
Catherine M. Keesling
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Nathan Arrington,
_Ashes, Images and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in Fifth-Century Athens._


The appearance of this book, based upon the author’s 2010 Berkeley dissertation, is timely for several reasons. The public burial ground of Classical Athens, the so-called _dēmosion sēma_ (to use Thucydides’ term), until recently revealed only by piece-meal rescue excavations, has now come into sharper focus, thanks to the excavations prompted by the construction of the Athens Metro. In 2009, an inscribed Athenian casualty list for the tribe Erechtheis from Marathon, found in a much later archaeological context in the Peloponnese, was published; at around the same time, the set of inscribed stones known as the “Monument of the Marathon Epigrams” was convincingly identified by Angelos Matthaiou as a centotaph for the Marathon dead erected in the _dēmosion sēma_. Earlier studies of the state institution of public burial in Athens (what Thucydides called simply the _patrios nomos_, the “ancestral custom”) had vacillated on the date of its introduction, some placing it as late as 465 B.C. As Arrington shows, it is now clear that both the burial place and the commemorative customs practiced there originated in the earliest days of the Athenian democracy (46-49).

In the first part of this book, Arrington offers a cogent archaeological reconstruction of the _dēmosion sēma_, which encompassed both collective polyandria for the dead of individual campaigns (an exception was made for the Marathon dead, buried under the Soros in the plain where they fell) and graves for worthy individuals who were not casualties of war. Indeed, the grave of Harmodios and Aristogeiton on the road to the Academy may have determined the location for subsequent state burials (72). Using a “scatter-cluster model” (88 and fig. 2.2) to map the space, Arrington stresses that the _dēmosion sēma_ was not sharply delimited, and that the area between the Academy and the city walls of Athens also encompassed private tombs, sanctuaries, and pottery workshops. Athens’ state cemetery was physically amorphous, but at the same time it provided a new “cognitive framework” (120-123) for
remembering the dead as a community of the fallen.

The book’s two guiding insights link the Athenian institution of public burial with a wider spectrum of texts and images from Classical Athens. The first concerns how the imagery of the dêmosion sêma, with its long inscribed casualty lists and battle reliefs, dealt with the reality of defeat, particularly in the era of the Peloponnesian War: “the Athenians chose neither to ignore defeat nor to transform it into victory, but to enmesh it in a rhetoric of struggle” (107). Monuments and funeral orations alike elided the particulars of individual conflicts, transmuting them into episodes of an ongoing agôn between Athens and its enemies. Few of the reliefs from public monuments in the dêmosion sêma have survived; Arrington takes a minimalist approach to identifying these in the archaeological record, arguing that the reliefs began to be produced only in the 430s B.C., and even then sparingly, in keeping with the self-conscious restraint and austerity of fifth-century official commemoration. Arrington argues that the message of the public monuments was reinforced by visual schemata displayed in contemporary Athenian temple sculpture. The scenes of combat between Athenians and mythical foes (centaurs and Amazons) on the Parthenon metopes are “brutal representations of agôn in which Greeks died spectacularly at the hands of a powerful foe” (141). By the time we get to the reliefs of the Athena Nike temple in the 420s B.C., new imagery of caring for the wounded and retrieving the dead had found their way into battle scenes both mythical and historical.

Arrington’s second insight brings with it potentially broader implications for understanding Classical Athenian material culture. The patrios nomos instituted in the early years of the Athenian democracy was an imposition, unwelcome not only to wealthy, aristocratic families with an Archaic tradition of private funerary monuments, but to all Athenian families thus deprived of contact with the bodies of their own dead, who were now subsumed within the new conceptual category of the fallen. Both private portrait dedications on the Acropolis and private centotaphs (among them the famous relief stele for Dexileos of 394/3 B.C.) resort to the hyperbolic celebration of the individual achievements of the war dead in words and images, a counterpoint to the restrained public commemoration of the dêmosion sêma. The book concludes with a chapter on white-ground lekythoi, perhaps the most economically accessible form of private commemoration available to Athenian families. Here the typical scenes helped to fill the gap left by the public burial ritual by visualizing the war dead in various ways: they are present sometimes as living warriors departing from home, and sometimes as ghostly eidola standing beside their own tombs.
The book’s production values are consistently good. All of the necessary illustrations are here, but readers may regret seeing only a single example of an inscribed casualty list (figure 3.1). The white-ground lekythoi discussed in the final chapter have been illustrated extensively, but the reproductions are small and some of the scenes are difficult to see. In this book, Arrington does not offer an epigraphical study of the inscribed casualty lists of the démosion sêma, or even a catalogue of their reliefs: for more about these, the reader is referred to the author’s earlier published articles. The tone of the book is thoughtful and meditative throughout, and the text has been carefully edited; the bibliography is complete. Arrington has marshaled an impressive array of earlier scholarship while at the same time clearly asserting his own point of view.

*Ashes, Images, and Memories* is a welcome addition to the burgeoning bibliography on memory in the Greco-Roman world, differing notably from other recent studies in its focus on cognitive as opposed to collective memory; it is recommended reading for anyone interested in fifth-century B.C. Athens.

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Vincent Azoulay (trans. Janet Lloyd),  
*Pericles of Athens.*


This critical biography of Pericles enjoys several strengths. First, it navigates successfully between anticipated pairs of hazards, such as idealization and vilification. Packing a lot of information into each chapter, it also offers a rich view of the strangeness (from modern perspectives) of Pericles’ world. Finally, the book concludes with a historiographical review tracing attitudes toward Pericles up to the twenty-first century. Three roughly chronological chapters follow an introduction, which articulates