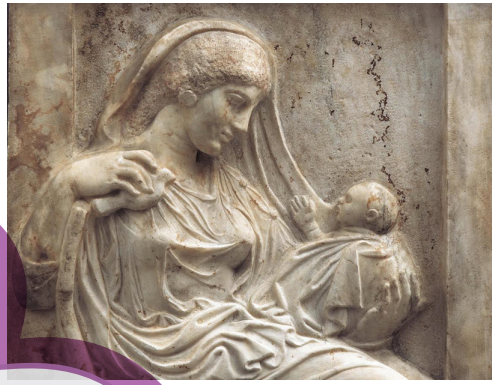
Reflections on some of the classical funerary sculptures of the Kerameikos ...



Upon entering the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum one is greeted by the classical funerary sculpture collection, which hosts some "beauteous" marble sculptures that were originally used as grave markers (*semata*) in the ancient cemetery. They incite genuine admiration arising from their exquisite craftsmanship, the moderation, harmony and ethos that characterize the ideal figures represented, as well as from the ecumenical and diachronic concepts they convey; besides, it is worth noticing that some of the mortals depicted on these monuments occasionally resemble the gods portrayed on the Parthenon Frieze as they were shaped by the same artists! The sculptors of the period disregarded and bypassed whatever they deemed as ephemeral or idiosyncratic and they continued to do so for approximately three generations henceforth... **Cessavit deinde ars.**[1]

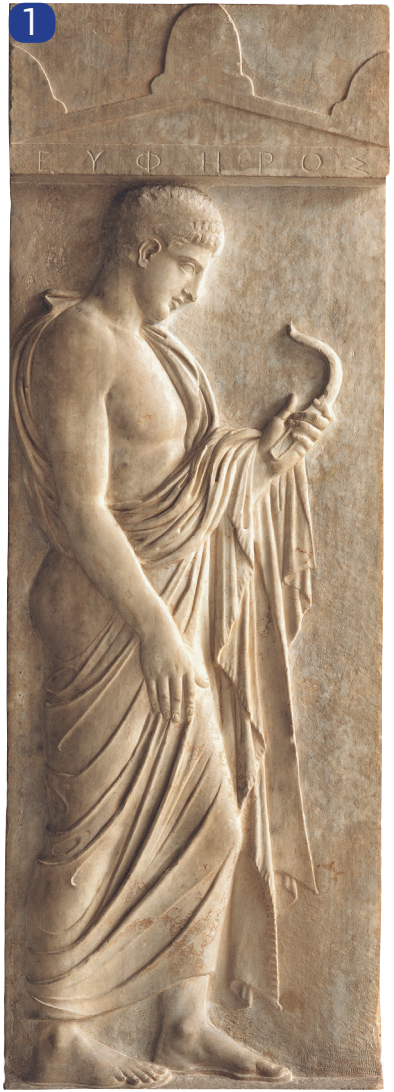
The modern exhibition of the sculptures in the form of a museum's collection, far from their original setting - where their copies stand - alienated from their excavation context and certainly deprived of their authentic colours and components, is an inevitable compromise, misleading to the contemporary viewer. Today we have a quite distorted perspective of these works of art, somewhat "academic" and remote, stemming from the twenty-five centuries spanning the time of their creation and the modern era, the way we communicate with ancient artefacts as a result of tourism, archaeolatry, the impact that the early (private) archaeological collections coinciding with the European Renaissance had, and -more recently- the excessively idealistic approach to antiquity.

We tend to forget that funerary sculptures were not originally intended to serve as masterpieces in a museum! They were objects with which sculptors earned a living, products for sale in the environment of an ancient cemetery. Funerary sculptures were mounted for public display on familial grave precincts and they often addressed passers-by through their inscribed epigrams, referring to "the common fate all people share".[2]

They were also decorated with **intense, vibrant** colours some of which were still vividly preserved when the monuments first came to light: for instance, the brown hair of Ampharete and the red details on her garments shone against an azure blue background, at the time when her naiskos-shaped monument was discovered, in 1933. Eupheros, was set against the light blue background of his oblong marble grave stele, which also preserved its colour when it was first unearthed in 1964. In the pediment above his head, two lions facing each other were painted and are still vaguely discerned to this day, surmounted by palmettes, also in colour.

The funerary monument of Eupheros is deeply humane and stirring at the same time; the youth is depicted in profile, as a sturdy ephebe and crowned athlete, garbed in the himation of the Athenian citizen, fixing his gaze on the strigil with which he is about to scrape off the powder of the conisterium. Despite the fact that "no artist ever thought or wished to render a person's facial features, the uncertain and perishable human race" while "everyone was restricted to the depiction of the outward appearance, the age, the hairstyle, the clothing and the pose, thus divesting existence of its materiality, imparting eternity"[3], the grave goods as well as the skeletal remains found in this specific burial near the Sacred Way have been astonishing: a figurine of an ape, vases and two bronze strigils were found deposited around the skeleton of a child!

Poor Eupheros passed away prematurely, possibly afflicted with the deadly plague that decimated the Athenians in 430-429 BC or 427-426 BC, or else of a different cause, but surely before he reached the age at which he is portrayed on his grave stele.



Had it not been for the strigil, the characteristic attribute depicted on the stele, also found as a grave good, we would have assumed that perhaps the marble monument was originally intended for some older young man, and ended eventually in the grave of the prematurely lost child for some unknown reason. On the contrary, we are dealing here with a conscious choice of the relatives (parents?) to honour the deceased and perpetuate his memory; they bestow upon their child (?) the Homeric "due of the dead" (*γέρας θανόντων*)[4]. This is how they chose to immortalize him: by depicting him at an age at which he would have been useful to Athens. We may envisage Socrates' words echoing in their mind:

"... that when they came to be of age, they might be useful to their country".[5]

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Photos

1. The grave stele of Eupheros at the Kerameikos, inv. no P 797/I 417, 430–420 BC (photo: S. Mavrommatis)

Endnotes

[1] "Thereafter art ceased". Plin. Nat. Hist. 34, 52.
[2] From the funerary monument of Eukoline, inv. no P 1136 / I 422.
[3] Σ. Καρούζου, Αρχαιολογικά Θέματα ΙΙ, Αθήνα 2011, 1.
[4] *Iliad,* Book XVI: 457, 675
[5] Plato's *Meno*, 89b. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967. Perseus Digital Library. www.perseus.turft.edu

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