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Frozen Serenity in Stone Wish, Demand, and the Oceanic Feeling in an Ancient Funerary Stele

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Abstract This article examines a banquet/symposion-themed funerary stele registered in the Istanbul Archaeological Museums not merely as an iconographic and typological object, but as a material counterpart to the mental and emotional strategies developed in the face of death. In the scholarship, such scenes have often been interpreted within the context of a "meal for the dead" or a "funerary banquet." Without excluding these readings, the present study proposes to understand the depiction not as a direct record of a specific ritual, but as a form of mental architecture that fixes a desire for security, stability, and tension-free continuity. In this framework, the stele's composition—through its spatial construction, allocation of roles, and placement of objects—can be read as a representational surface that visualizes an ideal state of being in which conflict is suspended and serenity is rendered continuous. Within this perspective, the concept of the "oceanic feeling" (das ozeanische Gefühl) as defined by Sigmund Freud in Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, (1930) is employed not as a diagnostic instrument in a direct clinical sense, but as an explanatory and interpretive conceptual frame to relate the scene's timeless serenity to a wish for a carefree, holistic, and uninterrupted mode of existence. The study therefore reopens the discussion of banquet/symposion scenes not only as representations of ritual practice, but also as cultural and affective representational constructions that make visible an ideal order demanded in the face of death.

Keywords Ancient Greece · Afterlife Belief · Symposion · Funerary Stele · Freud

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Introduction

While death represents a biological cessation, human societies have historically perceived it as more than a mere physiological interruption; from early times, death has been imbued with cognitive, religious, and cultural significance. Confronted with the challenge of conceptualizing death as an absolute termination, humans have endeavored to interpret this uncertainty through beliefs in an afterlife and the accompanying rituals; thus, death has been recontextualized within the frameworks of social order and continuity (Parıltı & Uhri, 2018). The burial practices and monumental forms of representation that emerged during this process were not only manifestations of the emotional and intellectual responses to death but also material surfaces through which these responses gained visibility in the public domain. In this regard, grave stelae should be understood not as passive markers merely denoting a past state, but as representational surfaces adept at visually articulating a meaningful order in relation to death.

In ancient Greece, rituals associated with the deceased extended beyond individual practices of mourning and remembrance; they were integrated into a broader intellectual framework aimed at regulating the religious and cultural impacts of death on the community. Within this context, the grave served both as a site for maintaining communication with the deceased and as a space where the boundary between the living and the realm of the dead was ritually managed (Garland, 2005, pp. 44–47).

Stone grave stelae represent some of the most prominent and enduring surfaces through which ancient Greek communities articulated their relationship with death. Through relief carvings and inscriptions on stone blocks, these stelae not only marked graves but also facilitated the dissemination of the social and affective meanings of death within the public sphere (Has, 2019, p. 294; Korkmaz, 2016, p. 145). In this context, grave stelae should be considered not as mere signifiers reflecting a static past, but as narrative surfaces where modes of existence, rendered meaningful in the face of death, are visually organized (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, pp. 24–32; Parker Pearson, 1999, pp. 3–5).

The stele analyzed in this study is a banquet-themed funerary stele of Thasian origin, cataloged in the Stone Artifacts Collection of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums under inventory number 1947 T. In archaeological scholarship, such scenes have typically been examined within typological, chronological, and iconographic frameworks and interpreted in relation to artistic traditions and indicators of social status. Among these studies, Dentzer's "Le motif du banquet couché dans le Proche-Orient et le monde grec"(1982) and Pfuhl and Möbius's two-volume "Die Ostgriechischen Grabreliefs"(1977–1979) remain principal reference works documenting the visual norms of this type comprehensively. Dentzer (1982, pp. 224–225) classifies the stele among a select group of independent and high-quality examples dated between 530 and 425 BCE, belonging to the autonomous Greek tradition of relief sculpture. However, much of this scholarship has concentrated on the formal features of such compositions, while the question of how these scenes establish a representational logic through inter-figural relations, spatial arrangement, and the placement of objects has received comparatively limited attention.

Accordingly, this article does not aim to interpret the stele under consideration as a direct depiction of a specific ritual, a record of a historical event, or a visual summary of an individual biography; nor does it seek to produce a psychological diagnosis of historical subjects through the figures represented in the scene. Instead, it endeavors to assess the stele's particular compositional choices—spatial construction, distribution of roles, and placement of objects—in comparative dialogue with broader tendencies within the type. This analysis treats the visual order as a tripartite structure: wish, expressing the desire for uninterrupted wholeness and tranquility in the face of death; demand, the dimension in which this desire takes material form within the scene through the distribution of roles, service relations, and established modes of fulfillment; and the state of repose, the visible outcome of both. The limits of the reading

proposed here are defined accordingly: rather than generalizing to the type as a whole, the discussion seeks to illuminate the representational possibilities opened up by this stele's particular strategy of arrangement.

The methodological justification for concentrating on a single object is as follows: within the disciplines of archaeology and art history, the approach known as close reading or intensive single-object analysis is recognized for its methodological validity in examining works that convey meaning through specific visual decisions within representational systems, rather than through generalized typologies. It is well-established in visual culture studies that the compositional choices of a work—such as figure placement, gaze relations, and object distribution—can independently generate analytical meaning.

The specific rationale for this focus is that the Thasian stele under investigation exhibits compositional divergence from contemporary examples. In Dentzer's extensive corpus of examples from the Near East and the Aegean world, dated between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE, and in the catalogues of Pfuhl and Möbius (1977–1979), nearly all examples display, to varying degrees, inter-figural contact, gaze relations, or action transfer. The systematic absence of these interaction patterns in the Thasian stele distinguishes it not as a typical example of the type, but as a deviation within that norm necessitating explanation, thereby demonstrating the necessity of single-object analysis.

In studies concerning the iconographic context of the stele, Ridgway (1970, p. 46) traces the composition's origin to Assyrian tradition and describes the depiction of the deceased figure amidst worldly pleasures, as though still alive, as an "ambiguous representation"; she interprets the scene as an early example with heroicizing associations, referencing either a funerary banquet or life in Elysium. Conversely, Boardman (1985, p. 44) positions the composition as an early instance of a schema that would later become prevalent in grave stelae, suggesting that the figure may indicate a heroized ancestor. Holtzmann (1992, p. 198) regards the work as one of the earliest and most significant examples within the series of approximately one hundred and seventy banquet reliefs specific to Thasos, aligning its austere plasticity with the circle of Aglaophon and Polygnotos. These studies primarily address the stele through the lenses of iconographic tradition, origin, and classification. The present study, while acknowledging these discussions, aims instead to elucidate the representational logic established by the stele by prioritizing compositional order over such distinctions.

The conceptual framework employed in interpreting this divergence is Freud's notion of the "oceanic feeling," as articulated in Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (1930). The term "oceanic feeling" in the title of this article similarly refers to this conceptual foundation. It is crucial to emphasize that within the human psyche, the oceanic feeling is not the sole configuration addressed by Freud; various representational strategies may align with different affective orientations. Stelae that adopt diverse compositional preferences may likewise engage with other orientations. Therefore, it can be asserted that the design of this stele does not entirely coincide with the oceanic feeling but rather exhibits a significant affinity with the conceptual framework provided by this notion. The objective here is not to propose a diagnosis but to offer a reference point that aids in conceptualizing the field of meaning generated by visual language.

The article proceeds by examining, in sequence, the general iconographic context of symposion/banquet scenes, the compositional analysis of the Thasian stele, and the application of the concept of the oceanic feeling to this visual order, as well as the limitations of such an application.

Symposion and the Grave Stele: Conceptual Framework and Iconographic Norm

The term symposion (συμπόσιον) in ancient Greek is etymologically derived from syn- (σύν, "together") and pinein (πίνειν, "to drink"), fundamentally signifying the act of "drinking together." However, as Węcowski (2014, p. 339) notes, its usage in Archaic and Classical literary sources encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings that vary contextually rather than adhering to a strict technical definition. In certain texts, symposion directly refers to a drinking party; in others, it may indicate the drinking phase following a sacrificial meal, or more generally, a feast or communal banquet. Similarly, terms such as potos, posis, and sympinein may be used interchangeably with more formal and epic terms like dais,

eilapinē, and thoinē, depending on the author's generic preferences, aesthetic concerns, and metrical requirements. This terminological flexibility indicates that symposion did not denote a singular fixed ritual but rather a banqueting practice within an aristocratic context, assuming different social functions and being redefined according to circumstance. According to Węcowski, the critical "tracer element" distinguishing the symposion from other banqueting practices is not merely reclining while drinking, but the arrangement of epidexia, which ensures equality among participants and incites competition; the pleasure principle emphasized by Murray gains significance precisely within this tension-filled structure (Węcowski, 2014, p. 340).

In the ancient Greek context, the symposion was not a mundane form of entertainment but a structured temporal and spatial framework within which social relations, identity, and cultural values were reproduced (Murray, 1990, pp. 3–7). Organized through specific bodily postures, behavioral codes, and forms of communication, this setting functioned as a social training ground where individuals learned and displayed their position within the community. In this regard, the symposion provided a framework in which ideals of citizenship and social harmony were concretized within everyday life.

The preference for the symposion scene in grave stelae suggests that this ideal framework was adapted to the context of death. However, interpreting the scene as a direct record of an experience actually lived by the deceased is challenging (Stewart, 1997, pp. 135–150). The consistent depiction of a calm and tension-free order indicates that the representation is less about reflecting a lived moment and more about establishing an idealized state. Some studies have interpreted these representations as depictions of a banquet held in memory of the deceased, while others view them as images of a desired mode of existence in the afterlife (Alföldi, 1949–1950, pp. 537–566; Metzler, 1983; Von Gall, 1989, p. 149). Without dismissing these interpretations, the present study suggests that the scene may be better understood not as a literal record of ritual practice but as a "mental architecture"visualizing a demand for security, stability, and continuity free of tension in the face of death. In this context, "wish"refers to the abstract expression of the desire for uninterrupted peace and wholeness before death, whereas "demand"pertains to how this desire is concretized within the scene through regulating elements such as the distribution of roles and cycles of service.

By "demand,"the intention is not to imply an explicit and commanding request by the subject, but rather a relational order in which need is inherently understood as legitimate, fulfillable, and established within the scene. Consequently, demand in the scene points less to dramatic tension and more to a preconfigured regime of fulfillment.

Existing scholarship on banquet/symposion-themed grave stelae has demonstrated that, in multi-figured compositions, inter-figural relations are generally established through bodily orientation, gestures, and lines of gaze. In Dentzer's extensive corpus dated from the seventh to the fourth century BCE, the fundamental visual logic of the banquet scene is based on a relational order organized around the act of service: between the principal reclining figure on the klinē and the servant, an explicit reciprocity is established through bodily orientation, gesture, and gaze, rendering the scene a temporally definable encounter. A similar dynamic is evident in Miller's comparative analysis of Late Classical votive and funerary stelae: whereas in votive stelae the principal figure often establishes direct eye contact with the viewer, in funerary stelae this gaze turns inward toward the scene itself; even this shift demonstrates that the representation is constructed as an observable yet closed scene (Miller, 2022, p. 119). Indeed, in the norm defined by Węcowski, the symposion operates by sustaining the tension between competition and equality—between agon and isotes—and this tension nourishes the scene's narrative intensity (Węcowski, 2014, p. 352).

It is precisely as an example of such a deviation within this normative framework that the Thasian stele emerges, and it constitutes the point of departure for the following analysis.

Figure 1

Thasian Grave Stele (Istanbul Archaeological Museums Archive).



The Composition of the Thasian Stele

Cataloged in the Stone Artifacts Collection of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums under inventory number 1947 T, the stele was discovered in Thasos in 1907 by J. H. Baker-Penoyre and incorporated into the museum collection in March 1908. Crafted from coarse-crystalline Thasian marble, the artifact measures 0.625 m in height, 1.145 m in width, and between 0.10 and 0.175 m in thickness. The figure field measures 0.535 m in height, 1.085 m in width at the lower part, and 1.078 m at the upper part (Mendel, 1914, p. 304).

The composition of the stele is designed as an arrangement that evokes the impression of an interior framed by architectural elements. The scene is centered around a triad of human figures: a reclining male figure on a klinē, a standing servant attending to him, and a seated female figure depicted in the background behind the man. Accompanying these principal figures are a dog and a bird, while pieces of furniture and personal belongings are distributed throughout the composition, enhancing the impression of a domestic setting. Although the figures are situated within the same visual field, there is no direct physical contact or reciprocal interaction among them.

A clear distinction is evident among the three human figures in the composition through scale, position, and bodily posture. The male figure reclining on the klinē, due to his central position and relaxed bodily language, becomes the focal point of the scene and is thus conventionally associated with the individual to whom the grave stele belonged. The smaller male figure opposite him, depicted naked, is interpreted based on his size and manner of action as a domestic servant. The seated female figure represented behind the principal figure, by virtue of her position within the composition and her posture consonant with the domestic context, is understood as participating in a household union with the male figure and is therefore generally regarded in the literature as the principal figure's wife.

The Household

The stylized columnar forms flanking the stele serve to frame the composition within a distinct architectural enclosure, suggesting that the scene is situated not in an open public space but within an interior with defined boundaries. This framing allows the depicted scene to be perceived not as directly associated with the public sphere, but rather within a more restricted and introspective spatial context.

It is well established that such architectural framing is a prevalent naiskos convention in Classical grave stelae; however, the significance here lies not merely in the presence of this form, but in the specific compositional order established by the scene within this frame. Dentzer (1982, p. 255) highlights that the composition of the stele diverges from the frieze tradition and approaches an independent "tableau" format, wherein the figures are positioned at broad intervals without physical contact.

In the ancient Greek context, the household (oikos) was understood not merely as a place of shelter, but as the fundamental unit in which the individual's social identity, economic continuity, and everyday order were established. The fact that the composition evokes a domestic resonance provides certain insights into the state of existence the scene renders visible. The architectural frame suggesting an enclosed space creates the impression that the fluctuations of the outside world have been excluded from the scene, situating the figures within a more controlled internal order marked by a sense of continuity. The architectural supports belonging to the house not only define the space but also function as a symbolic frame delimiting the boundaries of the scene.

In this respect, the household may be interpreted not merely as a physical structure but as a representational field in which distance from the outside world is maintained and order is stabilized within. Simultaneously, the issue at hand is not a single, clearly definable room, but rather an effect of inward and controlled spatiality pointing toward the oikos. The emphasis on interiority creates the impression of a compositional preference in which external interactions are restricted and a sense of stable togetherness is produced within the scene. In this sense, the scene may be understood as an arrangement referring not to the regimes of visibility and competition characteristic of the public sphere, but to a mode of existence structured around domestic continuity, stability, and tranquillity.

Spatial Continuity and the Challenge of Two-Dimensional Representation

It is challenging to assert that the figures and objects within the composition are definitively situated within a shared spatial environment. The positioning of the table directly beneath the klinē, the dog beneath the table, and the bird beneath the chair results from visual overlap on the surface due to the absence of depth. Similarly, the impression that the female figure is in direct spatial succession with the male figure cannot be confidently interpreted as spatial unity in the absence of ground lines or separating elements. The presentation of the hanging military equipment in a common visual context with the principal figure and the servant suggests that these figures are conceived within the same interior arrangement. In contrast, the isolated position of the mirror associated with the female figure indicates that spatial unity is not confined to a single room. Within this framework, the composition may be regarded as a representational field evoking a mode of life characterized by continuity throughout the oikos; the spatial relations among figures and objects may be understood less as a precise sharing of a room and more as an impression of repose dispersed across different internal zones of the same domestic order.

The Male Figure on the Klinē

The male figure reclining upon the klinē is depicted in a state of marked ease and comfort, both in terms of bodily posture and spatial placement. Supported by the bed and cushions, this posture allows the figure to exhibit a relaxed and effortless bodily language; no element in the scene suggests bodily tension or a state of readiness. The only movement he performs is a limited gesture associated with pleasure: extending his arm forward to receive his drink.

This measured gesture occupies a position open to interpretation within the overall stillness of the scene. The absence of urgency or command in the movement suggests that the relationship between demand and fulfillment in the scene is constructed within an order free from conflict or negotiation. In this context, the figure is represented not as a subject actively articulating his need, but as one positioned within a scene where that need is already assumed to be fulfilled.

In this respect, the male figure on the klinē may be regarded as one of the visual centers of the calm state established in the scene.

The Relationship Between the Man and the Servant

The relationship between the central male figure and the servant is characterized not by direct and dramatic interaction, but by a representation that conveys a sense of silent and established order. The expectation directed by the male figure toward the servant does not manifest as a commanding gesture or explicit demand; rather, it is limited to a measured movement that suggests a habitual and unquestioned orientation. The fact that the servant does not turn his face toward his master, does not establish eye contact, and does not complete his action through any verbal or bodily feedback indicates that the relationship is presented within a visual order that points less to a singular moment of encounter than to an ordinary distribution of duties.

Within this representation, there is no explicit element indicating tension, hesitation, or negotiation between the expectation of the male figure and the action of the servant. The relationship gives the impression of a static and uninterrupted flow. Thus, the scene visualizes not a display of power in which hierarchical coercion is openly staged, but rather a domestic functioning in which roles are fulfilled in silence. The wordless offering of service produces the impression that hierarchy is represented not as a forceful intervention, but as an order naturalized within the scene. This arrangement stands in clear contrast to the representational logic observed in Classical Attic banquet stelae. In the examples studied by Miller, the servant figure is often depicted as an element that establishes direct eye contact with the principal figure, responds through gesture, and participates in the dramatic center of the action. In such cases, service is constructed not as a silent routine but as a moment of reciprocal interaction. In the Thasian stele, by contrast, the marked withdrawal of this form of interaction suggests that the scene tends to represent not a dramatic encounter but an order characterized by continuity (Miller, 2022).

The allocation of roles within the household extends beyond mere domestic functionality; it also unveils a particular mechanism through which status is manifested. The absence of an urgent or coercive demand from the male figure's state of expectation can be interpreted as a compositional choice, wherein status is articulated not through pressure but within the confines of an established order. The servant's silent acquiescence to this expectation, in turn, suggests a relational model in which social hierarchy is preserved within the scene without engendering conflict.

This mode of representation is less indicative of a specific phase or moment in the principal figure's life narrative and more reflective of a condition where order is already established and operational. The presence of military equipment alludes to the male figure's warrior identity, yet it does not depict this identity in an active state of conflict. On the contrary, the absence of war within the scene reinforces the impression that the figure is portrayed not on the battlefield but in a context where order has been established and tension has receded into the background. In this regard, the male figure is visualized not solely as a warrior but as an individual whose role is defined and aligned with social order.

Dentzer (1982, p. 255) notes that, concerning the placement of the servant, the Thasian stele intentionally deviates from the conventional arrangement, with the servant momentarily turning his back on his master; thus, he characterizes the scene as an “exception dans l’histoire du motif.”

Weapons

The order depicted in the scene is further elucidated through the presence of specific objects. The helmet and shield displayed on the wall suggest the principal figure's identity as a warrior; however, these objects remain inactive: they do not engage with the body, initiate action, or directly influence the scene's dynamics. The absence of offensive weapons such as a spear, sword, or dagger, coupled with the emphasis on defensive and protective items like the helmet and shield, highlights a deliberate visual choice regarding the nature of the order portrayed in the scene. This implies a representation where the focus is not on war or violence as an active endeavor, but rather on a state where threat is managed and protection is prioritized.

Dentzer (1982, p. 258) observes that on the Thasian stele, only the helmet and pelta shield are displayed, whereas offensive elements such as the sword, cuirass, and knemides, present in the Parian example, are absent. This observation

corroborates, at the level of cataloguing, the interpretation that the scene emphasizes defensive objects and does not visually engage offensive capabilities.

The defensive nature of the weapons transforms them into indicators not of active conflict but of a state of "protectedness"where potential danger is not actively present. This passive stance suggests not that conflict is entirely negated, but that it is not activated within the scene and is maintained in the background in a manner that does not disrupt the continuity of the overall order.

Animal Figures

The tranquility depicted in the scene extends beyond the human characters and is reinforced by the portrayal of animals. The dog is shown in a relaxed position within the home environment, far from any sense of danger, and exhibits neither a defensive stance nor sudden movements. This portrayal implies that the dog might have been included in the scene not just as a guard or a symbol of status, but as a component that aligns with a stable and ongoing way of life.

In a similar vein, the bird is depicted in a manner that does not suggest flight, panic, or discomfort. Its calm and stationary position indicates that there is no immediate threat present that would cause it to take flight. In this context, the animal figures can be seen as visual indicators suggesting that even at a level of existence below human social interactions, a peaceful and orderly setting is envisioned.

Therefore, the dog and the bird can be interpreted as complementary elements that enhance the sense of security and continuity established by the composition, not only through the human figures but as a condition that permeates the entire scene.

The Female Figure

The positioning and actions of the female figure introduce a secondary yet complementary axis to the established state of calm within the scene. She is not directly integrated into the cycle of expectation and action that occurs between the reclining male figure and the servant; rather, she is depicted as engaged in her own activity, distinct from the scene's central chain of action. This indicates that the female figure is positioned not only spatially but also functionally as separate from the principal flow of the scene.

The alabastron she holds serves as the primary indicator of this distinction. The alabastron is neither associated with the demands of the male figure nor with the cycle of service performed by the servant. The absence of any indication of haste, orientation, or reciprocal interaction concerning the use of the object suggests that the alabastron signifies less a new call for action within the scene than a field of activity that remains uninterrupted and self-contained.

Dentzer (1982, pp. 258, 262) explicitly notes that the female figure is depicted as engaging in an independent action, separate from the main flow of the scene, defining this as an "independent occupation unrelated to the banquet." Dentzer also characterizes the alabastron, in symmetrical opposition to the weapons hanging in the scene, as an "attribut féminin."

While the alabastron carries certain associations with death and transition in ancient Greek funerary culture, the decisive aspect here is not its ritual function but the silent and uninterrupted lateral current it establishes within the composition. Therefore, the alabastron may be understood as a secondary layer of meaning that deepens the female figure's inwardly enclosed and continuous field of action, rather than drawing her into the dramatic center of the scene.

The relationship the female figure establishes with the alabastron creates the impression not of generating a new demand within the scene, but of allowing the existing order to persist without disruption. While the male figure's desire for pleasure is fulfilled through the servant, the female figure's action is represented outside this cycle, in a parallel and silent continuity. In this manner, the composition facilitates the idea of an order in which multiple activities can coexist simultaneously within the same context without generating conflict or negotiation.

Accordingly, the female figure is positioned neither as a passive spectator nor as a determining agent within the scene. Without disrupting the hierarchical order operating along the male-servant axis, she forms a side current compatible with the scene's general calm. The self-enclosed quality of her action offers a visual proposal according to which demand is limited, service is measured, and relations may be constructed within an order that does not require negotiation.

In this context, the study examines the female figure and the alabastron not as straightforward depictions of gender roles or daily activities, but as visual components that enhance the feeling of tranquility, continuity, and inner harmony created by the composition. This interpretation indicates that the scene depicted by the stele establishes an ideal model of calmness in the face of death, achieved not only through the central figure but also through the seamless and harmonious coexistence of various elements within the composition.

Oceanic Feeling and Psychic Layering

The concept of the "oceanic feeling,"as articulated by Freud in Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (1930), is understood as a remnant of an early experience of unity, wherein the self has yet to establish distinct boundaries from the external world. During this phase, the individual perceives themselves not as separate from their environment but as part of an existence characterized by interconnection with the external, where a sense of inclusiveness and continuity prevails. Over time, through experiences of pain, deprivation, and disappointment, boundaries between the self and the external world emerge; thus, the mature sense of self is formed as a more confined and defined version of this original wholeness (Freud, 1930, pp. 8–11). Freud emphasizes, however, that this initial state of wholeness does not vanish entirely but may persist as traces within the deeper layers of psychic life.

To avoid interpreting this concept as a projection of contemporary psychology, it is crucial to highlight the following: the analysis does not pertain to the contents of an individual psyche but rather to the realm of social meaning generated by the visual order. In this context, the oceanic feeling is not utilized as a tool for diagnosing the inner world of the individual who commissioned or is depicted on the grave stele, but as a theoretical framework useful for conceptualizing the impression of effortless continuity and wholeness conveyed by the composition.

Within this framework, the compositional choices of the Thasian stele exhibit a pronounced alignment with the existential orientation defined by the oceanic feeling. The scene establishes an order in which the self exists harmoniously with the external world, where the fulfillment of needs does not necessitate negotiation, and conflict is systematically suspended. This order is meaningful not as a religious promise or metaphysical consolation, but as a model of repose derived from lived experience and immortalized in stone. The preference for such a model in the context of death suggests that the oceanic feeling is not merely an individual psychic remnant but also provides a field of meaning that can be visually apprehended within cultural practices of representation.

Three Planes in the Stele: Wish, Demand, and the State of Repose

The composition of the stele can be analytically interpreted through three interrelated dimensions: wish, demand, and the state of repose. These dimensions should not be perceived as separate layers but rather as distinct functional aspects of a unified visual order.

The dimension of wish represents the abstract plane that articulates the self's aspiration for a seamless, uninterrupted, and holistic mode of existence. This orientation, which Freud describes as the "oceanic feeling,"embodies the need for secure continuity in the face of mortality. The stele provides a visual foundation for this desire: the enclosed interiority of the oikos excludes the uncertainties of the external world; the inactive weapons retain the awareness of threat while suspending conflict; and the tranquil animal figures extend this sense of security beyond the human figures. Consequently, the scene generates a field of tranquility that is shared not only at the level of social relations but across the entire organization of living presence.

The dimension of demand is where this desire is materialized within the arrangement of the scene. The measured gesture of the male figure, the silent and unreciprocated action of the servant, and the depiction of the female figure engaged in her own activity without integration into the main chain of action—all these elements render visible a distribution of roles that engenders neither negotiation, conflict, nor hesitation. The relationship between demand and fulfillment is presented as an already established framework within the scene; hierarchy operates not through coercion but as a normalized order. This arrangement proposes a field of existence predicated on interior continuity and the stability of roles, distinctly removed from the competitive and visibility-based regimes characteristic of the public sphere.

The state of repose is the visible outcome of these two dimensions. The scene does not document a singular ritual or a biographical moment but rather offers a visual model of a desired order of existence in the face of death. Its effect arises not from being a direct record of ritual but from a constructed order in which the possibility of conflict is systematically limited, roles function in an established manner, and the sense of continuity permeates the entire scene. In this regard, the stele is approached not as the direct "visual equivalent"of the oceanic feeling but as an example of representation that establishes an affinity with the field of wholeness and effortless continuity conceptualized by that notion.

Discussion

The focus of this study on a singular grave stele should not be misconstrued as suggesting that the interpretation developed herein posits a universal, generalizing psychological or affective model applicable to all banquet/symposion-themed grave stelae. On the contrary, extant scholarship clearly indicates that grave stelae categorized under the same iconographic classification exhibit considerable variations in compositional arrangement, inter-figural relationships, and emotional tone. Miller's analyses of Attic examples reveal that directions of gaze, reciprocal gestures, and bodily orientations can serve as the primary conveyors of meaning within the composition, and that the relationship of service may be depicted not as a silent and automatic function but through mutual awareness and interaction (Miller, 2022). Studies of Attic grave reliefs, in particular, have demonstrated that, in certain instances, touch, exchange of glances, and emotional tension are deliberately emphasized, and that the deceased may be portrayed as detached, melancholic, or inaccessible in relation to the living (Margariti, 2019, p. 129). This diversity illustrates that banquet iconography does not express a singular affective orientation but rather a flexible visual language accommodating various representational strategies.

In this context, what distinguishes the Thasian stele is that, despite employing the banquet theme, direct contact, relations of gaze, and dramatic tension are compositionally relegated to the background. The central yet passive position of the reclining male figure, the servant's silent and automatized action, the female figure's separation from the principal chain of action, and the inclusion of defensive weapons without activating them all suggest that, in this stele specifically, a strategy of arrangement has been adopted that privileges low tension and continuity. Accordingly, the reading proposed here does not claim to offer a universal explanation for banquet/symposion-themed stelae as a whole; rather, it seeks to elucidate which affective and mental orientation this particular stele selects from among the representational possibilities available within the type.

This study approaches the imagery on the grave stele not to produce clinical or individualized psychological diagnoses, but as a representational field of meaning operating through visual order, spatial construction, and the distribution of objects. The concept of the "oceanic feeling" is introduced in this sense not as an anachronistic diagnostic tool, but as a theoretical reference useful for conceptualizing the desire for effortless continuity produced by the visual order.

The domain of meaning encapsulated by an anonymous grave stele does not convey a singular, definitive "message,"but rather presents the potential for a multifaceted interpretation. Does the depicted scene implore the viewer

for intercession, or does it present to those left behind an idealized portrayal of an orderly and stable existence? It is conceivable that both perspectives coexist concurrently on the same surface. What is crucial here, however, is not so much the narrative conveyed by the representation as the rationale for confronting death with precisely such a scene. A durable and public medium such as a grave marker transforms this composition from a transient reminder into a representational field in which the order necessitated in the face of death is rendered enduringly and publicly visible.

Conclusion

This study has examined the banquet/symposion-themed grave stele in the Stone Artifacts Collection of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums not merely as an element of iconographic repertoire, but as a representational surface that visualizes a desired mode of existence in the face of death through figure arrangement, spatial construction, and the placement of objects. Explanations commonly found in the literature that point to ritual contexts, such as the "meal of the dead" or the "funerary banquet," remain limited when considered in isolation in accounting for the impression of stability and continuity produced by such scenes. The stele is better understood not as the record of a singular event, but as an idealized configuration that fixes a particular mode of existence preferred in the face of the uncertainty of death. Freud's concept of the "oceanic feeling" offers an explanatory framework that supports this interpretation: the arrangement of figures that avoids dramatizing conflict, the suspended threat elements, and the low-tension distribution of roles all concretize, on the visual plane, an orientation toward carefree continuity and completeness. The permanence of stone, in turn, extends this model beyond the bounds of temporary consolation and renders ideals of order and stability durably visible within public memory; thus, the stele acquires meaning less as a promise of metaphysical salvation than as a cultural solution that fixes in the public sphere a model of repose derived from lived experience.

In this framework, the approach proposed by this study enables the consideration of banquet/symposion scenes not only as representations of specific ritual practices, but also as one of the representational strategies proposing a mode of existence defined by order, continuity, and low tension in the face of death. When compared with different compositional choices within the type, the question that emerges is not only what grave stelae depict, but also which affective orientation they choose to privilege. This question offers a productive point of departure for future comparative studies.

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