

# FRAGMENT OF A FUNERARY STELE

GREEK, ATTIC, 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BC  
MARBLE

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HEIGHT: 66 CM.

WIDTH: 35 CM.

DEPTH: 20 CM.

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*PROVENANCE:  
FORMERLY IN A FRENCH PRIVATE  
COLLECTION.  
PASSED DOWN WITHIN THE  
SAME FAMILY FROM THE 1950S.*



This beautiful fragment of a bas-relief portrays a man in a seated position. He is wearing a himation, the traditional Greek

garment, which is draped around his body, covering his shoulders and right arm. There are triangular folds over his torso, and our figure is catching the folds that are slipping due to his seated position with his left arm. The relief of the clothing contrasts with the bared left arm, which comes out of the frame towards us, before resting on his thighs. The man's face is uplifted, gazing at a point towards the fragmentary left side of the relief. He has a classical Athenian face, with a round, heavy chin, full lips, round cheeks and large eyes framed by prominent eyelids. His hair is short and curly, baring his face and neck. His expression is absolutely serene, and despite the lifelike appearance of the modelled flesh, this feels like an idealised portrait.

By its format and style, we are able to recognise in this fragment an Athenian funerary stele from the Classical period. These bas-relief sculptures marked the placement of graves and were used for the offerings and cult given to the deceased, whom they recalled by their name and image. These steles emerged as early as the Archaic period and were originally high and narrow, often surmounted by a sphinx or a decorative palmette. The deceased were



represented standing, in relief or simply engraved or painted (Ill. 1). In the 5th century BC, tastes evolved, bringing about larger steles that took the form of a naiskos, or small temple surrounded by pilasters and surmounted by a pediment (Ill. 2). The larger space made it possible to represent the deceased sitting. Over time, these steles became larger and larger, and from the 4th century BC, whole family groups were sculpted in relief (Ill. 3).



Our fragment is perfectly in line with this tradition. Our man is resting his back against the remainder of the right pilaster of the naiskos in which he was housed. The direction of his face tells us that at least one other person was next to him, and he was favouring them with a farewell glance. The deceased is often the person represented seated, exchanging a handshake with a living family member. The gesture symbolised both a farewell and the link that persists after death. By observing the

position of the arms on our fragment, we can guess that it portrayed that very gesture. Complete steles show handshakes that place the arms in the same position as that of our figure's (Ill. 4). In this farewell scene, the expression of pain is discreet, but our sculpture is imbued with melancholy. These same codes and atmosphere can be observed in many Attic steles from the 4th century BC (Ill. 5-7).



Ill. 1. Stele (grave marker) of a youth and little girl, Greek, Attic, ca. 530 BC, marble, H.: 423.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 11.185a-d,f,g,x.

Ill. 2. Stele of Hegeso, Kerameikos cemetery, Athens, ca. 410-400 BC, marble, H.: 149 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 3624.



Ill. 3. Stele (grave marker) of Lysistrate, Greek, Attic, ca. 350-325 BC, marble, H.: 113.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 06.287.

Ill. 4. Funerary stele of Thraseas and Euandria, Greek, Attic, ca. 340-350 BC, marble, H.: 160 cm. Antikensammlung Pergamonmuseum, Berlin, inv. no. Sk738.



Ill. 5. Funerary stele with a man and a seated woman, Greek, Attic, marble, H.: 107 cm. Musée d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne, Marseille.



Ill. 6. Fragmentary funerary stele, Greek, Attic, ca. 340 BC, marble, H.: 55.8 cm. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, inv. no. 948.229.2

Ill. 7. Funerary stele, Greek, Attic, ca. 330 BC, marble, H.: 98 cm. J. P. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, inv. no. 73.AA.122.

Our sculpture is made of a white, rather translucent marble, with average sized crystals. It is very likely Pentelic marble, which was traditionally used in Athens. The marble is covered by a pink hued deposit, a testament to its long sojourn beneath the earth. Combined with its fragmentary aspect, this gorgeous patina tells of the passing of time and the long history of the sculpture, part of a French private collection from the 1950s.

