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RICHARD NORTON

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GREEK GRAVE-RELIEFS.

BY RICHARD NORTON.

I.

ONE of the subjects connected with Greek Archaeology that has received most attention is that of the gravestones. It is not only the fascination of studying beautiful sculpture that has attracted scholars, nor that we possess a continuous series of these monuments from the earliest times, that is to say, from the Mycenaean epoch till the period when Greek individuality was suppressed by the Roman arms. The real reason is that although these monuments stand before us oftentimes uninjured by the lapse of years and with inscriptions carved upon them, they offer riddles as regards their interpretation which have not yet been solved, and which appeal to the curiosity of the student.

Until Schliemann's famous excavations at Mycenae in 1876, the earliest examples of grave steles which were known did not date from an earlier period than the sixth century B.C. We know, however, from Homer¹ that steles were, at the period when the poems were composed, considered as the *γέρας θανόντων* (Il. xvi. 458), and the passage Il. xi. 369 ff.

αὐτὰρ Ἀλέξανδρος
.
στήλη κεκλιμένος ἀνδροκμήτῃ ἐπὶ τύμβῳ
Ἴλου Δαρδανίδαο, παλαιῷ δημογέροντος

showed that the poet considered the custom of setting up grave steles an old one, for Ilos was the eponymos hero of Troy. Pindar, too, seems to have believed the custom to have existed in the heroic

¹ Il. xi. 371; xvi. 457, 675, xvii. 434; cf. xiii. 437; Od. xii. 14.

times; for in one of the Nemean Odes¹ he tells how Idas and Lynkeus, having killed Kastor, were pursued by Polydeukes:

. τοὶ δ' ἔναυτα στάθεν τύμβῳ σχεδὸν
πατρῴῳ·
ἐνθεν ἀρπάξαντες ἀγαλμ' Ἄϊδα, ξιστὸν πέτρον
ἔμβalon στέρῳ Πολυδεύκεος.

But the actual character of these ancient steles was open to conjecture: whether, that is to say, they were memorials of the dead, or monuments dedicated to the gods. It is evident that these are the only characters which monuments marking graves can possess. In the one case the stele expresses the desire of the dead person or of his friends that after he has left the earth there should still be a perpetual reminder of him near the places he had frequented when alive; in the other case it expresses the religious feelings consequent upon the mystery of death, and is, as it were, of the nature of an appeal to the unknown rulers of the realm of Death. Hence, in an age when writing is not at all or but little developed, this religious type of gravestone is likely to exhibit a representation of some god or of something connected with the service of the gods.

The former class can be divided into the monuments which embody the desire of friends² or of a family to commemorate the dead; into those which embody the personal desire of the dead to be remembered, and finally, into those that symbolize, under the form of an animal, some characteristic of the buried person. The first of these classes is too common to need illustration; the second is illustrated by the desire which Aeschylus expressed, that on his gravestone should be inscribed that he had fought the Persians at Marathon.³ The symbolic class is well represented⁴ by the lion

¹ x. 65 ff.

² Cf. Anth. Pal. (ed. Dübner, Paris, 1871), vii. 509:

Σῆμα Θεόγυιῶς εἰμι Σιωπέος, ᾧ μ' ἐπέθηκεν
Γλαῦκος ἑταιρείῃσι ἀντὶ πολυχροσίου.

³ Cf. Pausanias, i. 14. 5. Anth. Pal. (Append.), ii. 17.

⁴ Cf. Weissbäupl, Die Grabgedichte der Griechischen Anthologie, p. 68 f.

set up in Corcyra over the grave of Menecrates, or that at Thermopylae over the grave of Leonidas and the Spartans,¹ or that at Chaeronea over the Thebans who had fallen in the battle with Philip in 338 B.C.² Bulls too were used with symbolic significance, as the one still *in situ* in the Dipylon in Athens shows,³ and dogs,⁴ which were sometimes thought of as watchers of the tomb. In the Anthology we have references to the last in such verses as,⁵

Εἰπέ, κύων, τίνας ἀνδρὸς ἐφειστώς σῆμα φυλάσσεις ;

Sphinxes also occur used in this manner,⁶ as a symbol, the meaning of which has not been discovered.

It is important to keep in mind, as we study these monuments, the similarity of the feeling that we now have towards death to that which the Greeks had, for this is one of the few subjects connected with Greek archaeology in the consideration of which we may fairly, to a certain extent, use our own feelings in the interpretation of problems that arise without that danger of drawing false conclusions from them which exists in most other branches of the study.

The thought of the inevitableness of death was as common to the Greeks as to us. Homer, in speaking of *Ἔννομος*, the augur, says :⁷

ἀλλ' οὐκ οἰνοῦσιν ἐρύσσατο κῆρα μέλαιναν.

Not though he foresaw the events to come could he escape the Great Equalizer : κοινὸς πᾶσι λιμὴν Ἄϊδης.⁸ Whatever differences in

¹ Cf. Anth. Pal. vii. 248, 249.

² Cf. Overbeck, *Geschichte der Griechischen Plastik* (4. Aufl.), ii. 189. Friederichs-Wolters, *Bausteine*, 1008. Milchhöfer, *Mith. d. Inst. in Athen*, iv. 65.

³ Milchhöfer, *ibid.*

⁴ Milchhöfer, *ibid.*, p. 63. Furtwaengler, *Einleitung zu der Sammlung Sabouroff*, p. 51.

⁵ Anth. Pal. vii. 64. For other cases of symbolism, cf. 421-428.

⁶ Milchhöfer, p. 63 ff. Cf. also in regard to this class of monuments Brückner, *Ornament und Form der Attischen Grabstelen*, p. 26 f.

⁷ Il. ii. 859.

⁸ Anth. Pal. vii. 452. Cf. Kaibel, *Epigram. Graeca ex Lap. conl.* 256.

rank or fortune exist in life, when the end comes all men are alike. As might be expected, Solon emphasized this idea and said :¹

τὰ γὰρ περιώσια πάντα
 χρήματ' ἔχων οὐδείς ἔρχεται εἰς Ἄϊδω·
 οὐδ' ἂν ἄποινα διδοὺς θάνατον φύγοι . . .

Another way of saying the same thing is,

ὡς ἀλλ' καὶ γαίῃ ξενὸς ὕππευτ' Ἄϊδης²

or as in another epigram,

θανάτῳ πάντες ὀφειλόμεθα.³

Another feeling which is as old as the race of man is that of the cruelty of death, — that those go who ought to live. It is this which is the bitterest feeling that can spring up in the cheerless presence of death, and which only those escape who are blessed with a steadfast conviction that all things, even death, serve some ulterior and beautiful purpose. We find it very simply and touchingly expressed in the lines⁴:

Ἡ γρῆς Νικῶ Μελίτης τάφον ἐστεφάνωσε
 παρθενικῆς. Ἄϊδη, τοῦθ' ὀσίων κέκρικας;

Why does Death take the young and leave the old?⁵ No matter what one's religious beliefs, this question occurs to all, and all must feel sympathy for the father who said :⁶

Δωδεκέτη τὸν παῖδα πατὴρ ἀπέθηκε Φίλιππος
 ἐνθάδε, τὴν πολλὴν ἐλπίδα, Νικοέλην.

But together with the grief that Death brings comes one comfort, one sure stay and anchor, in the conviction that though the bodies have passed away, still the memory of noble or beautiful men and

¹ Poet. Lyr. Graec. Min. (ed. Pomtow), i. 135, No. 21. Cf. Anth. Pal. vii. 130; Pindar, Nem. vii. 19, 31; xi. 16; Isth. vi. 42.

² Anth. Pal. vii. 265.

³ Anth. Pal. x. 105.

⁴ Anth. Pal. vii. 187.

⁵ Cf. Anth. Pal. vii. 483, 671.

⁶ Anth. Pal. vii. 453.

women is immortal. It was this that Simonides felt in regard to the Athenians who fell at Plataea:¹

Εἰ τὸ καλῶς θνήσκειν ἀρετῆς μέρος ἐστὶ μέγιστον,
 ἡμῖν ἐκ πάντων τούτ' ἀπένευμε τύχη·
 Ἐλλάδι γὰρ σπεύδοντες ἐλευθερίην περιθεῖναι
 κείμεθ' ἀγῆραντ' ἠρώμενοι εὐλογία.

It was this that Plato felt when he wrote the immortal verses:²

Ἄσπῆρ πρὶν μὲν ἔλαμπες ἐνὶ ζωοῖσιν Ἐψῶς·
 νῦν δὲ θανῶν λάμπεις Ἔσπερος ἐν φθιμένοις.

I have, with these quotations, endeavored merely to suggest the natural similarity of feeling in regard to death between ourselves and the Greeks,—a similarity which, would we understand these grave-monuments truly, must never be lost sight of; for these steles are not the scattered remnants of a vanished sentiment, but are the manifestation of a feeling that “makes all men kin,” quickened, made beautiful, and eternized by their simple, yet truthful, rendering of human life.

The steles I have referred to as found by Schliemann were slabs about five feet high by three feet three inches broad, four of them being carved, while others were plain.³ They were found above the so-called ‘shaft’-graves within the city walls of Mycenae. The sculptured steles were found over the graves that contained men’s bodies, while the unsculptured ones were over the graves that contained only women. Over grave iv, which contained bodies of both sexes, was an unsculptured stele. Notwithstanding this apparent exception it seems safe to conclude that sculptured steles were used to commemorate men alone and not women. Considering the secondary part played by women (the women of the heroic age, as sung by the poets, do not come under consideration) in the life of the ancient Greeks, it is not unnatural that the steles for the men

¹ Poet. Lyr. Graec. Min. ii. 23. No. 22. cf. No. 23; Anth. Pal. vii. 258; Pindar, Isth. vi. 27 f.

² Anth. Pal. vii. 670; cf. 587.

³ Sculptured fragments of others were also found. Schliemann’s Excavations, ed. by Schuchhardt, p. 167.