

MEMORIALIZATION

IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

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FEATURED ART OBJECT

Grave Stele of Pollis



Object Name: [Grave Stele of Pollis](#)
Date Created: about 480 BCE
Place Created: Megara, Greece
Culture: Greek (Megarian)
Material: Parian marble
Maker: Unknown
Dimensions: 153 × 45.1 × 15.9 cm
(60 1/4 × 17 3/4 × 6 1/4 in.)
Getty Museum

The cost of war is shown as an intimate sorrow on this marble **stele**, a tall, narrow gravestone for a beloved son. The **memorial** honors a young warrior named Pollis who died about 480–479 BCE during the historical wars between the Greeks (especially Athens) and the Persians. A funerary text is **inscribed** (cut) into the stone at the top. The form of the letters suggests that the stele stood near the city of Megara, an ally of Athens. Below the text the image of the young soldier is carved in **low relief**. The monument is broken off below his knees. Paint, now lost, would have made the letters more legible and depicted colorful details on the armor.

Stele/Stelai (pl)	Memorial	Inscribe	Relief, low
Upright stone or wooden slab or pillar used to honor a person or mark a place. Often an inscribed grave marker or a boundary stone (Also called stela/stelae.)	Structure to preserve the memory of a person, occasion, or act of importance to family, community, country, or history.	To write something on or to cut letters, text, or imagery into a hard medium with a sharp tool.	Method of carving figures or designs so that they are raised slightly above a flat background.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

The text directly addresses the viewer in Pollis's voice: "**I speak, Pollis, dear son of Asopichos, not being a coward: I myself died at the hands of the tattooers.**" Greek males were described as "the son of" their fathers instead of by a last name. Pollis died at the hands of "tattooers," probably Thracians who lived in northern Greece and were Persian allies. Their practice of tattooing made them noteworthy. It was likely Pollis's father who called him a "dear son" and carefully recorded his bravery by including that he died "not...a coward".

Below the text, a nude Pollis is shown as a hoplite soldier moving intently from left to right, wearing a helmet and carrying a shield, sword, and nine-foot throwing-spear, only part of which fits on the stele. Greek hoplites marched on foot against the enemy and overlapped their round shields to form a protective wall during attack. The tips of the long spears pointed up over the shields. In the carving, Pollis rests the shield on his left shoulder and holds his spear horizontally in his right hand, but his slightly crouched position suggests that he is ready for action.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles

Sarcophagus/Sarcophagi (pl)

Stone coffin, often decorated on the sides with mythological scenes carved in relief, sometimes with the image of the deceased person or couple on the lid. Used in Imperial Roman times from the early 100s into the 400s CE.

Memorial

Structure to preserve the memory of a person, occasion, or act of importance to family, community, country, or history.

This Roman marble **sarcophagus** (coffin) was created around 200 CE for a wealthy husband and wife, who are depicted reclining on the lid as if they were on a couch. Burial in sarcophagi (plural) was a common Roman funeral practice from about 150 to 250 CE. Since these coffins were meant to be seen and often included images of the deceased, they also functioned as **memorials**. The couple's faces are unfinished, perhaps because the sarcophagus was pre-made and had not yet been purchased. Once sold, the buyer would have requested the addition of specific facial features to represent the deceased.

Object Name: [Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles](#)

Date Created: 180–220 CE

Place Created: Athens, Greece

Culture: Roman

Material: Marble

Maker: Unknown

Dimensions: 134 × 211 × 147 cm
(52 3/4 × 83 1/16 × 57 7/8 in.)

Getty Museum





FEATURED ART OBJECT

Relief, high

Method of carving figures or designs so they are raised high above a flat background, often by half or more of their form in three dimensions.

Trojan War

Legendary war between the Greeks and Trojans that started with the abduction of Helen, the most beautiful (Greek) woman in the world, by the Trojan prince Paris.

Iliad

Greek epic poem about the Trojan War and the hero Achilles, told orally for centuries and then written down by about 700 BCE. Attributed to the poet Homer.

The decoration on the body of the coffin is carved in **high relief**, and many figures are almost fully three-dimensional. The four sides of the sarcophagus are decorated with mythological scenes from the life of Achilles, the Greek warrior made famous in the tales of the **Trojan War** recorded in Homer's

Iliad. The adventures of an ancient war hero don't seem to relate to the lives of a rich Roman married couple, but some tales of gods and heroes were viewed as symbols of overcoming difficulties, even death. They could also show off a person's knowledge of famous authors. These stone coffins were produced to order or pre-made and decorated with popular mythological scenes.

- The front side of the sarcophagus (the side from which the couple looks out at us) is carved with a detailed scene of Achilles dragging the corpse of the Trojan hero Hector behind his chariot. (This was a shockingly disrespectful act of vengeance, but Achilles eventually returned Hector's body to his father for burial.)



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Centaur

Creature formed from the upper body of a human merged with the body of a horse (replacing the horse's head and neck).

Odyssey

Greek epic poem about the return of the hero Odysseus from the Trojan War, told orally for centuries and then written down by about 700 BCE. Attributed to the poet Homer.

- The unfinished back of the sarcophagus shows a battle between Greeks and **centaurs**, mythological horse-humans whose wise elder, Chiron, was Achilles's tutor.
- One short end of the sarcophagus shows Achilles arming himself for war.
- The other short end shows Odysseus, the clever hero of Homer's **Odyssey**, discovering Achilles hiding among the daughters of King Lycomedes. Achilles's goddess mother Thetis wanted to keep him from going to war, where he was prophesied to die but win lasting glory. She sent him to hide disguised as a young woman in the court of the distant king. Odysseus found Achilles and convinced him to join the Greeks in their war against Troy. Although Achilles did die in that battle, his glory endured and his story was preserved as courageous inspiration on this sarcophagus, as well as many other objects.



VOCABULARY

Centaur

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Iliad

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Inscribe

To write something on or to cut letters, text, or imagery into a hard medium with a sharp tool.

Memorial

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Odyssey

Greek epic poem about the return of the hero Odysseus from the Trojan War, told orally for centuries and then written down by about 700 BCE. Attributed to the poet Homer.

Relief, High

Method of carving figures or designs so they are raised high above a flat background, often by half or more of their form in three dimensions.

Relief, Low

Method of carving figures or designs so that they are raised slightly above a flat background.

Sarcophagus/Sarcophagi (pl)

Stone coffin, often decorated on the sides with mythological scenes carved in relief, sometimes with the image of the deceased person or couple on the lid. Used in Imperial Roman times from the early 100s into the 400s CE.

Stele/Stelai (pl)

Upright stone or wooden slab or pillar used to honor a person or mark a place. Often an inscribed grave marker or a boundary stone. (Also called stela/stelae.)

Trojan War

Legendary war between the Greeks and Trojans that started with the abduction of Helen, the most beautiful (Greek) woman in the world, by the Trojan prince Paris.



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Closeup of Grave Stele of Pollis



Closeup of Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles



READING & DISCUSSION

Contemporary Connections: Comparing Memorialization Then and Now

**45 - 90
MINS
with optional
“Explore More”
Activity**

Explore how people and events are memorialized today and compare them with examples of memorialization in Ancient Greece and Rome.

OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Describe an ancient object
- Give examples of how people and events were memorialized in Ancient Greece and Rome
- Discuss ways that people and events are memorialized today, and compare with examples from Ancient Greece and Rome

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution digital images [Grave Stele of Pollis](#) and [Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles](#)
- [Featured Art Object information](#) for Grave Stele of Pollis
- [Featured Art Object information](#) for Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles

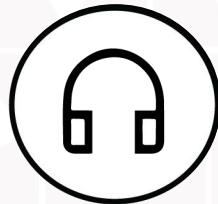
Note for Teachers:

This activity works best as a lead-in activity before students read about or research the object and focus specifically on what can be discovered through visual analysis.



READING & DISCUSSION

- Sticky notes or paper with tape
- OPTIONAL: Audio Clips for Grave Stele of Pollis and Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles



OPTIONAL RESOURCE(S):

Audio Clips for [Grave Stele of Pollis](#)

Audio Clips for [Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles](#)

DIRECTIONS:

1. Read the Featured Art Object Information for [Grave Stele of Pollis](#) and [Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles](#). **Optional:** Listen to the audio clips about these objects instead of, or in addition to, reading the Featured Art Object Information.
2. Then, discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups.

Optional: If working in groups or short on time, rather than focusing on both objects, select just one, read the single object description and answer the following discussion questions for each specific object:



READING & DISCUSSION

Grave Stele of Pollis

- Who was being memorialized by the Grave Stele of Pollis?
- What does the inscription tell us about the person being memorialized?
- What can we infer about Pollis from how he is represented in the carving?
- Considering both the inscription and the figure carving, what was the stele communicating about the person being memorialized?
- What does this stele suggest about how people were memorialized at the time it was made?

Sarcophagus with scenes from the Life of Achilles

- What stories are told by the carvings on each side of the sarcophagus?
- How do these stories relate to the idea of memorialization? Why would they have been put on a sarcophagus?
- What do we know and not know about who/what is being memorialized? Explain.
- What does this sarcophagus tell us about memorializing practices when it was made?



READING & DISCUSSION

3. Next, consider how people and events are memorialized today by discussing the following questions in small groups:

Discussion Questions:

- How does your family/culture honor loved ones who are no longer with us?
- What do you think is the best way to remember someone who has passed away?
- How are important historical events memorialized today? What examples can you think of?
- How would you compare the examples of memorialization in ancient times with the examples from today? What are the similarities and differences? Write each similarity and difference you think of on individual sticky notes or small pieces of paper and add them to a classroom idea board.



READING & DISCUSSION

4. To wrap up, do a “gallery walk” of the class’s ideas posted on the board to see what similarities and differences are between the other groups’ ideas.



EXPLORE MORE

Research contemporary examples of memorials or find examples from your family or community. Create a class slideshow or gallery to showcase the prevalence and variety of memorials.

Did You Know?

The word sarcophagus means ‘flesh eater’ in Greek.



RELATED LINKS

Grave Stele of Pollis:

- [Getty Villa Teacher Guide: Gravestone of Pollis](#)
- [Getty Villa Student Guide: Gravestone of Pollis](#)

Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles:

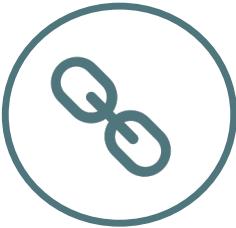
Primary Resources for Narratives on Sarcophagus:

1). From Homer's *Iliad*:

[Hektor drags Achilles's corpse \(*Iliad* XXII: 367-404\)](#)

Achilles drags Hector's corpse in the dust (BkXXII:367-404)

"He pierced the tendons of both feet behind from heel to ankle, and through them threaded ox-hide thongs, tying them to his chariot, leaving the corpse's head to trail along the ground. Then lifting the glorious armour aboard, he mounted and touched the horses with his whip, and they eagerly leapt forward. Dragged behind, Hector's corpse raised a cloud of dust, while his outspread hair flowed, black, on either side."



RELATED LINKS

- 2). Related section from [Prophecies about Achilles \(Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.174\):](#)

"When Akhilleus (Achilles) was nine, [the seer] Khalkas (Calchas) announced that Troy could not be captured without him. Thetis, who had foreknowledge that he would have to die if he went to war, concealed him in women's dress and handed him over to Lykomedes (Lycomedes) as a girl."



STANDARDS

National Core Arts Standards:

Prof.VA:Re7.1 Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

Prof.VA:Re7.2 Analyze how one's understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.

Prof.VA:Re8 Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant and sufficient evidence found in the work and its various contexts.

Prof.VA.Cn11 Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

9-10.SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

9-10.SL.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

9-10.RH.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

California Social Studies Standards:

HSS-10.1 Standard: Students relate the moral and ethical principles in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, in Judaism, and in Christianity to the development of Western political thought.