

Aristion of Trozen: A Hellenistic Actor's Relation to the Artistic Past on Stone

In 2002, excavators at the Kerameikos found part of a third-century funerary stele for the comic actor Aristion (SEG 52.216). When it was uncovered, the piece was found to have several special features: the name of a known festival victor, an elaborate six-line epigram, and a painting of a comic mask underneath Aristion's name. In their publication of the stone, Hallof and Stroszeck noted the existence of two fourth-century funerary stelai for actors on the "Eckterasse" by the Street of Tombs -- one for the comic actor Euthias (IG II² 11387 = CEG 550), the other for the tragic actor Makareus (IG II² 6626 = CEG 568). Based on the proximity of these two, they tentatively suggested that Aristion's monument may have once stood in the same area, in a plot designated for theatrical artists.

Though one cannot prove the stone's original position in the cemetery, I argue that, based on an intertext (noted though not fully discussed in the initial publication) between Aristion's epigram and that of Euthias, the later stone was intended to be read against the earlier one. The final verse in Euthias' epigram offers consolation to the deceased: δεύτερος | ὄν τάξει πρῶτος ἔφους <σ>οφίαι -- though he won "second" in dramatic competition, he is "first" in sophia, a formulaic commendation seen in other fourth-century inscribed epigrams (Tsagalis 2008). Aristion's epigram playfully adapts this convention in its third verse: . . . καὶ θνήσκω πρῶτος ὄφους τρίτατος. The isometric position of the phrase πρῶτος ὄφους with πρῶτος ἔφους in the earlier stone draws the reader's attention to this connection, as well as the juxtaposition of ordinal ranks. Rather than offer a similar conciliatory phrase, however, Aristion's epigram simply states that he was the "first" to die of his siblings, despite being "third" born. When we consider that Aristion was possibly a victor in either the Dionysia (IG II² 2325 fr. b) or the Delphic Soteria (F. Delphes III, 1, 478 l. 37), his use of Euthias' conciliatory phrase (when he does not need it) exhibits a

wry sense of humor towards his predecessor. This reading of the intertext thus prompts the viewer to consider the artistic legacy of Aristion in relation to the earlier actor, who was perhaps buried close by.

The direct reference of one artist's monument to another is a familiar feature of literary pseudo-epitaphs for poets in the Greek Anthology, as selected examples will show (e.g. AP VII.37 and VII.707, cf. Fantuzzi 2007). As scholars have long since come to recognize the literary-historical quality of the Hellenistic epigrams (e.g. Bing 2009, Fantuzzi 2007), I propose that Aristion's stele should lead us to consider how artists outside of the Alexandrian literary milieu took similar steps to assert themselves against the past in a different (inscribed) medium, and whether this practice demonstrates the direct influence of one medium (inscribed or literary) on the other.

Select Bibliography

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