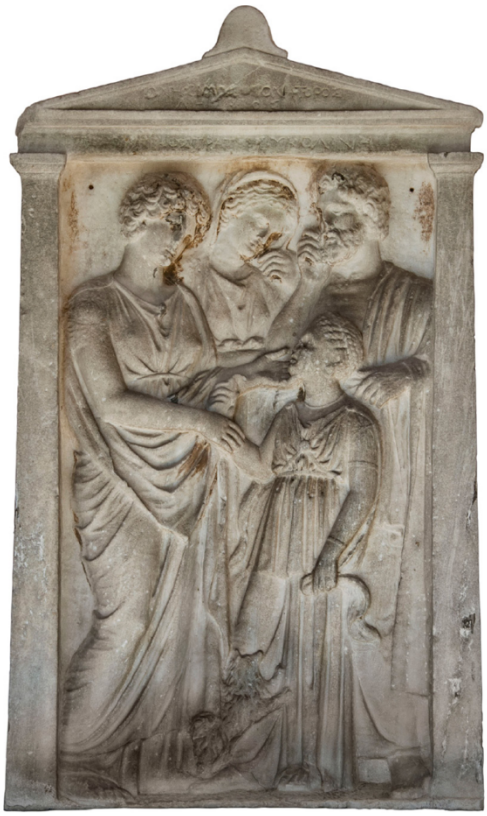


Figure 14. *Grave stele of Eukoline*. 350–338 BCE. Athens, Kerameikos Archaeological Museum. P 694/I 281. Photo E. Bardani; courtesy Archaeological Museum of Kerameikos; © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens.

Maidens are often portrayed as significantly shorter than their adult family members when presented alongside them, their older age seen only through their dress.[53] This is seen clearly in the Grave Stele of Eukoline (Fig. 14), who is identified as a maiden due to her Attic peplos paired with a shoulder pinned back mantle. Framed in the typical pointed house or chapel structure, Eukoline's family surrounds her. Two of these family members—a woman on the right and a man on the left—are standing in the background, both reaching for their faces, wiping tears from their eyes. The man cradles Eukoline's pulled-back and intricately braided hair. To the left, an adult woman stands next to the deceased young maiden tenderly cradling her face. Unlike the other figures with dogs, Eukoline is not focused on her canine companion. Instead, she stands to the right of the stone with her face in profile towards the woman cradling her face, a gentle hand grazing the woman's arm. Eukoline's other hand holds the back of her dress, similar to the maiden in figure 13. The dog itself is the standard small fluffy one seen on women's and children's

[53] Margariti, "Lament and Death Instead of Marriage," 92.

graves, and jumps up on two feet, pawing at Eukoline's knees. This style of farewell scene is fairly common in this period, but the small dog joining in the family's goodbyes all but states the canine pet was an integral part of their family.

Priests and animals representing the divine

While dogs on women's graves are almost exclusively seen within the domestic context, birds exist within a more complex tradition and are far more common on the graves of maidens. One of the theories—discussed by scholars such as Martin Nilsson and McInerney—around animal representations on Greek graves is that they represent a connection to the divine.[54] The gods of the Greek pantheon all had sacred animals—many of which were birds—associated with them, in addition to birds being generally entwined with the divine.[55] This theory suggests that these gravestones use these sacred birds to show the deceased's devotion to a deity, even in death. This theory is most often applied to the graves of young single women as an alternative to the idea that the animals on graves are solely representative of childhood, and that maidens did not graduate into adulthood before death. This theory would also explain the decrease in depictions of dogs on the stelae of older girls.

The tradition of associating the divine with avians allegedly far predates this period, with Nilsson suggesting birds were crucial elements of the great goddess in Minoan religion, which may have had lasting iconographic influence.[56] Animals continued to be intricately connected with the divine in ancient Greece, with cult images such as the Black Demeter showing the lack of boundaries between animals and the divine.[57] Additionally, Pollard cites multiple scholars such as Otto Keller and Salomon Reinach who argue that the animal-headed Egyptian gods acted as inspiration for early forms of the Greek pantheon, and that the holy animals associated with the pantheon come from the deities' original forms.[58]

The theory that these animals are directly related to a devotion to the divine allows for an alternative reading of the Grave Relief of Two Siblings, Mnesagora and Nicochares (Fig. 15), which is commonly seen as a playful domestic scene.[59] Mnesagora wears an Attic peplos—visually portraying her role as a sister, not mother to Nicochares—and a draped

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[54] Martin Nilsson, *Minoan Mycenaean Religion And Its Survival In Greek Religion*, (Lund, 1927), 340; McInerney, "The 'entanglement' of gods, humans, and animals," 18.

[55] See *infra* 16.

[56] Nilsson, "Minoan Mycenaean," 340.

[57] McInerney, "The 'entanglement' of gods, humans, and animals," 18.

[58] Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth*, 144.

[59] Wanda Papaefthymiou, "A tender hug," *National Archaeological Museum*, June 2023. https://www.namuseum.gr/en/monthly_artefact/a-tender-hug/.

cloak, while her long hair is held in a bun. Both Mnesagora and Nicochares are in profile, facing each other and the center of the stone. Mnesagora stands to the left, her head tilted downwards as her face falls into a relaxed, almost indulgent smile as she looks down at both her kneeling younger brother and the bird she is holding out to him. In contrast to his modestly dressed sister, Nicochares stands to the right in full nude, creating a striking visual reference to the harsh gender roles of the period. Nicochares stands half-kneeling, hands up, almost implying reverence towards both the bird and his elder sister while he reaches for the bird being offered to him. The veneration shown by Nicochares may suggest the bird represents something far more powerful than a normal animal. Applying the theory of avians representing the divine to the Stele of Mnesagora and Nicochares largely changes the scene. Mnesagora's calm knowing look is shifted from that of an indulging sister to that of a confident priestess who is guiding her brother through contact with the divine.

Figure 15. *Grave Stele of two siblings, Mnesagora and Nicochares*. 420 BCE. National Archeological Museum. https://www.namuseum.gr/en/monthly_artefact/a-tender-hug/.

The Grave Stele of Myttion from 400 BCE (Fig. 16) is a prime work associated with this theory. The stele features the singular female figure of the deceased standing in profile, looking down at the bird she holds in her left hand. The stele itself is a pointed structure, suggesting a houselike structure similar to Melisto's grave, and the relief is only in the

middle of the stele. Myttion is dressed modestly, wearing an open long-sleeved *kandys*—a garment primarily worn at religious ceremonies—with a draped dress visible underneath.[60] She seems drawn towards the bird in her hand, tilting her hip towards it. Her hair is tied up, with a headband visible. Within the context of avian associations with the divine, a possible explanation for Mytton's avian companion is that the young woman was a priestess, and the bird she is holding represents either a deity or a sacrifice.

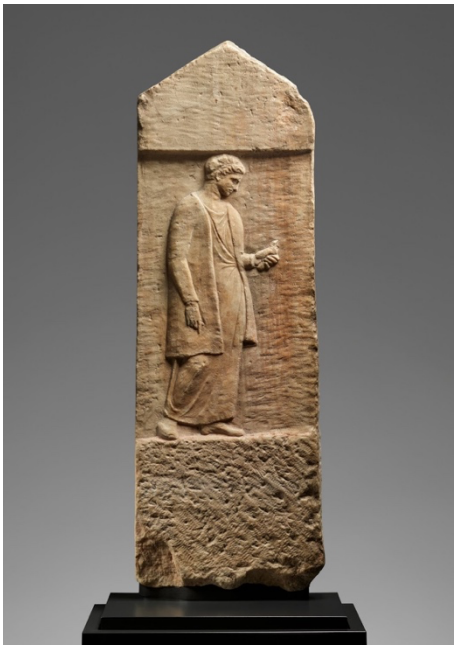

Figure 16. *Grave Stele of Myttion*. 400 BCE. 71.1 × 24.1 × 8.9 cm (28 × 9 1/2 × 3 1/2 in.), marble, Getty Museum. https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103TGT.

The imagery of young women with avian companions continued as a trend in funerary stelae, as seen in the Grave Naiskos of Apollonia from 100 BCE (Fig. 17). Buried around three centuries after Myttion, Apollonia's grave does not follow the same pose of standing in side profile while holding the bird. Rather, Apollonia is shown standing beside a pillar on which a large bird rests, gently petting the avian with her right hand. Apollonia wears a light Attic peplos, symbolizing her maidenhood, over which she wears a shawl that drapes over her left shoulder. This difference in pose and composition is easy to understand due to the different eras in which the stele was created, but the fact that the motif of birds on young women's graves continued for at least three centuries speaks to the possible meaning behind it and its importance. The more detailed grave of Apollonia also portrays a level of care in the treatment of the bird, with the girl gently grazing the bird's feathers with her right hand. In her left hand, Apollonia holds a fruit out towards the bird, suggesting she is

[60] "Grave Stele of Myttion," *Getty*, accessed March 2, 2026, https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103TGT.

offering it to her avian companion. The level of care and reverence the maidens show the birds gives credence to the idea of birds representing a deity or some sort of divine presence.

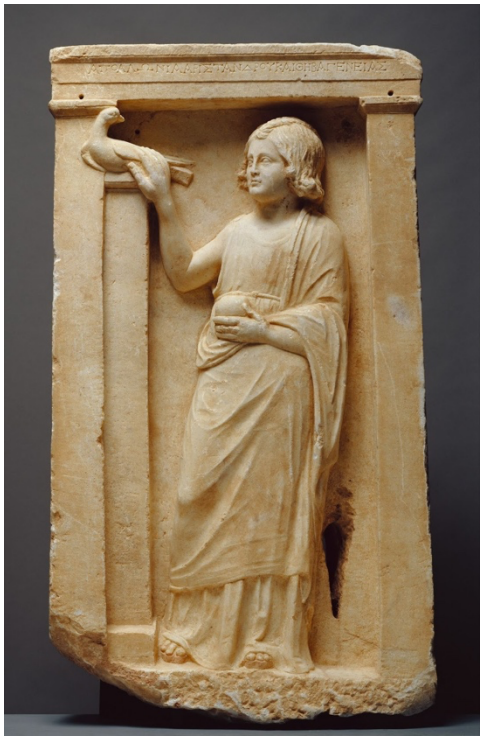

Figure 17. *Grave Naiskos of Apollonia*. 100 BCE. 112.4 × 63.5 × 20 cm (44 1/4 × 25 × 7 7/8 in.), marble, Getty Museum. https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103SZB.

Gender and cultural roles in life presented in death

Often, funerary stelae represent the livelihood of the deceased in order to honor that part of their life in death. This explanation can be used for the presence of dogs on men's graves, as they are stylized quite differently from those on children's and women's. Instead of the small and fluffy household dogs seen on the graves of children and women, the dogs on men's graves are sleek and larger, often seen with a smaller animal in its mouth representing a successful hunt. An example of a dog on a male grave can be seen on a grave stele from the Kerameikos Museum that features two men, likely father and son, shaking hands from the late 5th century BCE (Fig. 18). The motif of handshakes is commonly seen on Greek graves to show the unity of a family, even after death.[61] The younger figure on the left is joined by a canine companion, who stands at his feet, sniffing the elder man to the right, greeting him in the dog's own way. The presence of the larger,

[61] Glenys Davies, "The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 89, no. 4 (1985): 627–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/504204.

sleek-coated hunting dog speaks to the younger man's vitality and likely connects to his work, as ownership of such a dog suggests the man would be able to keep up with it and use it in the field. The dog itself is passive, almost tentative in nature, clearly obedient to its master. Neither figure is named as the piece is missing an inscription, thus it is difficult to identify which form represents the deceased.

Figure 18. *Grave Stele with two men shaking hands, with a dog standing beside the left figure*. Late 5th c. BCE. Kerameikos Museum. Inf. no. NAM 2894.

The Grave Stele of Xanthos (Fig. 19), created in the same period, almost directly mirrors the composition of the Grave Stele of Meliso—with Xanthos facing to his right instead of his left—but with a shifted focus. The two most apparent differences in this masculinized version of the motif are the dress of the deceased and the type of dog they are pictured with. Xanthos is barely dressed, with a claspless cape draped over his shoulder being his only garment, otherwise standing in the heroic nude. The difference in the dress of boys and girls speaks to the strict standards applied to their adult counterparts; women must always be properly dressed, while men stand nude to show off their ideal forms.[62] While Melisto is pictured with a small dog, which needs to stand on its hind legs to reach the bird held out to it, Xanthos is pictured with a larger, sleek-coated dog, which merely has to

[62] Janet Burnett Grossman, "Forever Young: An Investigation of the Depictions of Children on Classical Attic Funerary Monuments," *Hesperia Supplements* 41 (2007): 15, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20066796.

crane its neck to reach the bird. The presence of a less domestic dog in this scene may allude to Xanthos being an older child, but his adolescence is shown through the doll he holds by his side in his left hand. The doll's placement, at Xanthos' side, contrasting how Melisto holds it close to her head, may also be a sign that Xanthos was closer to reaching adulthood. Xanthos' and Melistos' stelae almost perfectly mirror each other; both figures stand in the same position and are accompanied by the same animals and items. However, the hunting dog Xanthos is pictured with shows that the boy was, at the very least, starting his transition from childhood domesticity to the hunting of adulthood.

Figure 19. *Grave Stele of Xanthos.* Late 5th c. BCE. Archaeological Museum, Pella.

Further showing this transition, the Grave Stele of an Athlete from the same period (Fig. 20) represents a more mature, adult version of this motif. The athlete stands in a similar position to Xanthos, but is twisted to more directly face the viewer rather than standing in true profile. Xanthos' body is softer, showing his youth, while the athlete's muscles are carefully chiseled into the ideal for Greek men. While the athlete's stele is missing his head due to age, his body communicates less interest in the animals with his distance. This almost suggests that the bird is there purely for the dog's amusement, as the athlete watches on passively. Instead of a doll, the athlete holds a *strigil*—a metal tool used for bathing, strongly associated with athletes—in his left hand, showing his maturity and occupation in contrast to the youth implied by the toy. While Xanthos' dog lies on the floor,

able to reach the bird in its master's hand without standing, the athlete's dog stands on all four legs, speaking to the height difference between the boy and man. All of the stelae with this motif portray a sense of human authority and control over animals, but this athlete's stele changes the interaction by making the athlete less engaged, showing the stronger authority expected of men in the ancient world.

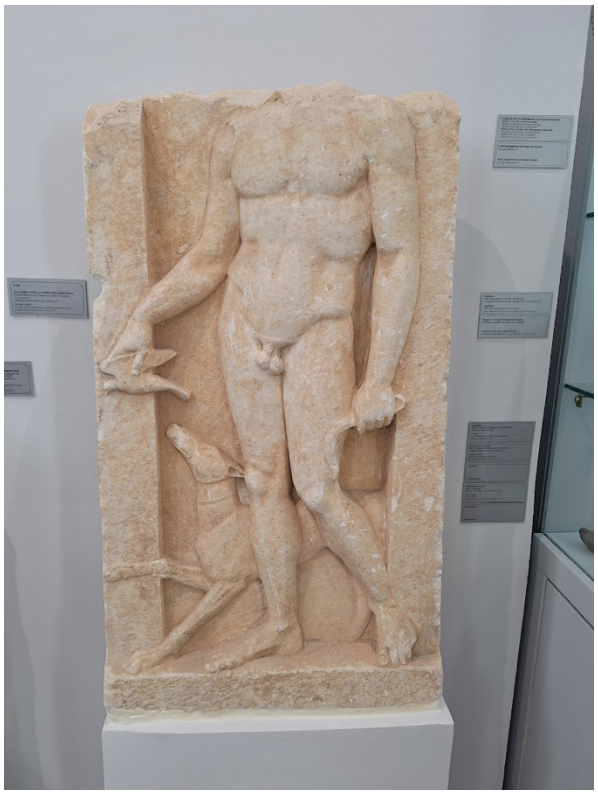

Figure 20. *Grave Relief of an Athlete with Dog, Dove and Strigil*. 5th c. BCE. Chalkis Archaeological Museum. Image uploaded to Google by Zoran Vulovic.

Conclusion

Within the abundance of modern scholarship devoted to analyzing the imagery of ancient Greek stelae, the presence of animals on these graves is largely disregarded due to the small number of artworks containing non-human figures. This small number of artworks, in addition to the large cultural divide between then and now, makes it extremely difficult to form definitive conclusions about the ancients' own opinions on these artworks and the intent behind their commission. Still, through careful analysis of the extant artworks, relevant contemporary literary sources, and modern scholarship, it becomes apparent that these stones speak to the continuous connection between human and animal across time. In compiling many of the theories surrounding these images and forming theories of my own, it seems misguided to claim one definitive answer. These

images were born out of a rich and abundant context, and as such, multiple theories are likely mutually correct, with some meanings perhaps being more relevant at different periods. Yet it is nearly impossible to make a definitive statement, as so much knowledge is simply lost.

Even without knowing the abundance of context surrounding them, these images still have the power to connect with modern viewers and our shared love for our animal companions. Still, knowledge of this background and the theories surrounding these objects allows for a more complete understanding of these artworks, and for us to connect with them and the ancient Greeks on a more personal level.

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