

Zeren Deniz Ataçoçugu, *Visits to the Grave in Classical Athens: An Experience Depicted on White Ground Lekythoi*

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The honouring of the dead did not end after the funeral in Athens during the Classical period, c. 500 – 300 BCE, and visitation of graves was expected.¹ These visits are depicted on white-ground *lekythoi*, vases which carried perfumed oil, produced in Athens. The earliest examples of these vases, depicting grave visits, date to c. 480 – 470 BCE and were continually produced throughout the fifth century BCE.² The *lekythoi* themselves were common grave offerings and would be used in the very activities they depicted.³ They provide invaluable insight into the lived experience of fifth century Athenians as they honoured their dead. By close analysis of the scenes, the figures and objects they include, we may gain some understanding of who visited the grave, what they dedicated, and what motivated the visits.

The theme of mourning occurs consistently on Attic painted pottery from as early as the eighth century BCE and remained popular throughout the Classical period in Athens.⁴ Grave visits became the most common scenes on white-ground *lekythoi* after the mid fifth century BCE, and they generally

¹ Osbourne 2008: 199

² Oakley 2004: 145

³ Neils 2004: 32

⁴ Shapiro 1991: 629.

follow a standard type.⁵ Two figures stand either side of a monument, commonly identified as funerary *stele*, and bring grave offerings. These offerings consist of baskets, ribbons, wreaths, and *lekythoi*.⁶ An example of



Figure 1. White-Ground *Lekythos*. c. 450 – 400 BCE. A cloaked figure (left) and figure carrying a basket (right) either side of funerary *stele*. © Newcastle Upon Tyne, Great North Museum, Shefton Collection (854), 2022.

a scene which follows this standard typology can be seen in figure one, two figures stand either side of a *stele* adorned with ribbons. A variety of figures are shown in these scenes, but it is female figures who are depicted most frequently.⁷

Who visited the grave?

Women in Classical Athens held little status as individuals, but religion was one element of life in which

⁵ Pipili 2009: 241

⁶ Hosoi 2014: 9

⁷ Oakley 2004: 214

women were allowed prominence. The daughters of some priestly families carried baskets in the processions of the Dionysia and Panathenaea, forty Athenian women served as priestesses to the city's cult, and female only festivals such as the Adonia and Thesmophoria were open to women across Athenian society.⁸ The care of the dead was another intrinsically religious activity designated to Athenian women. The close female relatives of the dead were expected to devote themselves to the burial, and continued visitation, of their deceased family members.⁹ Women were tasked with preparing the body for burial, the *prothesis*, in which they would lay out the body within the home before washing, anointing, and dressing it before the funeral.¹⁰ Aristophanes references this duty in his *Lysistrata*, in which the titular character mentions carrying out a funeral and rites performed at the grave.¹¹ The women in the family were also the ones to lead the funeral procession, the *ekphora*, which saw the body ceremonially delivered to the graveyard from its initial resting place in the family home.¹² Sophocles' *Antigone* illustrates how seriously this duty was taken, with Antigone going to her grave rather than letting her brother remain unburied.¹³ It is clear from the evidence that carrying out the duties surrounding death and burial was a distinctly feminine experience, albeit one delegated by men, which explains the dominance of female figures on the white-ground *lekythoi*.

⁸ Pritchard 2014: 189

⁹ Pritchard 2014: 191

¹⁰ Chrystal 2017: 148

¹¹ Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 612 – 13: London

¹² Osbourne 2008: 198

¹³ Sophocles *Antigone*: London

Of course, it is not only women in these scenes. On the left of the scene in figure one, a cloaked male figure who holds a stick can be seen. An elderly man, cloaked and with a stick, was often placed in scenes opposite a young,



Figure 2. Attic white-ground *lekythos*. c. 440 – 430 BCE. Bosanquet Painter. Women holding libation bowl (left) and youth (right) either side of grave *stèle*, lekythoi and wreaths adorn the base. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (23.160.39).

lightly armoured male figure who may have been meant to represent the deceased. This interpretation places the cloaked figure in the role of the mourner and creates an intensely emotional scene as the youth and potential of the deceased is mourned.¹⁴

However, it can be incredibly difficult to identify figures meant to represent the dead. John

¹⁴ Pipili 2009: 243

Oakley supposes armoured male figures must represent the deceased as it is unlikely men would wear armour to visit graves in reality.¹⁵ Nathan Arrington makes a similar observation about nude male figures in these scenes.¹⁶ These arguments are convincing as these types of figures rarely bring grave offerings so may be the recipients of them instead. A nude male figure can be seen beside a grave in figure two, a female figure offering libation stands opposite. Oakley also discusses the possibility of *eidola*, winged stick figures which appear in some scenes, denoting the deceased status of the figures they are depicted above; but again the evidence is too ambiguous to make any strong assertions.¹⁷ Despite the lack of certainty, the concept that the spirits of the dead were present during grave visits may help to explain the motivations behind the visits. Mourners could find comfort in knowing the dead were waiting at the graves to receive them and were present as they were honoured.¹⁸ This insight into how the visits were conceptualised is preserved by the scenes on the white-ground *lekythoi*.

What was taken to the grave?

The most common types of grave offerings were *lekythoi*, ribbons, wreaths, and baskets which carried these items. These baskets, an example of which can be seen carried by a woman in figure three, were open and did not have handles. They appear on pottery in a funerary context but also appear on red figure vases in a variety of other contexts. Baskets were carried in religious

¹⁵ Oakley 2004: 165

¹⁶ Arrington 2014: 5

¹⁷ Oakley 2004: 212

¹⁸ Arrington 2018: 8

processions and also played a part in wedding preparations.¹⁹ So their presence in a funerary context is invocative of these religious and marital activities which would inspire grief as the deceased loved one could no longer take part. The presence of the basket during the grave visit may also reference the *ekphora* and therefore have stirred up the feelings of grief felt at the funeral.



Figure 3. Attic white-ground *lekythos*. c. 450 – 400 BCE. Bosanquet painter. A youth with spears and woman with basket visit the grave. *Stele* with sash, *lekythoi*, and wreaths at base. Mirror and *lekythos* hang in the field. Athens, National Museum (CC1692).

Lekythoi

themselves are the most common vessels shown being taken to, and adorning, the grave; they can be seen carried in baskets, be held by visitors, or adorn the steps of the grave.²⁰ Funerary *lekythoi* reference themselves in these scenes by the depiction of the vase on a vase itself.

¹⁹ Reilly 1989: 417

²⁰ Oakley 2004: 205

This had the effect of doubling the offering made by the grave visitor as they left a pictorial depiction of the dedication they had just made. This also provides insight into the commercial aspect of grave visits, as by depicting this vase in a distinctly funerary context, Athenian painters allowed the viewer to identify the *lekythoi* with funerary custom and thus created more demand for their work.²¹ The presence of *lekythoi* in these scenes also made reference to domestic scenes, this might be anticipated as the figures we see are most often women. The home and grave are conflated in these scenes mainly by the objects which appear, the offerings put on the grave also appear in domestic contexts as household objects.²² This conflation is especially obvious when the items hang in the field as if they are on a wall, an example of this can be seen in figure three where a *lekythoi* and mirror hang above a woman making dedications. This comparison with the domestic sphere could be a reference to the role of women and how the care for the dead was seen as one of their domestic duties even though it allowed them outside of the home. Alternatively, this conflation could be seen as a way to keep the deceased close to home, by depicting the grave as part of the home the dead never truly left the family. Perfume vases, as well as wreaths and ribbons, also played an important role in the marriage ceremony.²³ So again, the grief of the dead being taken from the living, especially if they were women who died before marriage, is reinforced by the presence of these items.

Visitors to the grave are often shown holding ribbons and wreaths, and using them to decorate the grave.²⁴ Like baskets, ribbons had a diverse

²¹ Neils 2004: 33

²² Arrington 2014: 3

²³ Algrain 2015: 51

²⁴ Oakley 2020: 221

range of uses including religious and festival use so their appearance in these scenes stresses the ritual nature of the grave visit.²⁵ Wreaths also decorate the tombs in these scenes; usually made of olive or myrtle, they were used to reward victorious athletes as well as being exchanged by a couple on their wedding day.²⁶ Again, we see that the objects dedicated at the grave were never exclusively funerary and often referenced religious life and marriage. Ribbons can also be seen used to adorn the *stèle* in these scenes, an example



Figure 4. Attic white-ground *lekythos*. c. 450 – 440 BCE. Achilles painter. Woman ties ribbon to a funerary *stèle*. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (08.258.16).

of which can be seen in figure four. In this action, the *stèle* becomes the object of ritual and is used in place of a living person or the body during the *prothesis*. The *stèle* would also be anointed with oil in place of the body, which helps to explain why *lekythoi* were so popular in a funerary context.²⁷

With this in mind, we can understand the

²⁵ Oakley 2004: 204

²⁶ Reilly 1989: 420

²⁷ Hosoi 2014: 19

adornment of the *stele* as an outlet for the grief of the mourners and how the grave was viewed as a place where direct contact with the dead could be made. The presence of these grave offerings and their diverse significances, as well as the interaction with the *stele*, reveal how complex and interwoven the iconographies of death, marriage, and life were in Classical Athens and how the grief in these funerary scenes was often derived from the juxtaposition of the joy experienced in other scenes which included the same objects.

When and why did the visits take place?

The number of objects we see in a scene may also be an indication of the frequency at which grave visits took place. Oakley suggests a ribbon tied around a *stele* may have been the equivalent to the modern custom of leaving flowers at a grave and that multiple ribbons meant the grave was regularly attended to.²⁸ This can be seen in figure one, on which the *stele* is decorated with multiple ribbons and the basket carrier brings even more, suggesting the adornment of the *stele* with ribbons was a continual honour made to the dead. Sometimes, among the multiple *lekythoi* which sit at the base of the *stele*, fallen vessels can be seen, this occurs on around ten white-ground *lekythoi* and suggests the *lekythoi* may have been on the grave for some time. Arrington reminds us that fallen vessels in attic vase painting could be used to indicate motion, and so these fallen *lekythoi* could be present to indicate both the passing of time and create a sense of movement in the scene as the

²⁸ Oakley 2004: 204

grave visit is carried out.²⁹ Numerous objects in these scenes point to repeated and continual visits to the grave, and given the importance of honouring the dead in Classical Athens, it is reasonable to assume these visits would have been a somewhat regular occurrence.

Annual visits to the grave were dictated by religious festivals. The *Genesia* was an annual festival which honoured those who had been dead for multiple generations; the *tritopatores*, or thrice-ancestors. The purpose of this festival was to appease the spirits of the dead and avoid the reappearance of their vengeful ghosts who felt their resting places had been neglected.³⁰ This appeasement was a widespread concern, and with this motivation in mind we could read the leaving of *lekythoi* which depicted grave visits not only as a double offering but as a double insurance against these potentially vengeful spirits. Furthermore, there were legal motivations for these visits to the grave. The attitude someone took towards their deceased relatives was used to judge their morality and claims to inheritance could be undermined if proper respect had not been given to the dead.³¹ Additionally, the failure to carry out the proper visits to the tombs of one's parents and grandparents could lead to a man being prosecuted for poor treatment of his ancestors.³² Another compelling motivation for the care of the dead was the wish that the same kindness would be showed when those visiting the graves died themselves, we could view the scenes on these *lekythoi* as both reflections of reality and

²⁹ Arrington 2014: 2

³⁰ Chrystal 2017: 149

³¹ Osbourne 2008: 199

³² Pritchard 2014: 191

aspirational scenes in which the living are setting the standard for the care they wish to be shown in death. One specific motivation can never be ascribed to the visits but through the scenes on the *lekythoi* we can gain some insight.

Overall, the scenes of grave visits on white-ground *lekythoi* show us how integral women were to the care of the dead in Classical Athens. Consideration of grave offerings reveals how the objects dedicated at the grave were often associated with feminine and domestic contexts as well as referencing religious and nuptial contexts, and could be used to articulate the grief of the visit by invoking practices the dead could no longer partake in. The scenes also provide insight into the frequency of the visits and how the familial, religious, and legal expectation of Athenian society motivated these visits. On a more intimate level, analysis of the figures present and how they interact with the grave goods and stele can provide some indication of how individuals articulated and felt grief during these ritual visits, with the stele taking the place of the body. These observations are made all the more compelling due to the fact we gain this insight from the very objects which not only articulate the process but were used within it.

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