

NEUMANN, GERHARD

Problems of the Greek Votive Relief

[“Probleme des griechischen Weihreliefs”]

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The long-needed book on the Greek votive relief, a genus that has been increasing in number constantly over the last hundred years, is now finally presented in this Tübingen inaugural thesis. It is neither an illustrated survey, nor a complete catalogue of the known pieces, but a comprehensive study of the fundamental problems, focussing on the crucial points of

development. Neumann deals with the subject in three phases, the archaic, the early classical and the later classical period. For different reasons (the ambiguous or doubtful character of some early reliefs, same workshops, typological influences), the early grave reliefs are included in the discussion.

The first part deals with grave and votive reliefs up to 500 B.C. Starting from the Mycenaean forerunners, Neumann shows that formally the tall one-figured grave stele is an endogenous product, probably of the early 7th century Cyclades. He is able to confirm G. Richter's thesis on the development from sphinx to palmette finial of the 6th century Attic grave stelae, a group of special importance. Rather problematic are groups like the so-called Laconian hero reliefs, probably grave reliefs with an assimilation of the dead to chthonic deities, and therefore with a sort of votive character, much stronger than is usual in Greek grave reliefs, especially in Attica. Genuine votive reliefs do not appear before the beginning of the sixth century. In general they are rather small, framed and of varying form. This shows that they are marble transformations of clay or wooden pinakes, although at times formally influenced by grave reliefs and especially by a group of smaller Ionian reliefs of more cubic form of the later 6th century: Broader proportions and the introduction of a second or more figure favour the gable instead of palmettes etc. as finial of grave and votive reliefs after the turn of the century. Earlier Milesian naiskos-shaped votives seem to have had no influence on this development.

The paths of grave and votive reliefs separate again in the 5th century. Early classical votive reliefs still vary in form considerably. That there are only a few pieces from Attica may partly be due to the reduction of the marble workshops caused by the late archaic Attic law against funeral luxury. Funeral and votive reliefs from the Aegean take their place. Both genera show a tendency typical of the general atmosphere of the early classical period: the gods come closer to men and human self-awareness increases. The new type of 'dialogue picture' ('dialogisches' Bild), as Neumann calls it, leads to the dexiosis, the hand-shaking group in the grave relief, and to the direct confrontation of god and adorant in the votive relief. A new ambiguous funeral as well as votive type is the so-called 'funeral banquet relief' ('Totenmahl-Relief').

The Periclean building programme, especially the Parthenon, whose frieze Neumann calls a patriotic votive relief in itself, consumed all the masonic labour in Athens. After its end and the outburst of religious feeling caused by the plague in the first years of the Peloponnesian war, grave and votive reliefs start again in Attica. The period following is the 'golden age' of the Attic votive relief, whereas there is very little to say about the rest of

Greece, except for a few interesting reliefs from the Northwest Peloponnese. Neumann can do no more than point out some major problems and important pieces. For the beginning of the period considered he shows the important contribution of foreign work, especially from the islands. Since the architectural transformation of the reliefs in the last decades of the 5th century there are the two distinctive types of the gabled naiskos for the grave relief and the mostly oblong eaves type for the votive relief. The latter is not a longitudinal section of a temple, as has been suggested; Neumann seems right in explaining it by the important role played by the stoa from the late 5th century on in the new popular type of sanctuary, especially of Asklepios, the Eleusinian deities and others concerned with health, fertility and life, who now receive the bulk of the votive reliefs. Increasing numbers of gods and – more reduced in size again – adorants are typical of the later 4th century. An exception to this rule is the popular grotto-shaped votive reliefs for the nymphs.

A fourth chapter, devoted to the question of the statuary prototypes of the gods represented, is of art-historical importance for the now lost cult statues as well as for the adequate estimation and understanding of the late classical votive relief. Among Neumann's exemplary observations on this phenomenon are some of the major contributions of this book, for instance the identification of a pair of cult statues at Eleusis (p. 57 f, pl. 33), a Roman copy of a sitting statue of Athena originally perhaps on the Acropolis (p. 61 pl. 36), and an Artemis probably by Euphranor (p. 63 pl. 41 a). Typological influences of architectural reliefs such as the Parthenon frieze are something different, mainly to be explained by the participation of the first sculptors in the work on the temple friezes.

A final chapter deals with the social status of the patrons who commissioned these votive reliefs. As one kind of votive among many on a scale from precious statues and metal objects to small clay and wooden gifts, they seem to belong mainly to a middle class of craftsmen, small but increasing in the 6th century, and far greater in number in the late 5th and 4th centuries. The financial breakdown of this group at the end of the 4th century, the ruin of the marble workshops by a new anti-luxury law, and religious changes brought about the end of the classical votive relief.

Five pages at the end summarize the development of the Greek votive relief, which is illustrated by 48 excellent plates. By wise selection Neumann has reduced the ballast of the existing detailed literature in the notes to a bearable degree. His comprehensive book will remain a standard account on the subject for years to come, stimulating new discussion.

Dr. Reinhard Stupperich