

A ROMAN FUNERARY STELE WITH A REPRESENTATION OF A SHIP FROM THE TYMBAKI AREA IN CRETE

(Summary)

In 1992 a marble relief was handed over to the Archaeological Museum of Heraclion, Crete. According to the peasant who found it, the relief comes from the area of Tymbaki, not far from Phaestos.

The upper part of the slab is missing, broken in antiquity, but the initial width is preserved in the lower part. The marble is imported. Whitish in colour with a yellow-redish patina, it measures 0,68 m. high by 0,88 m. width, while the thickness varies from 0,05 m. (at the edges) to 0,12 m.

The relief represents five persons in a two-tholed boat, voyaging on the undulating waters of the sea, from which the heads of three sea creatures (probably dolphin and two fishes) appear. The figures are cut in high relief and some parts of them as well as parts of the boat (now broken) were sculptured in the round.

According to stylistic criteria the relief can be dated to the end of the 2nd - beginning of the 3rd century A.D.

The scale of the vessel in relation to the passengers is deliberately disproportionate, but the two thole-pins mean that it is a boat with four oars (δίσκαλμος). At the stern of the boat a steering-oar is seen. Exactly at the sea level is the garboard of the boat. A rope, tied around the left thole-pin and going transversally up, was probably destined to hold the sail, which might be at the broken part of the relief.

The coexistence of oars and sail allows us to suppose a *ιστιόκωπος* (or sail-oar-er) *actuaria*. The best candidates could then be the *λέμβος*, the *ἄκατος* and the *κέλης* (or *κελήτιον*).

Since the size is small and the prow is rather straight, I would tentatively propose the *δίσκαλμον κελήτιον* as the best candidate for the type of the vessel.

Five persons are seated in the boat. The three in the middle (two adult men and a little boy), judging from their dress and monumental posture, seem to be of higher status. Although the heads are missing, it is obvious that they are facing the spectator and that they are passengers. The two other people, depicted on a

small scale, are probably mariners. Both wear short chitons, a typical dress of the seamen. The one seated at the stern holds the steering oar (κυβερνήτης). The other is standing at the prow and he seems to look toward the direction of the navigation.

They wear a long χλαμύς (or cloak), which is clasped by a conical button on the right shoulder.

The figure on the left leans his right arm on his thigh and points his index finger towards the direction of the navigation. His left palm, projecting under the cloak, holds the handle of a sword, a symbol of his military career.

The figure on the right has almost the same posture but he holds with his left hand a little boy seated on his left knee.

The boy wears a chiton and a cloak clasped on his chest. The right arm and the face are cut off, but long curls frame the neck and the head is covered by a conical hat. The posture looks too official for a boy of that age.

It is beyond doubt that the relief is a funerary stele for the family tomb of the three central figures. It probably depicts the grandfather (on the left), his son and his grandson, navigating after death to the Islands of the Blest.

It is probable that when the stele was erected, only the grandfather was already dead, but it was quite common to erect funerary monuments, depicting dead members of the same family together with others still living. Thus the stele belonged to a funerary monument of a military family living in the then prosperous Gortyn, to which the territory of Phaestos also belonged at that time.

The theme of the navigation to the nether world on funerary stelae becomes more and more popular in the roman imperial times. It reflects the influence of philosophical ideas.

According to them human life is compared to a navigation and death as the last harbour of destiny. Thus the commandment or wish of the dead to the living εὐπλόει (navigate well).

Every just and kind man is allowed to travel to the Islands of the Blest (Νήσους τῶν Μακάρων), the legendary land of the Heroes. These Islands according to the tradition were either around the ocean or on the celestial sphere. The journey to them might be the human destination, and the anchoring in the celestial harbour (καθορμίζειν εἰς τὸν λιμένα τῶν οὐρανῶν) would be the final destiny.

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From a simple means of transportation the boat became gradually a symbol of the happy navigation to the coast of paradise.

Charalambos Kritzas
Epigraphical Museum
1, Tossitsa Street
106 82 Athens, Greece

NOTE

This text is a preliminary presentation of the stele. The proper publication is under preparation.

ILLUSTRATION

Roman tomb relief from the Tymbaki area (Crete).



FIG. 1