

Representing Absence: The Iconographic Impact of Sumptuary Legislation in the Funerary Monuments of Ancient Greece

Abstract

The impetus for Solon's sumptuary legislation has been widely studied but its specific effects on ancient Athens and the wider Greek world remain little addressed, particularly with regards to their iconographic implications. This paper examines the development and use of the motif of the mourning siren as it occurs in Greek art, and argues for its interpretation as a stand-in for the human women whose role in the funerary ritual was dramatically limited by the establishment of sixth century legislation directed at funeral practices. The shift in meaning of the siren, moving from a monstrous narrative element as depicted in the *Odyssey*, to an independent symbol of mourning used in a mortuary context, illuminates a desire on the part of the Greeks to translate the performance of mourning rituals by human females into a more permanent medium. This claim is supported by a study of the iconographic origins of the siren, a tracing of the practices of Greek funerals and the prescriptions of the sumptuary laws that altered elements of their performance, and an evaluation of the form and use of funerary monuments in conjunction with the iconography of mourning. While previous scholarship has treated each of these subjects separately, when taken together, they suggest an explanation for the genesis of the motif in relation to changing funerary customs, themselves the result of political changes. Although the mourning siren is a singular example, evaluation of this motif opens a dialogue for reinterpretations of other composite figures in Greek art, and puts forward the possibility that other such creatures also underwent an evolution in terms of conception and significance as the result of social and political events.