

## BIRTH AND DEATH ON AN ATTIC STELE<sup>1</sup>

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The Diniacopoulos collection boasts a particularly fine example of an Attic funerary stele, Cat. 41 (Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.778; Frel, 1970: 216, no. 65). This piece was created to honour an Athenian woman who had died in childbirth and represents the deceased seated on the right of the relief with a female relative holding the infant on the left.

This gravestone is fragmentary but would originally have been rectangular in shape and surmounted by a pediment; it seems to have been cut out of its original frame. It is broken off at the lower left and upper right corners, and straight across the top of the head of the seated figure; the head of the standing figure has been re-set but it lacks the front and back portion of hair. The lower front part of the footstool is missing, as is the front part of the chair's right leg. There is damage to the face of the deceased, including the tip of her nose, and the lower part of her left forearm. The lower frame of the relief is preserved and is roughly finished with tool marks; this treatment occurs in other funerary stelai, such as an example in the Princeton Art Museum (Ridgway, 1994: 17, no. 3). There is no inscription recording the name of the deceased; this would have been located on the now-missing pediment; see, for instance, the stele of Hegeso in Athens (NM 3624; Stewart, 1990: fig. 477).

On the right of the relief is a young woman of childbearing years. She is seated in profile to the left on a stool, a *diphros*, without a back and with contoured legs. A coverlet on top of this stool falls down its front and back. She sits facing left, with her feet on a footstool, set diagonally, and wears a light-weight khiton beneath a heavier mantle that covers both her arms, her lap, and her legs. The lighter khiton can be seen over her chest and around her ankles. She also wears shoes with a high, plain sole; the strapwork would have been painted on (Clairmont, 1993: 34; Morrow, 1985: 58). Her hair is wavy and pulled back from the face, encircled by a fillet, and covered with a wig, a *opisthosphendone* at the back. She sits with her right leg forward on the footstool and her left drawn back. This position causes the drapery over her legs also to pulled back, and very heavy, ridged, horizontal and slightly diagonal folds are produced that accentuate her lower legs. Her left arm reaches across her lap and her right is bent at the elbow and raised towards her chin. Her head is inclined in a gesture of mourning.

On the left of the stele, opposite the seated woman is a standing figure who faces right but is seen in a three-quarter view. This woman too wears a khiton and mantle in the same manner as the seated woman: the heavier garment covers her arms and shoulders and falls to her lower legs. The break at the lower left corner of the stele and her position behind the seated figure hide her ankles and feet. Her right leg is drawn back and pulls her drapery with it in vertical and diagonal pleats. This woman holds a swaddled infant in her arms, with her left hand supporting

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the back of its head and her right clasping it from underneath; this pose is similar to that on a stele in Paris (Musée Rodin 15; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.730). The child is shown in profile, completely wrapped in cloth, with indistinct facial features turned up towards the woman holding it. Her head has been broken off but seems to have been inclined only slightly. Little of her hair has been preserved, but she seems to have had wavy hair pulled back from her face and held by a fillet.

The Diniacopoulos stele joins a small but consistent corpus of funerary reliefs representing a mother with a child. These show the same composition of a standing woman holding out a child to a seated figure, although there is great variation in the age of the child: a stele in Leiden represents a small child (Rijksmuseum I 1903/2.1; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.652), while a relief in Munich shows, like the Québec stele, a swaddled infant (Glyptothek DV 32; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.759).

This class of grave monuments was made for women who had died in childbirth and would not live to see their child grow (Clairmont, 1993: 91, 633; cat. 2.278). The seated woman is likely the deceased mother: in the Québec relief, she has a particularly sad and evocative head position and holds her hand up to her chin in a gesture of mourning (Clairmont, 1993: 111). She also does not hold the infant, signalling that she has already lost her connection with it through her death. These reliefs conjure up all manner of sympathy both for the deceased and also perhaps for the motherless child. Her grief is more profound for her detachment on the stele from the figure holding the infant. There is no visual communication between the two women on the stele, and this too emphasises the mother's detachment both compositionally and in reality. They do not make eye contact, and one woman is clearly already in the next world.

The identity of the standing woman with the infant is controversial, as it is in all these reliefs. It had long been assumed that such figures represent servants or maids, but their costume does not bear this out. Only in a few instances is the standing female garbed like a true servant in a long-sleeved khiton, a garment that indicates servile status: for instance, the relief of Hegeso in Athens (NM 3624; Boardman, 1985: fig. 151) and a stele in Brauron (Museum BE 1589; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.762). In others, as in the Québec stele, the garment of the attending woman is often the same as that of the deceased (Clairmont, 1993: 35-37). This implies social equality rather than a highborn woman with a servant, and another type of more appropriate relationship must be sought. The most satisfactory explanation is that the two women are relatives. Family groups, in fact, are frequently represented on grave stelai, identified through inscription: brothers and sisters, as on the Stele of Mnesagora and Nikochares in Athens (NM 3845; Boardman, 1985: fig. 149); husbands and wives, as on the Stele of Kharito and Phaidrias (Athens, NM 990; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.790), and entire families, as on a carved funerary lekythos in Athens (Third Ephoreia AE 561; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.779) are common. Sometimes the deceased are not present but they are indicated by inscription, as in the stele of Ampharete, where the living grandmother holds the motherless child (Athens, Kerameikos Museum; Boardman, 1985: fig. 150). Other family relationships can be inferred through age differentiation on stelai that lack full or any inscriptions, such as the older woman and young



male on the stele of Erasinos in New York (Metropolitan Museum 19.192.39; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.811). Such representations make it possible to identify the two similarly dressed women on the Diniacopoulos stele as close relatives, with the standing figure perhaps even present at the birth of the child and subsequent death of the mother. Her presence in the funerary scene, holding the infant, might also indicate that she has been entrusted with the rearing of the child now that the mother has died. Perhaps the images on this class of stelai are meant not only to show the mother with her child, one last time, but also to ensure to the family and onlookers that it will be well-tended throughout its life and raised in an appropriate social and economic atmosphere. This is a more personal and intimate message than that delivered by a stele showing a well-born woman with a child delivered over to a mere maid, one that demonstrates family unity and strength through successive generations.

The Diniacopoulos stele is of exceptionally high quality for a funerary monument. The often-mediocre quality of such reliefs as well as the repetitive nature of many of their images indicates that many were carved according to motifs in pattern books or by observation of the products of neighbouring workshops or even those already erected in cemeteries (Clairmont, 1993: 67). Many of these also probably received preliminary carving in the workshops and were finished with specific details once they had been purchased, much in the manner of Roman sarcophagi several centuries later (Clairmont, 1993: 67). The Québec stele, both in its individual elements and in its overall composition is within well-established sculptural and iconographic traditions. For instance, the stool of the deceased mother appears in numerous other funerary reliefs: e.g. a stele of a family group in Athens (NM 870; Ridgway, 1997: pl. 34). The costume of the two women is also familiar from other reliefs: for example, a standing woman with infant on an Attic relief in London (British Museum 1894.6-16.1; Clairmont, 1993: cat. 2.786). The arrangement of a seated figure facing a standing figure is the most common in Greek funerary reliefs and examples are too numerous to list.

The consistency and unity among these monuments encouraged J. Frel to attempt to attribute a number of them to specific workshops or artists (Frel, 1970). He ascribed the Diniacopoulos stele to the Mnesarete Group and specifically to the Phylonoe Sculptor, and cited the faces, the drapery and the rendering of the bodies beneath, the positioning of the figures, and the favoured theme of women who have died in childbirth (Frel, 1970: 216). While the enormous number of stelai available for observation around Athens would have both provided inspiration and made imitation easy, the Diniacopoulos relief and the Mnesarete stele in Munich do show similarities that suggest a closer relationship, probably a common workshop (Glyptothek GL 491; Ridgway, 1997: pl. 39; Diepolder, 1931: 31-32).

The seated women show comparable poses, especially their leg position on the footstool, although the Munich relief depicts the footstool in profile. The down-turned angle of the head is the same, as is the left arm position, although Mnesarete's right arm plucks her drapery at the shoulder whereas the Québec figure raises her hand to her chin. Little can be said about the heads due to damage in the Québec stele. The line of the chin and the overall shape of the head are similar in both reliefs, but hairstyles are dissimilar. The drapery of both seated figures is alike and



it hugs the upper body in the same way, but it is more detailed overall in the Munich carving, while that in Québec is more summarily carved. The distinctive “rosette” of folds in the seated figure’s lap, however, is present in both (Ridgway, 1997: 167). The material pulled over the legs is different, and the more finely rendered, thin folds on the Munich woman contrast sharply with the heavier Québec drapery with the sharp, high, diagonal ridges towards the lower hem.

The standing figures differ more. There is no child offered, and the Munich woman is clearly a servant with a long-sleeved khiton buttoned at the shoulders; she too drops her head in a gesture of mourning, unlike her counterpart in the Québec stele, at least if the angle of the re-set head is accurate. The positioning of her body is the same on both reliefs, as is that of the seated figure.

Similarities with the inscribed Mnesarete stele offer a tentative date for the Diniacopoulos relief. The Munich piece is dated *c.* 380 B.C.E., a date not inappropriate for the Québec work. The figures overlap, a feature more common in the 4<sup>th</sup> than in the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Ridgway, 1997: 167). The forms are more plastic than on earlier reliefs, where even finely carved details can look flat and motionless, as in the Cat Stele from Aigina, dated *ca.* 430 B.C.E. (Athens, NM 715; Boardman, 1985: fig. 148). Note, for instance, the right leg of the deceased carved in lower relief than the left leg in the foreground as well as the footstool placed at a three-quarter angle (Diepolder, 1931: 30). Even the drapery has a plastic quality, despite its sketchy carving; painted detail would have enhanced this effect.

The positioning of the two women also suggests an early 4<sup>th</sup> century date. Although they do not have significant visual interaction, their bodies more or less face each other; funerary reliefs of the second half of the century show the figures more frontally, staring out at the spectator (Ridgway, 1997: 168). Similarly datable is the mournful cast of the deceased’s head, exemplifying the humanising of funerary monuments, in contrast to the more aloof representations and atmosphere of the High Classical Period (Friis Johansen, 1951: 149).

The Diniacopoulos relief seems to have been carved in the first quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and it is well within the style, composition, and iconography of its times, inspired by or even inspiring similar funerary monuments. It was fashioned for an aristocratic woman who died in childbirth and whose child survived to be raised by members of her own family. She is shown on her funerary monument mourning her own death and displaying the appropriate maternal sadness regarding her fate and the motherless state of her child, but at the same time the relief indicates the future security of the infant and the continuation of the family.