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AN HONORARY VOTIVE RELIEF
FROM LACONIA¹

Abstract: *Of great typological and iconographical interest is an honorary relief stele in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta inv. no. 2597 (Pl. 1: 1-2). The stele was found by chance in the area of the former municipality of Pharis, close to Sparta, and is carved in dark gray Laconian marble, most probably from mount Taygetos.*

The stele is horizontally divided in two equal zones. Two rows of three men walking to the right are depicted. Beardless and barefooted, they have short hair and bulky bodies wrapped in himatia long to under their knees in the type IV of himation-men of A. Lewerentz. They have nothing in their hands with the exception of the first figure to the left of the upper section which seems to be holding an unfortunately indiscernible object. The final impression given by the whole representation is that of six men walking rhythmically to the right as if participating in to a ritual procession. Stylistic comparisons with other Laconian reliefs show that the stele should be dated between the end of the Hellenistic – beginning of the Roman imperial period, 1st century BC – 1st century AD. The identification of the six older men commemorated by this stele is not an easy task. Nevertheless, they may be identified with Spartan officials of this late period of Spartan history, presumably with patronomoi, though other local officials cannot be excluded.

Keywords: *Laconian; relief; stele; officials; patronomoi; late Hellenistic – early Imperial*

¹ I would like to thank Dr. A. Antōnakos very much for the translation of my Greek text into English, the Ephorate of the Museum of Sparta for the photo of the Pl. 2: 2 and Dr. W. Papaeuthimiou for the photo of Pl. 2: 3.

Stored in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta is a very interesting and important, unpublished votive relief or, more precisely, an honorary votive relief stele with inv. no. 2597 (Pl. 1: 1-2).

The relief was discovered on the land of G. Frangis in the region of 'Marina' in the former Municipality of Pharis, but no other details are known (Versakīs 1912, 268, F') a). The stele was broken at its upper left corner, where its pieces have been put together, and at its lower end. It has a maximum surviving height of 1.1m, a width of 51cm, a maximum depth of 19.5cm (at the bottom) and a minimum depth of 16cm (at the top), that is, its depth is significantly reduced at the upper end.

The stele is carved in dark gray, compact Laconian marble of poor quality without crystals, most likely from Taygetus. Its surface is very weathered, covered here and there with lichen and sediment, so that the details of the representation are not visible. Traces of a thick point cover the back side and of a thinner one the more even sides of the relief. At the base of the pedimental crowning of the stele there is a convex molding without any details in relief, which most likely were painted. At the corners of the pediment roughly rendered *acroteria* survive. At the center of the pediment, at the point where the central *acroterion* would have been placed, there only survives a shallow cavity 5cm deep that would have been used to support a separately carved, most probably palmette-shaped, *acroterion*.

The representation extends into two zones arranged one on top of the other that are separated by a horizontal, well smoothed band 6cm tall. In fact, this band is more deeply carved at its two ends to a width of 5cm each, so as to project like a tablet, on which possibly there was an inscription, perhaps painted, no trace of which survives today. No other inscription is extant, nor is it likely that one existed, because despite the fact that the lower part of the stele is broken off, its dimensions indicate that it was not much taller than what survives today. Therefore, there would not have been an adequate space for the display of an inscription, though this type of stele would suggest such a thing.

The division of the stele into two horizontally arranged zones, although not unknown in votive reliefs of ancient Greek art, rarely occurs.² However,

² For other votive reliefs with more than one horizontal field, though not so canonically arranged in zones, as in our relief, see Comella 2002, 68-69, 209, cat. no. Eleusi 8, fig. 60: about 420 BC (= Boardman 1985, 182, fig. 145) and p. 116, cat. no. Atene 156, fig. 117: end of 4th century BC. See also Boardman 1985, 186, fig. 173 and the well-known relief of Archelaos: Smith 1991, fig. 216; Bol 2007, 257-258, fig. 224. For the Roman period see Schörner 2003, 34, Taf. 6: 2 (R 3), 30, 31 and Taf. 61-63 (tripod-basis). The division

in Laconia a few such stelae survived, which show that this type was popular in the region. Thus in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta a votive relief (inv. no. 689) from Amyklai (Schröder 1904, 24-31, Abb. 2; Tod and Wace 1906, 80 [the inscription], 202, no. 689) dedicated to Apollo and dated to the 3rd century BC survives (Pl. 2: 1). On this stele the sacrifice of a bull on the altar of the deity is depicted above and a chorus of women below, while local officials are referred to in the inscription under the lowest zone of the representation. In addition, in the same museum there is a votive relief of the late Hellenistic period with a depiction of the Dioskouroi with their horses above and two amphorae below (Tod and Wace 1906, 170, no. 356, fig. 49: not earlier than the 2nd century BC; cf. Bonanno-Aravantinos 1994, 14, fig. 12; Schörner 2003, Taf. 14).

In the two fields of the stele that we are examining, three men clothed in *himatia* are depicted walking toward the spectator's right. The bodies of the men are shown in a three-quarter view to the right, their heads in profile. All six of the figures have a similar, rhythmical movement as if participating in some religious, ritual procession and possibly can be identified as Spartan officials. All are supported by the left leg, while the right leg appears relaxed, bent back at the knee and stepping on the edges of the toes so that the momentary character of the figures' movement is emphasized. All the men are clothed in only a *himation*, which covers the left shoulder and the back and wrapped into a roll passes in front of the belly and falls on top of the left hand, reaching to a bit below the knees, as in Lewerentz's type IV of standing men wearing *himation* (Lewerentz 1993, 96-105, 265-268, Abb. 19-23). The men generally appear to be mature in age, as the flabby rendering of the pectoral muscles indicates. Their skull is round and hair short, and they are beardless. In addition, all six appear to be barefooted. Their slightly bent left arm seems to be totally wrapped in the *himation*, as clearly visible in the first figure from the right in the lower section, or in any case it seems to hold the *himation*. The right arm, also bent at the elbow, is held in front of the belly but it is not apparent whether it held something. Only the first figure from the left in the upper section seems to be holding an object. Unfortunately, the surface of the relief is quite corroded, making the details, which

of the relief stele into many horizontal fields is known in funerary stelae as well, especially in east Ionian regions, e.g. Pfuhl and Möbius 1977-1979, Nr 73, 75, 111, 154, 347, 357, 473, 509, 685-688, 701, 717, 835, 961, 1088, 1111, 1118, 1134, 1136, 1142, 1147, 1271, 1272, 1286, 1297, 1300, 1305, 1373, 1399, 1402, 1410, 1426, 1429, 1452, 1534, 1621, 1647, 1707, 1810, 1941, 2088-2091.

would have probably been crucial for the identification and interpretation of the figures, indiscernible.

Indicative of the date of the stele is a votive relief dedicated to Alexandra in the Museum of Sparta no. 441 (Pl. 2: 2) with a seated female figure playing guitar on the left and three standing male figures with *himation* in a three-quarter view towards her, that is, to the spectator's left. In between these two groups of figures is an altar. This relief has been dated to the 1st century BC and the male figures have been identified with local officials of Amyklai (Loeschke 1878, 165; Tod and Wace 1906, 176-177, no. 441, fig. 54; Stiglitz 1953, 72-83).³ The male figures are dressed in *chiton* and *himation* and, compared to the figures of our relief, their bodies are more in motion and the folds of their garments are obviously more plastically rendered. The relief of Amyklai is not only a work of better quality but also possibly earlier than the relief of the former municipality of Pharis.

Local officials, particularly those responsible for supervising the water supply of their region, are depicted in two further inscribed votive reliefs from the outskirts of Sparta, dated to the Hellenistic period (Museum of Sparta, inv. no. 5343: Le Roy 1974, 219-238, fig. 8, and Museum of Sparta without inv. no.: Peek 1974, 295-302, fig. 1; cf. Vikela 2011, 17 with notes 41 and 42, εικ. 4). Both are votive reliefs, one offered to Artemis *Ariste* and the other to Artemis *Eulakia*. In both Artemis is depicted with the officials who pay their respects to the goddess, who is easily identifiable through her garments and the torch she holds. Finally, both stelae are dated to the Hellenistic period, from the 3rd to the beginning of the 2nd century BC. The local officials are wearing *himatia*, most in type IV of Lewerentz, that is, with a bare upper torso except for the left shoulder and forearm, which are covered by the *himation*. However, only the figure of the servant in the relief of Artemis *Eulakia*, the first from the left, is similar to the figures in the relief of the former municipality of Pharis, since the *himation* reaches just below the knee, while the hair of the man is short. Generally, the work of both of these reliefs is of much better quality than the work of the relief we are examining. This is also the case for the funerary relief of the man pouring a libation in the Museum of Sparta no. 6722 (Papaefthimiou 1992, 148, Kat. Nr 21, Abb. 21), which is dated to the end

³ According to Loeschke 1878 the stele belongs to the 1st or 2nd century BC and is an honorary decree of Amyklai in honor of the body of the three Ephoroi that had to be set up at the sanctuary of Alexandra. Cf. Schörner 2003, 191. I thank my dear colleague and friend Professor E. Vikela very much for bringing these publications to my attention and for the relevant discussion. In general, for votive reliefs with the depiction of groups of male figures and their significance, see Edelmann 1999, 123-141.

of the 2nd century BC. The figure wears a *chiton* and *himation* and is depicted in a relaxed, almost frontal position. The 'sway' of the body and the 'flowing' drapery are similar to the relief under examination, but the quality of its work is certainly much better. The figures of the relief from Pharos seem to be more closely related to the relief funerary stele of Nikippos in Sparta (Pl. 2: 3; Papaefthimiou 1992, Kat. Nr 22, Abb. 22), which has been dated to the 2nd century AD, despite the fact that in the latter the work seems rougher, perhaps because it has not reached the final stage of carving, that is, the stage of smoothing. Especially impressive is the similarity between the two reliefs in the characteristic way the *himation* of the first figure from the right in the lower section wraps around its left arm. In addition, the heads with short hair and the round outline appear quite similar. These comparisons lead to dating our relief to the early Roman period, that is, from the mid 1st century BC to the mid 1st century AD.

In addition to our relief's typological interest, that is, the division into two horizontally arranged zones already mentioned, it is also particularly interesting from an iconographic perspective. A similar representation of officials in a row, without the depiction of the god to whom the relief is dedicated, is not known in any other votive relief and its uniqueness makes it especially important despite its low artistic quality. In fact, it is most likely a type of honorary relief, an honorary stele,⁴ that commemorates some officials, as in the Laconian votive reliefs to Artemis mentioned above. In this way their service to the city is publicly recognized.

It is well known that during the Hellenistic and Roman periods these types of reliefs were common in every Greek city (Schörner 2003, 146-147, 186-198, especially 192). As far as the identification of the officials is concerned, the lack of an inscription is crucial. It is known from the written sources that six people comprised the main body of the *patronomoi*, which replaced the *gerousia* according to Pausanias (2.9.1) during the radical reformation of Cleomenes III in 227 BC. The *patronomoi* were the highest officials of Sparta, in fact, the eldest was the *eponymous archon* of the city. Another six *patronomoi* were called *synarchoi*. Six men, however, comprised one more body of officials called *vidioi* or *vidyoi* perhaps from *videre*=to see, and apparently they supervised the various youth games. Finally, six were the *epimeletai* of Sparta, a body of officials that cared for the city, the public buildings and other activities, which we do not know exactly (Tod and Wace 1906, 8-14; Busolt 1926, 729, 735-736; Shimron 1965,

⁴ The term was suggested by E. Vikela, by analogy with honorary inscriptions.

155-158; Touloumakos 1973, 394; Kennel 1991, 131-137).⁵ There were, in any case, as the inscriptions inform us, other ‘bodies’ of officials or of those responsible for various public activities of which we are not aware. Therefore, exactly which officials are here depicted can not be determined with certainty. We could hypothesize that they are a group of local officials, as in the case of the relief to Artemis *Ariste* mentioned above, who possibly were honored for the erection of a public building though not necessarily a sanctuary since the deity is absent. In this case the honor bestowed through a relief becomes an act of even greater significance. The lack of architectural remains on the site beyond an unfinished, unpublished Ionic capital attests to the existence of a structure in this same region, but of unknown character. In any case, the number of honored persons and the lack of a deity make the hypothesis attractive that our relief honors important officials of the city, perhaps the *epimeletai* of public buildings or even the *patronomoi* as the most important officials of the city, who were generally responsible for the city and not only for a specific sanctuary or some public building. Nevertheless, the only certainty for now is that the new relief is yet another typologically peculiar Laconian creation of the late Hellenistic-early Roman period.

⁵ According to Kennel (1991, 137), however, there were seven members of this body, the *eponymous patronomos* and six *synarchoi*. Cf. Cartledge and Spawforth 1989, 201-202, 265, no. 19; Levy 2008, 423-424.

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Pl. 1. 1 – Relief stele. Sparta Museum, inv. no. 2597. Photo by the author
2 – As above, view from the side



1



2



3

Pl. 2. 1 – Votive relief from Amyklai. Sparta Museum, inv. no. 689. Photo by E. Gehnen, No. DAI-Athen 1996/62

2 – Votive relief from Amyklai. Sparta Museum, inv. no. 441. Archives of the museum

3 – Funerary relief of Nikippos. Sparta Museum. Photo by W. Papaeuthimiou