



Silent Slaves: Reconstructing Slave Perspectives on the Grave Stele of Hegeso

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ABSTRACT

The Grave Stele of Hegeso (400 BCE) depicts a ‘mistress and maid’ scene and preserves valuable insights into elite iconography. The stele also explores the experiences of wealthy Athenian women in their social roles and domestic spaces. The slave attendant, if discussed at length, primarily functions as a method of contrast and comparison to her elite master. While the comparison between elite and non-elite women is a valuable interpretation for studies of gender and class in classical Athens, more can be done in regard to examining the slave attendant on the stele, and as a result, examining slave figures in Greek art. Slaves made up a sizeable portion of classical Athenian society and were present in both elite and poor households. However, due to a lack of material and written evidence, the field of classics has not explored the concept of Greek slavery to its full extent. In addition, what little does remain to modern scholars was commissioned or written by elite voices, who were biased against slaves. The remaining elite perspective does provide insight into the role of slaves in classical Athenian households and can be reexamined to find subversive interpretations. This paper explores potential reconstructions for slave perspectives and narratives on the Grave Stele of Hegeso by drawing upon the Attic funerary practices and literary tropes of the Good Slave and Bad Slave in Athenian theater and Homeric epic. This paper also discusses the relationships between masters and slaves, household slave dynamics, and what constitutes the idealized Athenian slave. While the majority of remaining classical material and literary evidence relates to the elite, subversive ideals can be picked out from elite narratives and used to better understand the perspectives of the enslaved, construct frameworks that give voices to disenfranchised groups, and further enrich the study of surviving elite perspectives.

When the Grave Stele of Hegeso (Fig. 1) was first excavated in 1870, its remarkably intact status launched over a century of scholarship focused on elite iconography, gender, and status in classical Athens. Dating to 400 BCE, the grave stele is a Pentelic marble funerary monument standing 1.49 meters tall and 0.92 meters wide.¹ The stele depicts two women in a relatively common “mistress and maid” scene. As identified by the stele’s inscription, Hegeso, daughter of Proxenos, is seated as the lady of the household. Her slave attendant is at her side, holding a box

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of jewelry. The stele is a *naiskos* form, meaning that it emulates the architectural form of a classical Attic temple, with two columns and a pediment framing the two figures.



Figure 1: The Grave Stele of Hegeso, 400 BCE²

The majority of the existing scholarship for the grave stele focuses on Hegeso, rather than her slave. As an elite woman, Hegeso has a larger body of written and iconographic evidence to

analyze. This grave stele bears her name, and as such, it is only natural for scholarship to focus on her image. Hegeso's slave is not commemorated on this stone, but instead functions as a visual representation of her master's status as a free Athenian woman.³ When the slave is mentioned at length, it is usually to discuss what her presence and iconography has to say about Hegeso, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, the field of classics has historically avoided discussing the full extent of Athenian slavery. This hesitance can be seen in the common terminology used to refer to enslaved people as attendants, maids, or laborers rather than fully addressing the dark reality of Attic society. However, to many Athenians, citizen or not, slavery was an integral part of Attic society. As a result, reexamining the depiction of the slave on the Grave Stele of Hegeso can provide valuable insight into the Athenian perception of slavery and would have been regarded in vastly different ways for both slaves and their masters.

To fully understand the iconography of the slave, it first needs to be broken down and compared to the traditional iconography of the elite Athenian woman. In her monograph *Body, Dress and Identity in Ancient Greece*, Mireille Lee, a classicist specializing in the study of gender, writes: "servants and slaves are generally represented in opposition to the elite ideal," and this difference can only be fully highlighted when both modes of representation are discussed in full.⁴

Hegeso, the largest figure on the stele, is shown seated on a stool—a sign of luxury, leisure, and the domestic space.⁵ Her garments are rendered elaborately with numerous folds that cascade over each other. The hair is equally as complex, carved into a meticulously arranged hairstyle and incorporated into a headdress. As she sits, Hegeso is shown reaching into a jewelry box held by her slave attendant and pulling an object out. The original piece of jewelry showcased on the stele was not carved into the stone but painted on. As the original polychromy has faded away, scholars do not know what it looked like, but a popular theory is that it may have been a necklace or type of brooch.⁶ This iconography would have worked to present Hegeso as a well-cared for wife and highlighted the household's wealth.

In contrast, the four main iconographic elements of an Attic slave woman are as follows: short cropped hair, short physical stature, foreign features, and performing activities of servitude.⁷ On the grave stele of Hegeso, the enslaved attendant demonstrates several of these iconographic elements. She is physically much smaller than her mistress—if Hegeso were to stand, she would tower over the other woman. The slave's chiton is much less elaborately rendered, with fewer folds and definition. She is also wearing two types of chitons, a long-sleeved one worn beneath a short-sleeved one.⁸ This long-sleeved chiton is known as a *chiton cheridotos*. Hegeso's slave also wears her hair covered up by a *sakkos*, which in conjunction with the *chiton cheridotos* is the typical dress of female slaves on grave stelae.⁹ The enslaved attendant does not have any outwardly noticeable foreign features. These non-Greek physical traits can vary widely, although most commonly these are represented by tattoos and non-Greek physiognomy, such as red hair.¹⁰ The strongest indicator that Hegeso's slave is non-Greek is the *chiton cheridotos*, as it is a garment frequently associated with foreign-born slaves.¹¹ Lastly, Hegeso's slave is shown performing an act of service for her master, by holding the jewelry box for Hegeso to peruse. Several of these iconographic indicators can be seen on other contemporary grave stelae, such as the grave stele of a young woman and servant (Fig. 2) and the stele of Phainippe (Fig.3) which share the drastic

difference in height between mistress and slave and the performance of acts of service. Notably, they also share the *naiskos* form with the Grave Stele of Hegeso.

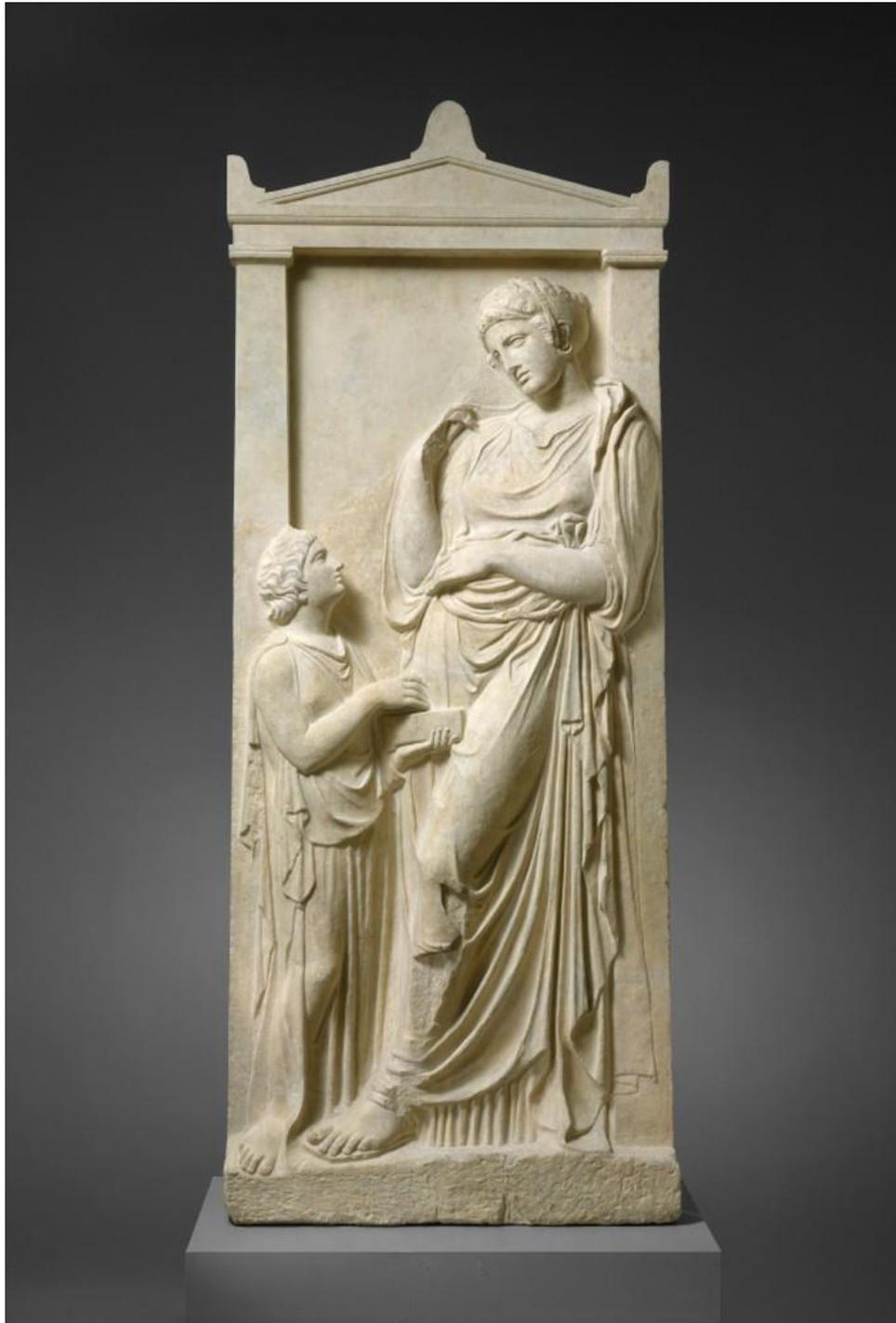


Figure 2: Marble grave stele of a young woman and servant, 400-390 BCE¹²



Figure 3: Marble stele of Phainippe, 400-390 BCE¹³

According to the popular, contemporary iconography, Hegeso's slave is a stereotypical depiction of an Attic slave. The visual stereotypes of slavery are what define her both as a slave and a person, and this use of stereotype also applies to the depiction of Hegeso. The stele is not aiming to convey an individualistic portrait of Hegeso and her slave. Instead, the stele, the artist, and the commissioner behind it are portraying "stereotypes of man, woman and maid" and using

these stereotypes to depict Athenian social norms and ideals.¹⁴ In Hegeso's case, she is represented as the ideal Athenian woman and wife, safely ensconced in the domestic space with wealth and the privilege of leisure. Managing the home and household slaves was a job that would have been expected of her as an elite wife, along with weaving and perhaps some minor role in cult ritual.¹⁵ The grave stele depicts Hegeso in her expected role of "carrying out a variety of traditional domestic...roles in accordance with the politics of gender and spatial differentiation."¹⁶ The *naiskos* format of the stele could also support this, as the form may represent the family house. Hegeso and her enslaved attendant are figuratively standing in for all women belonging to the domestic space.¹⁷ However, if the purpose of this grave stele was to convey prevalent social ideals, what is the depiction of Hegeso's slave attendant meant to say about the idealized form of Athenian slavery?

In classical Attic literary sources, with a particular emphasis on Athenian theater, slave characters can be used to unravel slave stereotypes prevalent during classical Athens. Athenian theater often engaged with contemporary issues in society, and as such, the character types in these plays can provide insight into the social perceptions of slavery. These stereotypes can be separated into two distinct character types: the Good Slave and the Bad Slave. The Bad Slave is seen most often in comedies, and can be characterized as "untrustworthy, sex-starved, bibulous, gluttonous, and weak-willed."¹⁸ They are physically and morally ugly, disloyal to their masters, occasionally outright traitorous, and are usually punished or mocked as a form of social sanctioning. The punishment of "bad" slave characters would be considered humorous in Athenian comedies. In drama and tragedy, scenes of punishment were regarded as righteous comeuppance for disobedient and disloyal slaves. For both genres, the abuse of "bad" slave characters reinforced the "physical power of masters over the bodies of slaves" and the lack of slave autonomy.¹⁹ This display of power would have been reassuring to slave-owning elites, who were vastly outnumbered by the slave population in Athens.²⁰ In contrast, the Good Slave embodies the opposite traits: loyalty, obedience, and devotion. They are members of the family but are ultimately aware of their status as a slave and their place in the Athenian social hierarchy. Hegeso's slave embodies the stereotype of the Good Slave via her obedience and servile nature to her master, even after death.

The earliest literary reference of the Good Slave trope appears in Homeric epic.²¹ The *Odyssey* has two prominent slave characters: Eumaeus and Eurycleia. Both characters are members of Odysseus' household, remaining loyal to their master even after his twenty-year absence. They scorn the suitors who are destroying Odysseus' property and curse the household slaves who have not remained loyal. Eumaeus aids his master in the slaughter of these suitors and Eurycleia crows in triumph at the execution of the household intruders. The Bad Slaves of the *Odyssey* are justly, but cruelly, punished according to classical Attic standards. Telemachus and his father execute all the female slaves who turned their back on the household and fell into bed with Penelope's numerous suitors. The Good Slaves aid their master in restoring the balance of the household and are narratively rewarded for doing so, while the Bad Slaves are unceremoniously executed for their transgressions.

Homer's version of slavery is one deeply rooted in paternalism, "marked by loyal service on one side and benevolent care on the other."²² In the *Odyssey*, Bad Slaves are punished for breaking social contract and the consequence is their death. However, a fear of punishment is not the only motivation to maintain the paternalistic relationship. Good Slaves are sometimes rewarded for maintaining this paternalistic relationship. In an exchange with Odysseus in Book 14 of the *Odyssey*, Eumaeus sums up some of the numerous rewards a slave can earn from years of loyal service:

He would have taken care of me, and given / what kindly owners give to loyal slaves: / a house with land, and a wife whom many men / would want—as recompense for years of labor which the gods have blessed and made to prosper. (14.62-66)²³

Odysseus would have provided for his slave as a father would for his son, gifting some of the privileges of the free elite to his slave, including land and a wife. This would only come after proving one's worth and loyalty to the household. This sense of paternalism is deeply embedded in the Good Slave trope, and this ideal persisted in the collective consciousness of classical Athens, as Hegeso's slave is rewarded by being immortalized on the stele with her master. She only achieves an identity after proving herself as a worthy member of the household.

Depicting Hegeso's attendant as a Good Slave would have also reflected well on the household in terms of their moral character and status. It should be remembered that Hegeso's grave stele would have been commissioned with some design input from her husband. With this in mind, Hegeso's depiction as a well-cared for, wealthy, domestic wife would have spoken to her husband's wealth and status. As the head of the household was responsible for the stewardship of both his wife and slaves, it is likely that the household reputation was also considered with the depiction of the slave attendant. "Good" slaves reflected well upon their household and masters in the same way that "well-behaved children reflect positively on their parents."²⁴ An unruly slave was indicative of the poor character of the master, who was assumed to be either too lax in disciplining their slaves or equally unworthy in character. As such, the presumed character of a slave played a key role in determining their master's social status. Since Hegeso's slave is meant to be viewed as the Good Slave figure, her presence on the grave stele would cement both Hegeso and her husband's virtue as upstanding Athenian citizens. Furthermore, the presence of Hegeso's slave in conjunction with her mistress could have been intended to represent a cohesive and well-run household, which would further emphasize Hegeso's capability in managing the household and her slaves.²⁵

The argument that Hegeso's attendant is meant to be regarded as a Good Slave is strengthened when the full context of the stele's original location is considered. The Grave Stele of Hegeso was excavated from the Kerameikos Cemetery in Athens.²⁶ While the modern site is currently within city limits, Kerameikos, like all other Greek cemeteries, was located outside of the city walls in the 400 BCE.²⁷ The Kerameikos Cemetery was situated by the Dipylon Gate, a major entrance to the city of Athens, and the well-traveled road to Eleusis, which made it a site uniquely suited to receive a constant flow of people.²⁸ Athenian elite, their slaves, and even foreign visitors to Athens would have passed through this site and viewed the grave stelae. Furthermore, Kerameikos would

develop a reputation as a burial place for prominent Athenian citizens, “singled out as the burial place of those whom the city wished to honor most highly,” making the grave stelae at Kerameikos exceptionally noteworthy in its contemporary period.²⁹ In its original position, the Grave Stele of Hegeso would have been placed atop a walled terrace that bordered the roads. This prominent position at a well-known and well-traveled cemetery stands as evidence that Hegeso’s grave stele was intended to be viewed as a public monument. Athenian elite passing through Kerameikos would view this stele and may leave having formed new opinions about the social standing of Hegeso’s household.

Athenian elite were not the only ones who got to view the elaborate funerary monuments at Kerameikos, although they were the ones who commissioned and paid for them. Grave stelae, such as the one belonging to Hegeso, would have been seen by slaves passing in and out of the city through the Dipylon Gate. This slave audience would also have the chance to form opinions about the stele and the social ideals it sought to convey. Hegeso’s grave stele, which sat overlooking a road, would have functioned similarly to a modern billboard, advertising the qualities and benefits of the Good Slave. In many ways, this appears especially insidious, as the positive traits of the Good Slave are traits that “were most useful in the context of slavery.”³⁰ For Athenian elite, owning slaves is easy when they are compliant, loyal, and unwilling to resist subjugation into slavery. It would benefit slave owners greatly to promote the characteristics of the Good Slave in order to reduce conflict and make the lives of slave owners easier. Enslaved persons who embody the ideals of the Good Slave, such as Hegeso’s attendant, would have been the “type of servants their masters most wanted to have and would want other slaves to emulate.”³¹ Hegeso’s slave attendant may have functioned as a role model for other enslaved servants and laborers to aspire to, demonstrating that good behavior would bring good rewards such as prestigious positions in the household.

The most desirable reward for a slave would have been manumission, earning their freedom through years of hard service. This would be granted entirely at the discretion of the slaveowner to slaves that they deemed loyal and hardworking, encouraging slaves to be obedient and minimize the chance of revolts.³² While manumission could also be attained by purchasing one’s freedom, the benevolent gift of freedom from a slave master has roots in the paternalistic nature of slavery established in Homeric epic. The gift of freedom would be most easily achievable by slaves who were constantly near their masters, such as the household slave depicted on the Grave Stele of Hegeso. Slave viewers passing through Kerameikos, simply from the nature of their travel in and out of the city, may have worked as laborers at sites outside of the city and likely did not enjoy a household position. Slave viewers may have regarded the slave figure on the stele as a visual representation of the rewards that come with submission and obedience, and as motivation to comply with their master’s wishes.

The interpretations of a grave stele varied depending on the viewer. For the elite audience, wealthy households commissioned grave steles as a way to cement their social standing and their moral characters. For a slave audience, these interpretations can vary. While a more positive view of slavery which emphasized the rewards of loyal service may have been the interpretation intended for slaves by slave-owning Athenian elites, there could be an alternate reading where

slaves viewed the enslaved attendant on the Grave Stele of Hegeso as a type of ‘class traitor’ and recognized it as propaganda. Turning to Athenian drama, themes of resistance can be excavated from surviving written evidence. In contrast to classical Athenian comedies, classic dramas more willing to give voices to minority groups and on occasion could present a view of slavery far different from the more common perspective of the slave-owning elite.³³ A particularly famous example is Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, which details the agony and humiliation that comes from elite women being forced into slavery. However, it should not be forgotten that Athenian playwrights, even those who penned thought-provoking explorations of slavery such as Euripides, were slave owners.³⁴ Regardless, that does not mean that these plays do not offer valuable insight into the reality of classical Athens, although they do offer a biased perspective. In the play *Alexandros*, also revolving around the events of the Trojan War, Euripides writes: “Slaves who are fond of their master’s class arouse much hostility from their own kind.”³⁵ Unfortunately, *Alexandros* is not extant so the specific context of this fragment has been lost to time. The potential interpretations this quote inspires are mostly based on conjecture, as there is not enough remaining literary or material evidence to fully reconstruct a narrative of slave resistance. However, this quote still raises a very interesting point, suggesting that there was conflict between slaves about having positive relationships with their masters and that there may have been some degree of solidarity between slaves.³⁶ To the slaves viewing the grave stele, Hegeso’s enslaved maid could have been regarded as a figure that betrayed other slaves in the household in order to secure higher household standing. Slave viewers could have been greatly insulted by the depiction of a slave willingly adopting a servile attitude towards those who had enslaved them. There may have been remarkably complex dynamics within the Athenian household between slaves determined to resist and those who were willing to submit for personal gain.³⁷ However, there is not enough material or literary evidence to construct a comprehensive, theoretical framework of resistance, and so many interpretations on this aspect of slavery must be primarily speculative unless more evidence is excavated.

Despite the lack of a substantial body of evidence, it is important to construct narratives that have themes of resistance in the material that has survived. As conjecture-based as these interpretations may be, exploring slave-based narratives is equally as important in developing more inclusive and complex frameworks about gender and class in classical studies. While the majority of the material and literary evidence remaining relate to the elite, subversive ideals can be picked out from elite narratives and used to delve into and better understand the perspectives of the enslaved. Furthermore, constructing frameworks that give voices to disenfranchised groups will also enrich the study of surviving elite perspectives, providing more context around their decisions and the complex social relationships between the elite and enslaved.

Hegeso’s enslaved attendant may have served as the model example of the ideal slave. This could have been the way her elite masters wanted slave viewers to see her, as a role model for them to follow. Slaves seeking manumission may have regarded the figure on the stele as a source of motivation for attaining household positions and a beneficial paternalistic relationship with their master. The slave’s interpretation could have been more negative, recognizing it as targeted propaganda attempting to keep slaves compliant and powerless. It is also possible that Hegeso’s

slave serves no further purpose other than functioning as a background object to highlight Hegeso's wealth and neither elite nor slave viewers regarded it as noteworthy. It is an unfortunate fact of the field of classics that there is not always enough evidence that has survived the test of time. Much of this surviving material belongs to elites, as the poor and the enslaved did not have the wealth to construct buildings, monuments, and grave stelae that would survive past antiquity. However, that does not mean that exploring slave perspectives in more depth is futile and there is always a chance that more evidence can be found to inform us on the experience of Greek non-elites. Reexamining existing finds such as the Grave Stele of Hegeso can open up new roads of interpretation for non-elite voices and enrich the study of antiquity.

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NOTES

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