

Marta González González

FUNERARY EPIGRAMS  
OF ANCIENT GREECE

REFLECTIONS ON LITERATURE,  
SOCIETY AND RELIGION

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# Funerary Epigrams of Ancient Greece

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# Funerary Epigrams of Ancient Greece

*Reflections on Literature, Society  
and Religion*

Marta González González

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*To my father,  
Fausto González Velasco (1927–2014),  
who taught all three of us not to use words to hurt*



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Marta González González  
May 2018



# Introduction

Greek funerary art seeks beauty and exalts excellence, *arete*. Stelai and statues stand *along the road* with the intent that the passer-by would pause, contemplate, remember and mourn. These are retrospective monuments in the sense that they represent those no longer present, using the best image of what they were in life: splendid athletes, valiant warriors, maidens of promise, loving mothers. These idealized images, not at all realistic, serve not so much to reflect a determined social organization as to actually construct it. To the extent that they look towards the future, they do not speak of punishment or reward, and certainly do not denigrate this life in favour of a better one: if any immortality is imagined, it is the immortality of renown (*kleos*) attained from the particular virtue commemorated in the epigram, and, in no small measure, from the skill of the artist commissioned for the monument.

In the pages that follow, I will take time to pause at some of these Greek memorials of the Archaic and Classical periods. Although my interest is primarily a literary one, the epitaphs are much better understood in the few cases where their corresponding image, statue or stele is preserved. Naturally, I have taken a selection of epigrams from the extensive corpus, a sample significant in size, not overlooking any of the fundamental examples, and giving priority to those cases where the whole monument ensemble is preserved, both text and image. From this evidence I hope to draw out information about the society that created it, giving attention to the parameters of age, gender and social status. This study is structured around the presentation of such information, ordered within its historical and chronological context.

Chapters 1 (The funerary landscape: a reflection of the world of the living), and 2 (The literary form: tears of Simonides . . . and of Pindar) present the texts and their context, the type of literature that these funerary epigrams represent, and the archaeological landscape in which they are embedded. To expand our field of view, in both time and space, I begin with the archaeological landscape, outlining briefly the evolution of Greek funerary customs and the general traits of the art that emerges from them.

Monuments from the Archaic age are the focus of the next chapter (Chapter 3: Phrasikleia, *forever a maiden*. Kroisos, *whom raging Ares destroyed*), focusing especially on the funerary statues that nobles dedicated to their deceased youths. Special attention is given to two exceptional monuments, those of the maiden Phrasikleia and of Kroisos the young warrior, their funerary statues surviving together with the brief elegiac distich of the epitaph.

The Classical age is marked by the appearance of the splendid Attic stelai, attributed by most scholars to the same artists who worked on the reconstruction of the Athenian acropolis after the destruction of the Persian Wars. At this time, the epigrams are somewhat longer than in Archaic times. These funerary monuments target a more diverse social group than those of the Archaic age. The present study focuses on the epitaphs of individuals in the more significant stages of life, where gender differences are most marked. Thus, setting aside childhood and old age, I consider youths who died before their time (Chapter 4: How to deprive the year of its spring). I also study epitaphs that are more unusual in that it is not a family member who makes the dedication but where intimate friendship has prompted commemoration (Chapter 5: Immortal remembrance of friends). The next chapter focuses on the epitaphs of husbands and wives (Chapter 6: Wives and their masters). I devote some space to two types of funerary epigrams that share the unusual element of explicitly mentioning the cause of death: death in childbirth and death at sea. While the first case is linked naturally to the female gender, the second predominantly (though not exclusively) belongs to men (Chapter 7: Powerful enemies: childbirth, the sea).

Finally, the last chapter (Chapter 8: Rewards for piety . . . next to Persephone) focuses on eschatological allusions in funerary epigraphy. In the fourth century especially, we begin to find references to rewards in the hereafter for having attained piety, *eusebeia*. Interestingly, certain expressions that now appear for the first time in inscriptions bear some resemblance to expressions used in the famous *lamellae aureae*, focusing on Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.

Most of the evidence in this book comes from Attica, and the Kerameikos remains a fascinating area. However, excavations continue in different parts of Greece, bringing to light works of great interest. I often include this information in a peripheral way to round out the chapters presented here and to put into perspective the tentative nature of the conclusions offered here. If the archaeological funerary landscape reflects the world of the living, then social and historical differences between one region and another are logically manifest in their necropoleis.

It seems justifiable to consider only the metrical epitaphs: they constitute a very extensive but manageable corpus (not the case if we were to consider *all* epitaphs) and have considerable documentary value. The non-metrical epitaphs convey very little information: the name of the deceased, sometimes his or her place of birth or affiliation, and little more.

Only a small selection of the preserved epigrams will be analysed here, but I have tried to ensure that the sample is relevant. In both the selection and the commentary, I have turned my attention to the aspects that in my opinion have been the most neglected, and to details that enable general claims to be tested, for example that death before marriage was a theme exclusive to the tombs of young women, that the people who dedicated epitaphs always had family ties to the deceased, or that funerary epigraphy abounds in references to the separation of soul and body after death. A chronological perspective is useful to review and clarify these claims. The fact that I examine private rather than public epigrams is reflected in the structure of this volume: after the first and second introductory chapters, the third focuses on Archaic epitaphs, basically from the sixth century BC, while the vast majority of the epigrams studied in subsequent chapters are from the fourth century BC, with a few exceptions from the late fifth century BC. This leap forward in time, and the fact that most of the epigrams selected are from Attica, necessarily leaves out epitaphs from much of the fifth century BC, a period in which the victorious atmosphere that followed the Greco-Persian Wars prompted the most important cities, especially Athens, to commission epigrams for the war dead,<sup>1</sup> and the importance of private memorials waned. Public memorials for the war dead, for which there is an abundant and recent bibliography, are not analysed here.<sup>2</sup>

The epigraphic and iconographic sources used here are listed along with the rest of the bibliography at the end of this study; however, I wish to briefly mention the primary works that are constantly cited throughout these pages.

## Epigraphic sources

Peter Allan Hansen's publications, *Carmina Epigraphica Graeca saeculorum VIII–V a. Chr. n.* and *Carmina Epigraphica Graeca saeculi IV a. Chr. n.*, are taken as the documentary basis for this study. The author collects metrical epigrams, whether funerary or not, from the eighth to the fourth centuries BC. This work is cited as *CEG* in the present study, as is customary in all studies that draw from it.

One wide-ranging publication of Greek metrical epigrams from all eras and geographic locations is *Greek Verse Inscriptions. Epigrams on Funerary Stelae and Monuments*, by Werner Peek. This was the standard reference work before Hansen's publication, and is still used widely today, although many of its reconstructions have been criticized. The epitaphs cited throughout these pages also include their equivalent as shown in this publication, indicated with GVI.

Only rarely will I refer to epitaphs from the third century BC. In this case, Peek's publication mentioned above has been used, complemented by the more recent publication by Élodie Cairon, *Les épitaphes métriques hellénistiques du Péloponnèse à la Thessalie*, who compiles metrical funerary epigrams from peninsular Greece (Attica and Thessaly represent two thirds of the whole), from the death of Alexander the Great until the publication of the *Garland of Philippos*, c. 40 AD.

A consideration of Anne-Marie Vérilhac's work, ΠΑΙΔΕΣ ΑΩΠΟΙ, *Poésie Funéraire*, is also a requirement for our topic of study. Her book covers funerary epigrams from all eras and locations that commemorate boys and girls who suffered an untimely death. Her focus is on children rather than youths, and the timeframe is excessively wide; nonetheless, I have taken this work into account for my study.

Finally, I have reviewed the corresponding volumes of the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (SEG) for the more important epigraphic discoveries that have appeared since the Hansen publication. These advances considerably enrich the known data and can force us to reconsider instances that might otherwise be thought of as 'exceptional'. In short, they remind us that, of all categories, the *unicum*, the *hapax*, is most unstable.

## Iconographic sources

One of the first historical studies on the origin and interpretation of Attic funerary stelai is K. Friis Johansen's work, *The Attic Grave-Reliefs of the Classical Period. An Essay in Interpretation*, still a fundamental resource. Its author poses many of the open questions regarding the funerary stelai, seemingly simple and classifiable works of art. Johansen wonders, for example, who the deceased person is in grave-reliefs of couples or family groups, where we have no epigram that clarifies the situation. From Johansen's historical perspective he establishes that the seated posture of the deceased person, a norm in the Archaic period, is

not applicable in the Classical period. Also significant to this study is the still unresolved debate as to the meaning of *dexiosis*: a gesture of farewell, a gesture of encounter (depending on whether we consider the encounter to take place in *this* world, with the graveside visit, or in the *other* world). Johansen interprets it as a gesture occurring within the close family relationship of the characters in the scene.

Another reference volume is Gisela M.A. Richter's *The Archaic Gravestones of Attica*, which reproduces and discusses the corpus of Attic stelai from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. When the stele is accompanied by an inscription, the study is supplemented with an epigraphic commentary by Margherita Guarducci. Richter also wrote two fundamental works on *korai* and *kouroi*: *Korai. Archaic Greek Maidens. A Study of the Development of the Kore Type in Greek Sculpture*, and *Kouroi. Archaic Greek Youths. A Study of the Development of the Kouros Type in Greek Sculpture*.

In addition to these pioneering works, one of the key names associated with the study of funerary monuments as a whole (image and inscription) is that of Christoph W. Clairmont, *Gravestone and Epigram: Greek Memorials from the Archaic and Classical Period*. Here Clairmont presents a corpus of the Archaic funerary monuments, whether decorated with reliefs or paintings, where both image and epigram are preserved. Although he presents ninety-two pieces in total, a quarter of these are too fragmented and of little use. Attica, as always, is the source of more and better examples. More recently, Clairmont published *Classical Attic Tombstones*, a nine-volume reference work that reproduces and discusses Attic stelai from the Classical Age. In this monumental publication, the author inevitably refers to the devastating article by Georges Daux<sup>3</sup> that critiqued Clairmont's initial study from years before. While accepting some criticisms, Clairmont defends himself, not without reason, by pointing out the fruitfulness of his pioneering work. In this line, Clairmont mentions some of the titles that had appeared since his 1970 work, which demonstrate the viability and interest of the joint study of stelai and epigrams. In fact, in his new work, he clarified some observations made in his first work, where he often showed scepticism in regard to the relationship between text and image. An evaluation of Clairmont's contribution to the study of Greek funerary art was the object of an interesting colloquium published by Geneviève Hoffmann, *Les pierres de l'offrande. Autour de l'œuvre de Christoph W. Clairmont*. Both of Clairmont's studies are cited throughout the following pages, indicated by 'Clairmont', when referring to his first work, or CAT, when referring to the second.



## A note regarding the translations

The texts that I am going to analyse are first presented in the original Greek, followed by an English translation to make them accessible to the reader. I understand translation to have a merely instrumental value: it is neither the purpose nor the result of a study such as this. When offering translations of highly complex texts, as in our case where the texts are cultural artefacts, the result usually involves the translator's own interpretation. In my case, I have tried to leave interpretation to the commentary, and maintain a certain neutrality in the translation, as far as possible. Thus, for each of the terms that belong to the usual lexicon of epitaphs (and therefore, to the cultural context that concerns us), I have opted for a single translation that I maintain throughout.

Let us consider this more closely. A large proportion of the terms used in the epitaphs refer to a cultural world and system of values that only correspond to our own in part, perhaps very little at all. At times I have tried to close the gap between the original and the translated text by including notes and explanations, sometimes historical, sometimes etymological. To illustrate this, let us consider two terms, *arete* (ἀρετή) and *sophrosyne* (σωφροσύνη), whose frequent appearance in funerary poetry warrants some mention in this preamble. I have chosen to translate *arete* as 'excellence'. No matter how great the difference between the Homeric hero and the noble whose funerary stele stands along the road, excellence in one and the other is sung alike. *Arete* is the skill to stand out in something, it is the set of attributes and abilities that confer preeminence upon the one who possesses them; their owner becomes *aristos*. Again, whether we refer to the warriors of the *Iliad* or aristocrats of the Archaic age, to be *aristos* is to 'be spoken of' as *aristos*, bringing us to another crucial concept, that of *kleos*, or renown, the driving force behind the epic, and the ultimate motivation of funerary art.<sup>4</sup> As for *sophrosyne*, its translation presents a different type of problem. The term refers to 'good sense', 'good judgement' or 'prudence'. I translate this systematically as 'good judgement', and thereby make no artificial distinction between male and female *sophrosyne*. Certainly, the Greeks – and yes, we ourselves – have different ideas about what it means for a woman to have good judgement and what it means for a man. We often find translations that overrun any nuances, and superimpose our own prejudices, ascribing them to the Ancient Greeks; *sophrosyne* in the epitaphs of men is translated as 'intelligence' or 'good judgement', and in the epitaphs of women, as 'prudence' or 'modesty', doing an injustice to these texts where men and women were praised in the same terms. The undeniable differences between what would be considered – then and

now – a judicious man or a judicious woman, do not take the shape of two virtues with different names. In any case, translating always means making a choice; by attempting to avoid what I consider common translation errors, it is likely that I fall into others. It is up to the reader to point these out, but the reader can be assured that the English term ‘excellence’ always corresponds to the Greek ἀρετή, and ‘good judgement’ to σοφροσύνη. In short, the intent is to offer a more accessible version of the Greek text.

There is another term that causes even greater problems: *psyche* (ψυχή). The English word *soul*, with its long Platonic, Neo-Platonic and Christian tradition, is inseparable from the condition of immortality. To believe in the existence of the soul is practically the same as believing that there is something eternal that remains after physical death. But this is not true of the Greek term ψυχή, that last breath that escaped from the mouth or the wounds of Homeric heroes in their dying moment. Separation from the body did not imply that the soul continued to exist, or more precisely, did not imply immortality; it might live on, we do not know for how long, as a ghost in Hades that attains neither reward nor punishment for its life on Earth. Immortality of the soul was not preached until the arrival of the Orphic, Eleusinian and Dionysian cults, and more extensively, from Plato onward. In fact, as Burkert indicates, it was no less than a revolution that the epithet used by Homer to characterize the gods (the *Immortals*) would become essential in the human being.<sup>5</sup> The epitaphs we examine in this study occasionally speak of the separation of *soma* and *psyche*, body and soul, after death, but not of the immortality of the soul; only once is this explicitly affirmed, in an epitaph from the mid-fourth century BC, which we consider later.<sup>6</sup> Despite all these considerations, I have preferred to maintain the convention of translating ψυχή as soul, but with the precautions expressed here, and occasional reminders later.

## Note on the Greek text

The epigraphic texts are reproduced in accordance with Peter Allan Hansen’s publication cited above, except when noted. For the interested reader, I include here a list of diacritics and their meanings, in common use by publishers of these types of texts:

[αβ]	letters lost
⟨αβ⟩	emendation by the editor

{αβ}	superfluous letters deleted by the editor
[[αβ]]	letters erased or overwritten
†αβ†	<i>locus desperatus</i>
αβ	letters damaged, but almost certain
[...]	lacuna of a determined number of letters
[---]	lacuna of an undetermined number of letters
(i), (ii), (iii)	inscriptions engraved in the same stone, but separated

# The Funerary Landscape: A Reflection of the World of the Living

The topic of the first chapter is the evolution of the funerary monument that bears the epitaphs. The funerary epigram was inscribed on the base of statues; in the case of the stelai, whether decorated or not, the epigram could be on the base or the body of the stele. This monument was in turn placed within a very specific setting, the necropolis, although funerary monuments have also been found in private settings, for example when families opted to bury their dead on their country estates.<sup>1</sup> I will briefly review the characteristics of these memorials, to help us better understand when and why the funerary monument evolved from a simple stone that marked the place of burial, to an iconic element with statues and reliefs that evoke the deceased. The final part of this chapter will refer also to funerary legislation, particularly the laws attributed to Solon; although they are not sumptuary laws in the strict sense, they do make a mark on the archaeological funerary landscape.

## Funerary practices of the Ancient Greeks

The necropolis is a world of the dead that also reflects the world of the living. The study of the necropolis can help us to understand how a society is organized according to different classes of age, gender and wealth or social status. Our investigation begins with the funerary monuments of the sixth century BC and extends through the end of the fourth century BC, but it is advisable to review briefly the customs prior to this time, taking note of any indications of age, gender and status.<sup>2</sup>

Funerary customs were not exactly alike in all regions of Greece. Our study is based especially on material from Attica. In the Geometric age (c. 900–700 BC), as in the Archaic and Classical periods, both cremation and burial were customary. However, changes in preferences and customs can be detected from

one period to another. Throughout the ninth century BC we find secondary cremation, in other words, a custom whereby the ashes remaining from cremation are collected from the pyre and placed in an amphora that afterwards is deposited in the pit with grave-goods; this in turn is covered with a small tumulus. Already around this time there is a verifiable difference between the graves of adults and of children,<sup>3</sup> adopted apparently in all regions of Hellas: children were buried, not incinerated, and in Athens they were usually buried in the area of the future Agora and not in the Kerameikos.<sup>4</sup> A symbolic code is also followed in order to distinguish male tombs (funerary neck-handled amphora and war-related grave-goods: spearheads, swords) from female tombs (funerary belly-handled amphora and grave-goods related to feminine adornment: spindles, gold jewellery). The fact that, in Attica, women's graves display no less wealth than men's, is a unique case in the Greek Iron Age. In the same period, male graves begin to predominate in the Kerameikos, and in the opinion of François de Polignac, this necropolis became a place for commemorating the public status of certain men. In other words, a selective access to funerary rites is already perceptible within the elite group.

As we enter the eighth century BC, we observe a trend toward burial, although cremation continues as an aristocratic custom, following the well-known hero ritual – Patroclus, Hector – which will be recovered in the following century. The vessels that mark tombs become increasingly monumental in form, an innovation possibly due to aristocratic insistence on public commemoration for all their members, women included, whereas this privilege was previously reserved for a group of deceased males of the Kerameikos. The richest tombs are most prevalent in the rural demes.

With the beginning of the Archaic period, through the seventh century BC, we observe a number of important changes in funerary customs.<sup>5</sup> Again we find cremation as the dominant practice, and we observe, especially in the Kerameikos necropolis, a restriction that excludes children and women from the practice of formal burial – an expression used to indicate the type of burial that can be analysed archaeologically.<sup>6</sup> In this century, of the two types of Attic grave, those of adults and those of children, differences are seen in the method of burial (inhumation in the case of children, cremation for adults) and in the type of pottery found in the graves, when there are grave goods (Subgeometric pottery for children, Orientalizing pottery for adults). The archaeologist James Whitley, who has studied this matter in detail, suggests that formal burial of adults was in fact for men, evoking heroic funerary practices; if this is so, there would no longer be any place for female symbolism, and Attica would lose its uniqueness,

rejoining the rest of Iron Age and early Archaic Greece, with customs that distinguish only between the graves of male adults and the graves of children. In this century, the grave-goods to which I have alluded are quite scarce; however, in connection with male graves we almost always find the placement of external offerings (the German term *Opferrinnen* has been adopted). These are not grave-goods strictly speaking, but rather cult offerings.<sup>7</sup> Within these constructions we find evidence of the celebration of funerary banquets, including large quantities of pottery; these were most likely deposited and covered after being used in the cult celebration. Over the course of the seventh century BC, this became the usual practice in the Kerameikos; by the end of the century it had extended to other parts of Attica, and this custom makes it reasonable to interpret such remains as indication of some kind of tomb cult, according to Whitley. All the data point unmistakably to clearly political and elite connotations of the funerary space, monopoly of the *agathoi*, throughout the seventh century BC.<sup>8</sup>

As we pass to the sixth century BC, there are a few changes, but less abrupt than in the previous century. Cremation is no longer the norm in adult burials, and graves once again become the place where the deceased is left with his grave-goods. By contrast, *Opferrinnen* are much less frequent: the custom of constructing such repositories was already unusual around 600 BC, and became very rare by the middle of the sixth century BC. The vessels that marked tombs disappear for the most part; in contrast, we find stone stelai and statues of youths, *kouroi* and *korai*.<sup>9</sup> With the appearance of the *kore*, linked to the clan-based aristocracy, the tombs of women recover their individuality, although only unmarried young women receive this recognition. Also worth mentioning is that the funerary monuments and inscriptions of this period are usually found associated with groups of tumuli throughout Attica, in areas such as Vourva, Velanideza (the Aristion stele), Anavyssos (the Kroisos *kouros*). While it is possible to speak of aristocratic family tombs in relatively small complexes such as Vourva, studies emphasize that Archaic and Classical burials in the Athenian necropolis of the Kerameikos did not follow any family-related pattern, but rather that of age or status. The enormous tumuli that were raised in the Kerameikos between 560 and 540 BC do not represent any blood relations, but instead are groupings according to status, groups with some shared identity – men who had drunk and fought together and were buried together — and so confirm the particular role of this necropolis as manifesting public funerary ideologies, distinct from family customs.<sup>10</sup> Women would have no representation here.

The archaeological evidence of sixth-century BC Athens reveals a city where ostentation prevails in certain funeral ceremonies. In the Kerameikos, about

580 BC, a new mound was built over the seventh-century mounds, inaugurating a new series of burials, which culminated in the gigantic Mound G (c. 555–550 BC).<sup>11</sup> The same ostentation is also seen in the Agora, where an enormous Cycladic marble sarcophagus was discovered within a large complex of Archaic tombs, dated between 560 and 500 BC.<sup>12</sup> Due to its exceptional nature, at a time when graves were no longer placed within the city, this sarcophagus has been hypothesized as the tomb of the Peisistratids.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in 500 BC, according to D'Agostino, the city intensifies its control over funerary manifestations, and interest in figured stelai declines; there is no hesitation even to reuse these stelai in building the walls of Athens, under Themistocles.<sup>14</sup> Around the timeframe of 490–440 BC, the state instituted public speeches in Athens for the war dead, and was in charge of their commemoration in stone monuments, referring to the monuments that stand along the road to the Academy, sometimes bearing inscriptions, in the area known as *demosion sema*.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the doubts raised by some scholars, it is difficult to question the existence of this space in which orators commemorated the thousands who fell in war, a place in which speeches and public celebrations served to interpret the past, express shared values and build a collective identity for the city.<sup>16</sup> With regard to the exact location of this public cemetery, there are two possibilities. The general idea is that it was beside a road leading from the city to the Academy, but which one? Most scholars think that the cemetery was set on the wide road that issued from the Dipylon Gate, but others have suggested that it was beside the road that issued from the Leokoriou Gate, to the east of the Dipylon Gate, and ran parallel to the Academy Road deviating slightly in the direction of the demos of Hippios Kolonos. Archaeological excavations seem to indicate that the *demosion sema* was beside the former, that known as the Academy road. Thus, the establishment of this public cemetery is linked to clearly political motives: 'In establishing the *demosion sema* near the Academy road, the demos defined a new funerary space. The choice was motivated in part by the road's web of cultural associations, but it also drew a deliberate contrast with the district immediately to the east, along the Leokoriou roads where aristocratic values were celebrated. The Leokoriou roads had a noble, elite history, frequently expressed through association with horses and horsemanship. These roads were a particularly appropriate place for such aristocratic rhetoric because they were physically and conceptually linked to the hallowed ground of Hippios Kolonos, where, together with the hero-knight Kolonos, Poseidon and Athena were worshipped in their guise as horse deities.'<sup>17</sup> Burying together those fallen in war