The ancient Greek conception of the afterlife and the ceremonies associated with burial were already well established by the sixth century B.C. In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes the Underworld, deep beneath the earth, where Hades, the brother of Zeus and Poseidon, and his wife, Persephone, reigned over countless drifting crowds of shadowy figures—the “shades” of all those who had died. It was not a happy place. Indeed, the ghost of the great hero Achilles told Odysseus that he would rather be a poor serf on earth than lord of all the dead in the Underworld (*Odyssey*, 11.489–91).

The Greeks believed that at the moment of death the *psyche*, or spirit of the dead, left the body as a little breath or puff of wind. The deceased was then prepared for burial according to the time-honored rituals. Ancient literary sources emphasize the necessity of a proper burial and refer to the omission of burial rites as an insult to human dignity (*Iliad*, 23.71). Relatives of the deceased, primarily women, conducted the elaborate burial rituals that were customarily of three parts: the *prothesis* (laying out of the body (54.11.5), the *ekphora* (funeral procession), and the interment of
the body or cremated remains of the deceased. After being washed and
anointed with oil, the body was dressed (75.2.11) and placed on a high bed
within the house. During the prothesis, relatives and friends came to
mourn and pay their respects. Lamentation of the dead is featured in early
Greek art at least as early as the Geometric period, when vases were
decorated with scenes portraying the deceased surrounded by mourners.
Following the prothesis, the deceased was brought to the cemetery in a
procession, the ekphora, which usually took place just before dawn. Very
few objects were actually placed in the grave, but monumental earth
mounds, rectangular built tombs, and elaborate marble stelai and statues
were often erected to mark the grave and to ensure that the deceased
would not be forgotten. Immortality lay in the continued remembrance of
the dead by the living. From depictions on white-ground lekythoi, we
know that the women of Classical Athens made regular visits to the grave
with offerings that included small cakes and libations.

The most lavish funerary monuments were erected in the sixth century
B.C. by aristocratic families of Attica in private burial grounds along the
roadside on the family estate or near Athens. Relief sculpture, statues
(32.11.1), and tall stelai crowned by capitals (11.185a-c,f,g), and finials
marked many of these graves. Each funerary monument had an inscribed
base with an epitaph, often in verse that memorialized the dead. A relief
depicting a generalized image of the deceased sometimes evoked aspects of
the person’s life, with the addition of a servant, possessions, dog, etc. On
early reliefs, it is easy to identify the dead person; however, during the
fourth century B.C., more and more family members were added to the
scenes and often many names were inscribed (11.100.2), making it difficult
to distinguish the deceased from the mourners. Like all ancient marble
sculpture, funerary statues and grave stelai were brightly painted, and
extensive remains of red, black, blue, and green pigment can still be seen
(04.17.1).
Many of the finest Attic grave monuments stood in a cemetery located in the outer Kerameikos, an area on the northwest edge of Athens just outside the gates of the ancient city wall. The cemetery was in use for centuries—monumental Geometric kraters marked grave mounds of the eighth century B.C. (14.130.14), and excavations have uncovered a clear layout of tombs from the Classical period, as well. At the end of the fifth century B.C., Athenian families began to bury their dead in simple stone sarcophagi placed in the ground within grave precincts arranged in man-made terraces buttressed by a high retaining wall that faced the cemetery road. Marble monuments belonging to various members of a family were placed along the edge of the terrace rather than over the graves themselves.

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Citation


Further Reading


