

MOTHERHOOD SCENES ON ANCIENT GREEK FUNERARY STELAE*

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Abstract: Ancient Greek ideals about women were represented on stone no less than they were put down in writing, and Greek funerary *stelae* with motherhood scenes provide us with vivid glimpses of these ideals. Although these *stelae* were originally set up to commemorate dead women and carry messages which were particularly valued by them, their ideals were also shared with and understood by other (still alive) members of their communities. This paper studies ancient Greek *stelae* representing women during the classical and Hellenistic periods. It argues that most Greek women wanted primarily to be remembered as having been mothers. As such, they were mostly represented either as having died while giving birth to one, bidding farewell to their children or in familial scenes.

Cuvinte cheie: artă antică greacă, stele funerare, scene materne, femeie antică greacă.

Rezumat: Idealul grecilor antichi despre femei a fost reprezentat în piatră dar și în inscripții sau pe stele funerare, cu scene materne care ne oferă câteva frânturi despre acesta. Cu toate că aceste stele erau inițial puse pentru a comemora femei decedate și pentru a transmite mesaje pe care acestea le prețuiau în mod deosebit, aceste idealuri erau împărtășite și înțelese și de către alți membri (încă în viață) ai comunităților. Această lucrare studiază stelele antice grecești reprezentând femei din perioada clasică și elenistică. Ea susține, în principal, că cele mai multe femei din Grecia doreau să fie comemorate ca mame. Ca atare, ele au fost reprezentate mai ales mai ales ca decedate la naștere, luându-și rămas bun de la copiii lor sau în scene familiale.

At the beginning of her important study of Death, Birth, and Motherhood in Classical Greece, Nancy Demand has raised some questions about ancient Greek funerary reliefs which commemorate women. While one of these questions relates to the actual risk women faced during labor in ancient Greece, another asks: “*Why did families choose to portray scenes of labor on funerary memorials...?*”¹. This question, in addition to some others, provides the starting point of this paper; scenes of labor or childbirth constitute only a part of the topic I am discussing here. Funerary *stelae* also show women with their infants presented to them, or surrounded by children when these were old enough to walk. I shall attempt here to demonstrate that motherhood scenes constitute by far the most dominant scenes on women’s funerary reliefs and that the frequency and variety of these scenes reflect, above all, a public recognition of women’s primary role in the Greek world of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Moreover, the high frequency of these scenes, both in and

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¹ Demand 1994, IX; where she notes that “*Greek commemorative tradition otherwise avoided references to suffering and illness*”.

outside mainland Greece during these periods, as we shall see, attests to the universality and importance of the ideal of motherhood in the ancient Greek world.

To demonstrate this point, I shall divide the scenes in which women appear into three groups: the first includes women who died during childbirth. The second group shows women accompanied by one or more children while the third includes familial scenes showing, in addition to the woman and her children some other members of her family. Although these groups include women in different stages of their lives, and probably also in different statuses as widowed mothers or mothers survived by their husbands, they all concentrate on a common idea: the deceased woman was either a mother or died on her way to become one. Needless to stress, however, that the divisions between the three groups of *stelae* are not clear cut, particularly since labor scenes often include some close relatives of the deceased. Considering the limited space available for this paper, I shall limit my discussion to some illustrative examples from each group.

Labor Scenes

A considerable group of funerary monuments show women in labor, apparently to emphasize the circumstances leading to the loss of their lives.



Fig. 1. Metropolitan Museum of Art 24.97.92.

The style of these monuments has been described as attic or imitating the attic, particularly in the classical and early Hellenistic periods. Their interpretation has also been a subject of debate centred on whether or not these scenes indicate that the Greeks gave equal honours to women who died during childbirth as they did with men who lost their lives in battle. Demand, who discussed some of these scenes, has concluded that Greek funerary stelae “register an important distinction between men and women who died for the polis, rather than establishing an equivalence between the two”². Her view contradicts earlier opinions advanced by some French and German scholars. Nicole Loraux has formerly argued for this equation on basis of the literary evidence in a famous article, significantly entitled: “*Le Lit, La guerre*”³. The same view was also expressed by Ursula Vedder whose article title is more expressive of the idea of equivalence and who has concentrated on attic stelae of the 4th c. BC⁴. Most recently, the issue has been reconsidered by Maria Luisa Catoni in an article discussing rules of life and death motherhood scenes on stelae⁵ and by Susan Wise in her Ph. D. thesis presented to the at University of Cincinnati two years later⁶. I shall come to this point later; suffice it here to note that these previous discus-

sions have mostly depended on a certain group of classical attic funerary gravestones and that they do not consider closely other motherhood scenes, particularly the second and third groups of stelae discussed in this paper.

Scenes of women in labor appear both on stelae and on a type of pottery named *lekythos*. The association between this particular type of vases and funeral scenes is a well known phenomenon, as may also appear from some scenes on white ground vases during the 5th and 4th c. BC⁷. However, whether on a stone slab or on a *lekythos*, the deceased woman appears in these scenes in a general state of exhaustion, collapsing and receiving help from a female attendant, with her clothes loosened and her hair usually untied⁸. Sometimes, there is one or more than one female attending to her and, in some cases, a male figure who may presumably be her father or her husband.

Labor scenes include two groups, one which show the infant and another which do not.

I begin with an early votive funerary scene which comes from Athens and dates to the 5th c. BC (fig. 1)⁹. The woman appears in the usual “*sinking posture*”, with loosened hair and clothes, and a downcast face. She is surrounded by two female figures; one of them stands behind her touching her head and holding a “*swaddled infant*” with her left hand; the other figure obviously represents a deity.¹⁰

The famous *lekythos* of Theophante provides us with an example of the scenes which are characterized with the presence of a man (fig. 2)¹¹. It comes from Athens, dates ca 340-330 BC and shows Theophante sitting on a chair with loosened hair and clothes, and with her right hand falling. Her collapsing body and motionless limbs are all usual indications of labor. Behind her stands a woman, whose head is close to Theophante’s as if kissing her farewell. On the right stands a man supporting her left hand. His grief is apparent from the movement of his right hand up to his head. Since no swaddled infant appears on this scene, it may be the case that Theophante died before giving

² Demand 1994, 121 with note 1; quote at 129 [emphasis original]; Garland 2001, XIV.

³ Loraux 1981, 37-57.

⁴ Vedder 1988, 181-191, pls. 21-25. All dates are BC.

⁵ Catoni 2005/1, 27-53.

⁶ Wise 2007, especially 239-245.

⁷ Younger 2002, 171.

⁸ Wise 2007, 240; Demand 1994, 122 with note 4. Cf. Vedder 1988, 162, 164.

⁹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 24.97.92.

¹⁰ Demand 1994, 123. Cf., however, Wise 2007, 240, n. 485, on the recent discussion on the authenticity of this relief.

¹¹ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 1055. Another famous example may be found on the Sackler Museum stela in which an originally female figure was reworked to represent a man; on which see now Stewart, Gray 2000, 248-74.

birth¹². Another famous scene is that of Plangon and Tolmides (fig. 3)¹³. Plangon appears sitting on a chair falling backward as if fainting. She is being helped by two females from both sides who give her physical help and support. Tolmides stands on the far left holding his head with the palm of his left hand in a gesture indicating sadness and grief. His feelings are further confirmed by his attitude and downcast face. The inscription on the architrave identifies the deceased and her husband and shows that they were from Plataea. The *stèle* dates to around 320 BC¹⁴.

The iconographical representation of women dying during childbirth was not limited to Athens which provided us most of the preceding examples. Other *stelae* with the same theme, dating back to the classical period, were found elsewhere in Greece in addition to many others which prove that scenes of women dying during childbirth traveled with the Greeks to other areas into the Hellenistic world. They all share the same main elements, for the most part, and can be dated in light of each other. For our purposes, however, they attest the popularity of the scene and reflect an appreciation of the particular circumstances which caused the deceased to lose her life. Particularly noteworthy here is that this appreciation was widespread in classical Greece and in the Hellenistic world. Vedder has counted ten *stelae* dating to the Classical period and five dating to the Hellenistic. She has compared their style and has stressed that they are all “almost similar in the number of figures and in their scenes composition”¹⁵. Reference has already been made to the *stelae* of Plangon and Tolmides which was found at Oropus between Athens and Boeotia. I give further some more Hellenistic examples to demonstrate the point¹⁶.

From the city of Volos, to the north of Attica, we have a painted *stèle* which represents a deceased named Hediste. The relief is accompanied by an elaborate epitaph indicating that the woman died together with her child, which appears swaddled in the hand of a female figure in the scene¹⁷.

¹² See also the *lekythos* of Pheidestrata and Mnesagora, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, NM 1077 (which has two female figures); for other scenes on *lekythoi*, see Catoni 2005, 34, 37, 42.

¹³ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 749.

¹⁴ Demand 1994, 124.

¹⁵ Vedder 1988, 174.

¹⁶ See the list compiled by Wise 2007, 239, n. 482.

¹⁷ The epitaph reads: “The Fates spun on their spindles then for Hediste their painful thread when the bride went to meet the pains of labor. Miserable one! She will not embrace her infant, or wet the lips of her baby with her breast, for one light [of day] look, and then Fortune coming to both alike carried the



Fig. 2. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 1055.



Fig. 3. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 749.

The island of Thasos which lies further north in the Aegean provided us with some fragments of a relief bearing the same artistic motifs already encountered on Athenian ones, but dates to the late 4th or early 3rd c. BC¹⁸. In Alexandria, in Egypt, two

two away to one tomb” quoted in Demand 1994, 126 with note 31.

¹⁸ Vedder 1988, 172-173.



Fig. 4. The Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria.

stone *stelae* and a painted one were found. On the better preserved stela of the two stone reliefs (fig. 4), we see a pregnant woman being supported by two female figures, her upper part is naked and the garment falls on her lower part allowing us to note the artist's concentration on the signs of pregnancy¹⁹. The same scene is found also on the painted slab²⁰. Another similar *stela* found in Rhodes dates to the 3rd c. BC and shows the same artistic motifs²¹.

Despite the clear message of these *stelae* in their representation of women dying during childbirth, their interpretation has been a subject of discussion on the basis of an epigram which dates to the 4th c. BC and identifies the deceased as the mother of the pregnant woman²²:

Unhappy Mnasylla, why does it stand on your tomb, this picture of your daughter Neotima whom you lament, her whose life was taken from her by the pangs of labour? She lies in her dear mother's arms, as if a heavy cloud had gathered on her eyelids and, alas, not far away her father Aristoteles rests his head in his right hand. O most miserable pair, not even in death have you forgotten your grief.

Demand, who quotes this text, is certainly right in concluding that we need to be more flexible and to exercise some caution in our interpretations of these scenes²³. But how much caution do we really need to exercise in these cases? It is important to note that this particular epigram provides us with an unusually detailed description²⁴. Greek funerary *stelae* of the classical period are not usually accompanied with such detailed inscriptions that may help in their interpretation. This general remark applies as well to women's funerary *stelae* studied here. It would seem rather that Mnasylla's epigram was purposely written to caution the viewer against reading this particular *stela* according to the general terms of other similar scenes (a point which applies to Ampharete's *stela* below). Therefore, we may indeed be justified in stressing that the majority of *stelae* have been those of the pregnant woman herself. Another more general argument which is usually introduced against a direct interpretation of funerary scenes is that they were sometimes reused and adapted to the needs of



Fig. 5. Piraeus Museum 21.

¹⁹ Demand 1994, 124; Vedder 1988, 173 with note 53.

²⁰ Which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, cat. 04.17.1.

²¹ Catoni 2005, 43, fig. 14.

²² *Anth. Pal.* 7.730, trans. Paton, slightly modified (Loeb).

²³ Demand 1994, 131.

²⁴ Stears 2000, 213. Wise 2007, 242: "This description goes far in explaining the imagery used in these monuments".

new users²⁵. Unfortunately we do not have Mnasylla's *stèle* to determine how much this was the condition in her funerary scene. Judging from the inscription, it may be possible that the *stèle* may have originally meant to commemorate the dying pregnant woman and the epigram would be an ingenious way to reuse the *stèle* without touching the scene. As Boardman summarizes the issue, Mnasylla's case provides us with a scene that is made "*specifically appropriate by the epitaph*"²⁶. This argument may not seem conclusive, admittedly; but it, at least, explains the central place of the pregnant woman in the scene.

Whether the *stèle* which was accompanying the epitaph was originally intended for Mnasylla or for her daughter is, however, of relative importance as far as my discussion is concerned. More significant is the relationship between the depicted figures as well as the central theme of the monument – a dead mother embracing her daughter who was dying during labor. The words of the epigram are eloquent in describing the mother's grief over her daughter who passed away on her way to become a mother in her turn. The *stèle* thus glorifies motherhood on two levels: through Mnasylla's everlasting grief over her beloved daughter and through the latter's death during childbirth²⁷.

It has also been objected that childbirth scenes may sometimes be commemorating the death of a midwife, rather than the woman giving birth. A *stèle* in the Piraeus Museum representing a certain Malthake was advanced by Demand to prove the point on basis of the epithet of the deceased (fig. 5)²⁸. The woman is described as being *chreste*, meaning worthy, and the epithet was sometimes given to nurses, midwives and slaves²⁹. Compared with other more elaborate *stelae*, Malthake's scene is modest and done in low relief, but it does have a typical labor scene. Vedder, who does not consider the epithet in her discussion of the relief, notes that it belongs to the earliest group of attic funerary reliefs representing women dying during childbirth³⁰. Leaving aside the type of the *stèle* with its small, low relief panel scene, as an indication of the low status of its owner³¹, the



Fig. 6. British Museum, GR 1894.6-16.1.

stèle could well have been of a working woman, but of a woman who died during childbirth and not of a woman whose profession was necessarily a midwife³². A grave *stèle* of a midwife where the pregnant woman dies during childbirth would flatly contradict the connotation of her epithet as *chreste* and, indeed, might put her professional ability into question³³. The epigram of Mnasylla and, probably less so, the *stèle* of Malthake may become thus, as Paul Zanker puts it in his study of Smyrnaean reliefs, "*instructive as the exceptions that prove the rule*"³⁴.

To summarize this discussion of the scenes representing women dying during childbirth, it may be concluded that they were primarily meant to highlight the conditions in which the deceased lost her life and the reasons causing her death, namely, that she lost it while trying to give life to her baby. This much may be clearly understood from the epitaph of Kleagora from Miletus which states

²⁵ See note 11 above and Vedder 1988, 166-167.

²⁶ Boardman 1985, 184.

²⁷ Wise 2007, 243, n. 494: "*Though the owner of the tomb is a different character in the scene, the concept conveyed in the image is nevertheless, death in childbirth*".

²⁸ Piraeus Museum 21.

²⁹ Demand 1994, 125, with notes 25, 26. See also Kosmopoulou 2001, 311-312, *N10, N11*, (describing a nurse).

³⁰ Vedder 1988, 170-171.

³¹ Stears 2000, 216. Cf., however, Oliver 2000, 67, 71.

³² Cf. Kosmopoulou 2001, 299: "*The stèle of Phanostrate ... offers the only secure representation of a maia in Greek art*". See also Wise, 2007, 241 with note 492.

³³ As most recently suggested by Beaumont 2012, 46-47.

³⁴ Zanker 1993, 228.

that she lost the light of her life “while bringing a child to light”³⁵. The scenes obviously underline the greatest sacrifice a Greek woman could make. They also show how much these prospective mothers were deeply grieved and lamented by their parents and other members of their families and how much their sacrifice was publicly noted and appreciated by their families and communities³⁶.

Infants/Children Scenes

A large number of *stelae* shows a deceased woman with one or more of her children. They show some variety both in terms of the age of children as well as in their numbers. My emphasis here is on the scenes which include only the deceased together with her children; those which include other members of her family will be discussed in the next group. The swaddled infant we have seen on the first *stèle* appears also on another gravestone in the British Museum which dates to the first quarter of the 4th c. BC., and comes from Athens (fig. 6)³⁷. It represents a woman seated on a chair and wearing her clothes in an orderly manner. In front of her stands a maid holding a swaddled infant and about to give it to its mother who looks elsewhere.



Fig. 7. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 52.11.3.

³⁵ Athens, Epigraphical Museum, 10531; Vedder 1993, 187, with n. 125.

³⁶ Wise 2007, 243 n. 496, where she counts some 15 inscriptions mostly from the 5th and 4th c. BC.

³⁷ British Museum, GR 1894.6-16.1.

It seems that the woman probably died shortly after she had given birth to the child and left it less than six months or one year old³⁸, even though its face seems older than that. Another *stèle* with two swaddled infants, one carried by the woman herself and another by a young attendant, is now in the Louvre Museum and dates back to the same period³⁹.

There are also more scenes which confirm that death of mothers within a short time after childbirth was not infrequent⁴⁰. On these *stelae* we usually find a woman seated on a chair wearing her normal dress and slightly covering her child in her lap with her himation. A *stèle* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art dates to the first quarter of the 4th c. BC and provides us with a typical scene (fig. 7)⁴¹. These scenes are fewer than those in which an attendant stands holding the child and they probably explain that both the mother and the child died within a short period one following the other⁴².

A small simple *stèle* in the Walters Art Gallery shows a woman sitting on a chair holding a swaddled infant in her hand whom she cradles and bends her head to look at it (fig. 8)⁴³. In front of the woman stands a boy, holding a bird in his right hand. He seems to be showing it to the infant. The *stèle* dates to the end of the 5th c. BC and contains no more figures than the woman and her two children. From the same period comes also the famous *stèle* which represents a certain Ampharete playing with a child beyond swaddling age, sitting in her lap⁴⁴. It is only from the inscription that we know that Ampharete is the child’s grandmother. Nothing in the woman’s features explains that she is exceptionally older than the other women who appear in similar *stèle*. Like Mnasylla’s epigram mentioned above, the inscription on the architrave describes the child as the “*dear infant of my [Ampharete’s] daughter*”, and serves as a due warning to the viewer not to read in this particular case the usual “*generic message*” often attached to other similar scenes⁴⁵.

³⁸ Sommer 2011, 156 and cf. Beaumont 2012, 103.

³⁹ Catoni 2005, 35, fig. 7. See also the comprehensive list of these *stelae* in Wise 2007, 241, n. 488.

⁴⁰ *idem*, 32-35, figs. 3, 4, 6, 7. See also the *stèle* in Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 819; Louvre, 3296; Musée du Québec, 66.246. For life expectancy of women, see Stewart, Gray 2000, 272.

⁴¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 52.11.3; for other examples: Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 792; Athens, Kerameikos Museum, 4123 (a fragment).

⁴² von Bothmer 1953, 186-187; Beaumont 2012, 99.

⁴³ Walters Art Gallery, 23.176.

⁴⁴ Athens, Kerameikos Museum, P695, 1; Catoni 2005, 35, fig. 8.

⁴⁵ Boardman 1985, 184; see also Stears 2000, 214.

Most of the preceding *stelae* come from Athens and its neighbourhoods and date back to the classical period. For the Hellenistic age, however, we have to turn elsewhere since the funerary laws of Demetrius of Phaleron brought the flourishing gravestone industry in the city to a stop⁴⁶. Thus the majority of funerary *stelae* in this period comes from Asia Minor and the Aegean. Those of Smyrna in Asia Minor have been lately the subject of a study which stresses their symbolic importance as representations of the identity and self-image of citizens of Smyrna, particularly those of its upper class⁴⁷. Zanker's observations on these scenes are important since they show that, by the 2nd and the 1st centuries BC, the Smyrnaeans were adopting new modes of expression, stressing new values as well as using a new type of *stèle*, the *naiskos*.

However, despite the changes showing themselves in Smyranean *stelae*, they provide us with some evidence that women were careful to show that they were mothers as much as they cared to show their *pudicitia* and other signs of status⁴⁸. On a *stèle* in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid, a woman is depicted in her full dress as if coming out of her house which is signified by the altar and the jewellery box behind. She is being followed by a girl carrying a baby in her left hand. The fact that the girl is a slave is indicated by her bare right shoulder⁴⁹. Another *stèle* in the Armenian School of Izmir depicts a woman standing in a frontal position and is surrounded by two children on the left and one on the right (fig. 9). The *stèle* is interesting because it shows three children whose "liveliness" confirms that they were all her children and not slaves⁵⁰. More noteworthy, however, is that the woman seems to be unaware of their presence beside her. Excluding the playful attitude of the little children, no emotions are represented on the *stèle* between them and their mother. Compared with the attic *stelae* of the classical period, the concentration here is not on a private moment between the mother and her children; rather it is on the children as an integral part of the image of a Smyranean woman as being a mother in addition to her being modest and chaste⁵¹.

Emphasis on the motherhood of the deceased manifests itself in the preceding scenes

⁴⁶ Stears 2000, 219-220; Stears 2000a, 54.

⁴⁷ Zanker 1993, 212-230, and more recently Langier 2009, 64.

⁴⁸ Langier 2009, 68, 70.

⁴⁹ Zanker 1993, 223, fig. 23.

⁵⁰ Slaves' status on these *stelae* is signified by their small size, Zanker 1993, 223, fig. 21; Kurtz and Boardman 1971, 334.

⁵¹ Zanker 1993, 223-226.



Fig. 8. The Walters Art Gallery, 23.176.



Fig. 9. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional.



Fig. 10. Volos Museum 376.

through the mere presence of her children. But it is also apparent from the number of children appearing with the deceased. The scenes may therefore be taken as a realistic representation of the number of children surviving their mother and the attention given to this fact by those who set up the *stelae*. Thus, while Asia appears with one child⁵², the woman in the *Walters Art Gallery*, referred to above, appears with two. In an epigram dating to the end of the 3rd c. BC, a deceased woman states that she gave birth twice. However, only one of her children was still alive since she had taken the other with her to the underworld⁵³. We do have some other examples which show that the deceased was survived by more than two children, though they might not be as many as those mentioned before⁵⁴. The realistic representation on these *stelae* appears as well in its careful designation of the gender of the children and of their age. Looking at the *stèle* of Asia, again,

⁵² Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 767; it dates to the first quarter of the 4th c. BC.

⁵³ Quoted in Vedder 1988, 185, n. 117.

⁵⁴ See the *stelae* of Apollonia below.

it will be easily noted that she was a mother of a boy who was old enough to walk.

Although many of the *stelae* which are studied here are not accompanied by elaborate epitaphs, or to be more precise, some of them have been separated from the inscriptions which were attached to them when they were set up, some inscriptions which were found separately may supplement our study of the scenes. They are no less expressive in their verbal stress on the circumstances attending these women's death and on the fact that they were survived by their children. In an epitaph dating to the 4th c. BC, we read the following epigram⁵⁵:

*This very dust has received the comely daughter of Damainetos,
Kratista, the dear wife of Archemachos,
Who died because of the painful fate of childbirth,
After leaving to her husband an orphan son in the house.*

Unfortunately we do not have the scene which commemorates Kratista's death, but it may be possible that this orphan has survived this particular childbirth in which its mother died. In another epitaph we encounter a woman named Khairippe who boasts that she has left for her children a record to be remembered of her *arête*⁵⁶. In a third epitaph the deceased woman asks her husband to take care of her beloved ones, which can be taken in this context to mean her children⁵⁷. More important to note, however, that in addition to the epithets which we encounter on women's graves to commemorate their beauty and modesty, *arête* and self restraint, a woman who had a particularly painful pregnancy could also have been pitied for having died during birth leaving no child behind, *ateknos*⁵⁸. On the other hand, the second most frequent epithet encountered on women's reliefs studied by Hooper in Koum Abou Billou in Egypt, prided them on their having been loving of their children, *philoteknos*⁵⁹. Although he goes on to comment on the epithet saying that "*it would be a natural term to use if it is assumed that it was usually the children who provided the stèle*", the

⁵⁵ Tsagalís 2008, 232, comments on this epitaph saying: "*The inscribed epitaph by its inception aims at bringing the memory of the deceased to the present. In this respect ... [its words] convey to the reader features of the deceased's past life*". See also Loraux 1981, 39-40.

⁵⁶ Quoted and discussed in Tsagalís 2008, 154.

⁵⁷ As suggested by Younger 2002, 183 with note.

⁵⁸ The complete epitaph is quoted in Vedder 1988, 185, n. 118 (see also the following note).

⁵⁹ Hooper 1961, 29. Although the epitaph of the preceding footnote dates to the 1st c. AD and the reliefs cited by Hooper date to the 3rd and 4th c. AD, they nevertheless belong to the Greek world and continue the traditions already noticed in the previous examples.

epithet nevertheless complements our view of the deceased woman as a mother and a loving one of her children at that.

Familial Scenes

The third and final group of motherhood scenes shows women with their children as well as other members of the family. Usually the children appear old enough to crawl, stand, or walk. Sometimes the *stelae* include a man who may be identified as the woman's husband and thus signify the two roles of a woman as a mother and a wife. Both roles obviously overlap, but the presence of the father may also indicate that he was still alive when the woman died.

I begin with a touching *stèle* from Phalanna in Thessaly in northern Greece (fig. 10) which dates to 430 BC⁶⁰. It shows a woman sitting on a chair and holding a child with both hands. Both the woman and the child face a man who stretches his right hand with a bird out to the child. It is interesting to note the manner in which the woman holds the child as if handing it to his father and entrusting it to him. Another *stèle* from Athens dates circa 375-350 BC and shows a man standing before his deceased wife and shaking hands with her in a usual *dexiosis* scene (fig. 11)⁶¹. Meanwhile a little girl stands next to the man who rests his right hand on her left shoulder. The girl stretches her right hand (now broken) to bid her mother farewell while holding a bird in her left. The unity of the family is confirmed both physically and symbolically while stressing simultaneously the double role of the deceased woman who is seated on the left side of the scene.

Another *stèle* shows a deceased woman and her children with other members than her husband. On a famous *stèle* from Ikaria, which dates around the middle of the 5th c. BC, sits a woman named Apollonia on a chair in the left of the scene and with her are depicted five children, “*apparently of five different ages*”⁶². She holds a baby in her lap and in front of her stands an older boy leaning against her and putting his left hand on her knee. Behind him on the floor crawls yet a third naked son. On the right stand two lads who bid her farewell. The younger one raises his right hand on to his head in a gesture of grief. Considering that her brothers Koironos and Eurymedes were the ones who have commissioned the *stèle*, it is likely that they are the two figures on the right. If this interpretation is



Fig. 11. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 65.11.11.

correct, Apollonia may have played the role of the mother for her three children and for her two young brothers. In fact, that much can be deduced from her “*matronly seated figure*”⁶³.

Again all these scenes date to the Classical period and come from Athens and mainland Greece and we have to rely on evidence from elsewhere for the later Hellenistic period, as already pointed out. On a *stèle* from Smyrna, now in Vienna, Cemetery of Grinzing, a woman stands beside her husband in an almost frontal position (Fig. 12)⁶⁴. A little child stands on the right next to his mother and holds her mantle with its right hand. The frontal poses of the figures reflect a drastic change from the traditions of the classical *stelae*, but more noteworthy is the lack of emotions between the figures represented. The movement of the left hand of the woman to touch the shoulder of her husband seems somewhat forced and unconventional, compared to the postures of other Smyrnaean *stelae*⁶⁵. However, it

⁶⁰ Volos Museum 376. See also, Boardman 1985, 185, fig. 166.

⁶¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 65.11.11.

⁶² Golden 1993, 18.

⁶³ Boardman 1985, 68, fig. 53, suggests that they are all her children, however.

⁶⁴ Zanker 1985, 226-227, fig. 26.

⁶⁵ See also Zanker's comment (1993, 226): “*Almost all [figures*



Fig. 12. Vienna, Cemetery of Grinzing.

is apparent that she is a mother of the little girl and the point was important enough to be noted in the scene.

Conclusion

What do we understand from the variety of the preceding motherhood scenes and, particularly, how far can we interpret the scenes which represent women dying during childbirth in the light of the last two groups? Seen collectively, they obviously attest to the importance of the motherhood ideal in the Greek world. Many women wanted to be commemorated as mothers, if not as good lov-

in the stelae] look directly out of the frame, at the viewer, and the scene of dexiosis is rarely encountered”; and cf., on the other hand, the strong sense of family unity in the Metropolitan stele (11.100.2) which probably includes a father, his wife, their daughter and a granddaughter, and dates to middle of the 4th c. BC.

ing ones, particularly as may be inferred from the scenes which show them playing with their children. The scenes which show dead women with their swaddled infants may also be considered a proof of the importance of this ideal (though unfulfilled in their case).

Considering the importance of being a mother for a married woman and the dangers attending labor, it would seem rather possible to conclude that death during childbirth was, for Greek women, similar to men’s dying in battle. Indeed this much is understood from the well known passage of *Medea*, in which she complains that men think that women’s life is easier than theirs and states that she would prefer to “*stand three times in the front of battle than bear one child*”⁶⁶. Although the passage does not make a direct comparison between women’s death in labor and men’s death in battle, it is clear in stating that, from a woman’s point of view, labor was more perilous than fighting an enemy in a battlefield. It follows from *Medea*’s words and from the inscriptions which underline women’s sacrifice of their life to give life to their children that a woman’s death during labor was considered the greatest sacrifice she can make while trying to fulfil her duty as a mother, just as dying in battle was the utmost sacrifice a Greek man can make while fulfilling his duty as a citizen⁶⁷.

Men who died in battle were commemorated on their *stelae* and so were women who died during childbirth. Admittedly each group of *stelae* had its own iconographic rules and women were represented facing death in a passive manner while the concentration was on the heroism and bravery of men. Pregnant women’s passivity was usually interpreted in terms of male/female antithesis and was taken as a sign indicating that the Greeks did not compare between the two deaths. But, the difference in emphasis in men’s and women’s funerary *stelae* may be explained by the nature of battle women were engaging in against an unseen foe. Furthermore, it may be also understood according to the conventional rules followed by the artists. It has already been noted, for example, that labor scenes of women showing clear signs of pregnancy did not appear in the *stelae* before the Hellenistic age. What I am suggesting here is that the multiplicity of motherhood scenes on funeral *stelae* reflects a public recognition of women’s vital role as mothers and of their death in labor. In a society

⁶⁶ Euripides, *Medea*, 250-251.

⁶⁷ Thus Vedder 1988, 184: „Neben dem Tod auf dem Meer und dem in Kriegertod ist es vor allem der Tod von Frauen, die beider Geburt oder im Kindbett gestorben sind, die in den Gedichten beschrieben und beklagt wird“.

which women had “no independent existence”⁶⁸, the preceding motherhood scenes were probably the best we can get to acknowledge woman’s role as a mother and to publicly commemorate her death on her way to become one.

⁶⁸ Blundell 1995, 114.

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