

GRAVE STELAI

- Π A stele (plural stelai) is a stone slab carved in relief - sometimes low relief, sometimes high
- Π There were various purposes for stelai - particularly votive, recording and funerary
- Π Votive stelai were dedicated to the gods, particularly in healing sanctuaries. In Epidaurus you can see a stele with ears on it, for example, to give thanks for a cure.
- Π Stelai for recording purposes include the noting of treaties, laws, decrees and planning decisions (like the building of a bridge). A stele survives recording the treasure kept in the Parthenon.
- Π ARCHAIC grave stelai/reliefs were usually a tall, narrow slab featuring a single kouros-type figure
- Π There was a period without any grave reliefs - probably because ostentatious signs of mourning were banned
- Π The practice of using decorative stelai in Attica (the area of Athens and surroundings) crept back again around 430BC, perhaps partly to give work to the sculptors who were not so busy now that the major construction work on the Parthenon was complete
- Π In CLASSICAL times there was keenness to decorate the tombs of the 'private dead' in the same way that was applied to the 'public dead', who had been lost in wars, defending their country
- Π State graves for the war dead had been built in C5 BC outside the city walls of Athens, decorated with fighting scenes, with all the fallen from one battle buried together
- Π The main cemetery in Athens, the KERAMEIKOS (*Potters' quarter*) had family plots, with the main aim being to be to provide an impressive display. Frequently there were lengthy epitaphs.
- Π The Kerameikos is as much a sculptural showcase as a burial ground. The two most important processional routes of Athens begin here: the Panathenaic Way leading to the Acropolis, and the Sacred Way, leading

to Eleusis, where the mysteries were held, so many people would have seen and admired the tombs

- Π In the EARLY CLASSICAL period (early C5BC) grave stelai *outside Attica* became broader than in the Archaic period, with more figures - particularly seated ones - with architectural features as a frame. In the HIGH CLASSICAL period, the new Attic reliefs continued in this way, and in particular developed the framing.
- Π The faces on the stelai are similar in expression to those on the Parthenon Frieze
- Π Children and slaves also had stelai
- Π Greek tombs were places of worship. A fellowship was established and maintained between the living and the dead, with food being brought for the dead, and other rituals regularly taking place
- Π Towards the end of C5, graves were sometimes marked with elaborately decorated marble vases
- Π A decree in the last years of C4BC put an end to the lavish display in Attic cemeteries

II SUBJECT MATTER OF THE STELAI

- in effect the dead in life. They are never seen as corpse-like, unlike the marble effigies in cathedrals
- they are not usually treated heroically, unless they died in battle
- figures are normally shown in everyday dress, but warriors are shown armed, even if they did not die in battle
- it is not always obvious which figure is the deceased, and sometimes the inscriptions don't clarify this, so to a certain extent they must have relied on current, local knowledge
- farewell scenes are often shown, with closeness represented by a handshake
- the deceased is often shown surrounded by family members, in a symbol of togetherness and mourning
- the manner of death is shown extremely rarely; usually the deceased is seen in a typical everyday scene
- similar scenes are shown on many stelai, so they would have been readily understandable to Ancient Greeks
- the dead are not closely characterised, but shown as generic types, with obvious signs of age or relationship - eg old man with stick; child with toy; toned youthful athlete
- very occasionally a profession is indicated by an attribute
- figures are often seated, on similar chairs with elegant curved legs
- animals feature frequently - particularly dogs, but also cats and birds