Visual Flexibility: Votive and Funerary Banquet Reliefs in Late Classical Attica

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Abstract

Votive banquet reliefs featuring a reclining elder male employed a visual language that to ancient viewers unambiguously defined the nature and identity of a hero. This highly flexible language appears to have been quickly adopted in the heroising realm of funerary monuments by the end of the Late Classical period, ca. 400–323 BCE, and remained a desired aesthetic throughout the Hellenistic period, ca. 323–31 BCE. In this lesser known and smaller corpus of votive banquet reliefs, few examples retain any vestiges of polychromy or inscriptions. An unstudied and unpublished relief of this type from the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, however, exceptionally retains both. A close study of this relief provides insight into the aesthetic tastes of the Late Classical period, as well as an understanding of how banqueting iconography, originally reserved for a hero rather than heroised deceased, was emphatically adopted into the funerary sphere at the end of the fourth century BCE.

Introduction

The implementation of specific iconographies, colours and inscriptions in relief are aesthetic choices made by both craftsmen and patrons and provide insight into ancient societal praxes. In antiquity, such aesthetic choices often become trends, establishing a style of artistic expression that is widely accepted not only due to preference, but also due to practicality and legibility. Banquet reliefs, for instance, can serve either a votive or funerary function. This distinction is often overlooked in modern scholarship in part due to a brief

period of production (approximately 100 years) and therefore subsequently small corpus of votive banquet reliefs (approximately 200 known artefacts) as opposed to the innumerable funerary examples (Fabricius 2016: 33–35). A new opportunity to investigate this difference as well as the social interactions of two contrasting narratives, one votive and one funerary, yet represented in the same aesthetic mode, is offered by a votive banquet relief [LI.90.3] in the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tennessee, ('the Brooks Relief') published here for the first time following recent close examination (Miller 2020). Carved in marble and exceptionally retaining both pigment and inscription, a close study of this relief provides insight into aesthetic taste in the Late Classical period, as well as a better understanding of how this banqueting iconography was adopted into the funerary sphere at the end of the fourth century BCE.

In general, the iconography of this banquet relief type features an elder male figure reclining while drinking and dining. This motif was introduced from the ancient Near East and was used by Athenian citizens in Late Classical Greece as a means of asserting power, displaying abundance and control of resources, and honouring gods and heroes in perpetuity (Dentzer 1982; Lawton 2016: 388–389). In the detailed catalogue of votive reliefs excavated in the Athenian Agora, Carol Lawton confirms that this type of banquet dedication was indeed reserved exclusively for gods and heroes during the mid-late Classical period, ca. 420–323 BCE, and served to document such acts of dedication (Lawton 2017: 13). Lawton's systematic examination of the imagery associated with the banquet relief reveals an accompanying female companion, a group of worshippers, servants, and attendants in diminutive scale, and organised architectural framing in a rectangular, close-to-square format (Lawton 2017: 15–17). Additional key features include the *polos* crown, the *rhyton* drinking horn, the sacrificial animal (most commonly a pig), and a krater for mixing wine and water (van Straten 1995: 262–264). It is important to note that the sacrificial pig is a clear indication of a votive dedication as pigs were not sacrificed to mortals in Greek tradition. It is not until the late Hellenistic period, ca. 197–31 BCE, that the funerary banquet reliefs adopt their own unique iconographic elements with the addition of chthonic imagery (i.e., snakes) (Fabricius 2016: figs 1, 5 and 6). Even with such well-defined iconog-

raphy, votive banquet reliefs continue to be misidentified as funerary grave markers in museums worldwide; even the Brooks Relief was originally designated by its holding museum as a grave relief.

Despite our modern confusion, it seems such imagery would have been remarkably clear, concise, and legible to ancient viewers. Despite the standardised iconography, the narrative it conveyed was elastic—easily adapted to honour a specific hero or a heroised deceased, as determined first and foremost by display context, and only later by the subtle variations in iconography. Because of this reliance on contextualised display, it is entirely possible that some votive reliefs were used in the funerary domain during the Hellenistic period. This change occurs at the end of the Late Classical period when banquet reliefs shift from a dedication to a hero in a sanctuary to a dedication to a deceased in a necropolis, altering the perception of the reclining banqueter and what he could symbolise. Despite this change in narrative, the popularised aesthetic choices regarding imagery, material, polychromy, and inscription, however, remain a constant. Figures remain in the same postures reclining at the right of the relief frame, worshippers and/or family members remain at left in reverential arm-sling pose, format remains close-to-square, blue is consistently used in the background, and inscriptions, although rare, are consistently carved into the architectural framing. It is ultimately the continuity of such aesthetics in conjunction with the flexibility of the narrative that establishes a collective preference for the banquet relief as a means of honorary monument, and thus the long-lasting trend of its production and use.

The Brooks Relief

The Brooks Relief, serving here as a case study for the establishment and continuity of late fourth century Greek aesthetics, was first documented in 1989 on the international art market in relation to the activity of British antiquities dealer Robert Symes. Robert Symes Limited sold the relief to Clarence Day (1927–2009) on December 6th, 1989. In March 1991, it was then loaned to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, as part of a larger collection of classical antiquities on behalf of the Clarence Day Foundation, administered by the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis (Miller 2020: 5).

A close reading of the Brooks Relief reveals standard banqueting iconography, namely the iconic bearded elder male reclining on a *kline* (banqueting couch) and wearing a *himation* (outer garment draped over one shoulder) over his lower body and draped over his left arm (**fig. 1**). Crowned with a *polos* headdress he leans against what appears to be a folded textile with his head turned away from the accompanying figures, while holding aloft in his right hand a ram headed *rhyton* and in his left hand, a *phiale* (Ebbinghaus and Molacek 2018: 150, 256). A similarly scaled woman in profile, wearing a *chiton* (long tunic) faces the hero. Her hair is bound in a bun, and she extends an offering of incense towards the reclining banqueter via a *thymiaterion* (censer) in her right hand. While her status is elevated, given her similar scale, her proximity to the hero on the *kline*, and the positioning of her feet off the ground, it is understood that she is still subordinate to her male counterpart (Lawton 2017: 95–96). Behind the woman stand five figures at a smaller scale, all in civic dress and in the conventional 'arm-sling' pose associated with appropriate public conduct and audience (Dillon and Garland 2013: 96–98). In the center foreground, a young male attendant in a tunic presents a large sacrificial pig and holds the *kanoun* (bound sacrificial implements; Jensen 2009: 30–31), while in the right foreground a table is laden with offerings (*plakounta* and *pyramides*). At the far right, closest to the reclining banqueter, is a nude youthful male attendant in contrapposto pose decanting wine from an *oenochoe* (wine jug) into a slender, waist-high volute krater.

Such iconography, standardised and repeated across votive banquet reliefs, would have been clearly legible to ancient viewers as a dedication to a hero rather than as a funerary monument to a deceased citizen. In votive banquet reliefs, for example, the hero is often portrayed breaking the fourth wall of the narrative scene and engaging directly with the viewer, in contrast to many funerary banquet scenes in which the deceased's attention is often concentrated on the interior action (Dentzer 1982: figs 363, 484, 493, 497, 499). The hero's gaze signifies intimate connection with a dedicator or worshipper, while that of the deceased connotes his departure from the worldly realm to that of the afterlife. The votive banquet therefore encourages more sensorial engagement and interaction by the viewer, while the funerary banquet is more passively

observed—a difference, for example, between having a conversation and observing a conversation. These votive reliefs would also have been surrounded by offerings, incense, and orations, reinforcing their sensory impact. The visual impact of this iconography, amidst this larger experience, emphasises the importance of the reclining banqueter as a divine being worthy of such exaltation.

It is possibly a desire for similar recognition that later prompts a new interpretation of the narrative: a banquet dedicated to an exceptional individual worthy of a hero's status. This desire amongst Athenian citizens to be elevated to a similar status is effectively executed through the continuation of an established collective aesthetic trend; this involves, along with similar imagery, the use of similar raw materials, that is, marble and blue pigment, and similar ways of inscribing the relief.

Material

The aesthetic choice of light-coloured marble (as evidenced in the Brooks Relief) is significant not only because of its broader associations and sensorial impact, but because of its consistent use in banquet reliefs later in the Hellenistic period. In terms of construction, the Brooks Relief is unremarkable; the carving is quick and cursory with little surface texture variation. The lateral sides and top of the relief are roughly picked, and the back of the relief reveals quarry face splitting and remains in its natural, unfinished state (**fig. 2**). The use of marble from Mt. Pentelikon, however, with its white colour and silvery mica veining inclusions, creates a powerful perceptual bond with other Athenian constructions. The use of this permanent stone material would have served to liken the modest personalised marble votive dedications to the larger, public civic ones, such as the Parthenon and its Ionic frieze (Boardman 1995: 186; Stewart 2008). Visually, this effect would have been intensified by the physical elevation of the votive reliefs that were mounted on vertical shafts (Fischer and Tal 2003: 54). The Brooks Relief provides evidence for this elevated display via a broken-off tenon on its central underside. Drawing on such visual echoes between the Ionic friezes of the great temples and the votive banquet reliefs, Athenian citizens would have wanted to liken their small-scale

dedications, both materially and visually, with those to the gods on the Acropolis. The impact of private votive banquet reliefs thus operated mimetically—highlighting their direct connections to sacred ritual and public civic life.

Marble votive reliefs of the Late Classical period are found in their highest concentrations in Athens, with the few reliefs found outside of the city likely being exports and/or the products of small secondary workshops; these products adhere to the same aesthetics as those produced in the city proper (Lawton 2016: 391–392) (**figs 3–4**). As a group, such reliefs, privately coordinated by their patrons with an artisan, reflect the intentions and concerns of individual Athenian citizens demanding the attention of the gods to be focused on individual dedicants rather than an entire deme (Dillon and Garland 2013: 100–103; Kroll 1979). Such elevation of status was further facilitated by the rectangular shape of the reliefs which imitated *naiskoi*—a form derived from the contemporary display, in freestanding *naiskoi*, of wooden *pinakes*, which likely served as the earliest hero votives (Plantzos 2018: 257–258; Pollitt 2014: 202–204). These *pinakes*, or wooden panel paintings, likely influenced not only the format of the marble hero votives and their visual imagery, but the use of colour as well (Boardman 1985: 185–186, 1995: 132). It is a desire for a more permanent material, like that witnessed at the Parthenon and other monumental buildings in the mid-fifth century, that supplanted the production of the wooden panels. Spurred by the opening of quarries on Mt. Pentelikon, it was this event, in conjunction with constructions on the Acropolis, that not only made marble desirable but also made it and skilled carvers readily available to produce private dedications that were now economically feasible for the average Athenian citizen (Clairmont 1993: 182; Stewart 2008: 170–171). So, it seems that the aesthetic preference for white marble was affected by multiple factors—marble was appreciated for its association with public civic monuments, its ability to retain and display pigment vividly (an ability also associated with the *pinakes*), and its permanence in contrast to its wooden prototypes.

Polychromy

Colour is also a key aesthetic feature of banquet reliefs, not only aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but, more broadly, serving as a means of ordering, classifying, and understanding the world (Young 2018). It is important to consider colour as a system of codification in the ancient world; that is, as an unambiguous means of comprehension. The perception of colour, combined with other modes of representation, grants things additional meanings. In the case of the Brooks Relief and its comparanda, colour served more as a means of distinguishing a sacred or ritual object and likening it (much like the material) to larger public monuments.

While tests in ultraviolet light did not reveal any traces of pigment or paint shadows on the Brooks Relief, visible induced luminescence (infrared light) revealed the presence of Egyptian blue on the recessed background (Miller 2020: 12; for imaging technique see Brinkmann 2017; Warda 2011; **fig. 5**). The strongest preserved concentration of Egyptian blue pigment was found in the protected depths of the relief around the head of the reclining banqueter's female companion (**fig. 6**) and presumably would have covered the background of the relief entirely. A secondary investigation using microscopy further captured detailed images of the blue pigment particles, which consistently appear in the highly disturbed burial accretion in the depths of the relief, rather than as a single, distinct, intact layer of pigment (**fig. 7**). The blue background of the relief was conventional in this period in relief sculpture and is attested quite clearly in many of the better-preserved Hellenistic funerary banquet relief types (Blume 2014: 168–172; Stamatopoulou 2016: figs 1 and 10).

For ancient viewers, the use of blue in the Brooks Relief would have been striking—both drawing the eye and calling attention to the heroic nature of the scene. As discussed by Damaskos (2012: 105), blue was associated with heroised or sacred objects, emphasising the heroic character of the depicted subject matter. The votive reliefs, much like their wooden antecedents, were set along paths and in walls at sanctuaries. In this context, bright Egyptian blue would have stood out to the ancient viewer as a profound means of dedication and would have strengthened the visual connection between the re-

lief and the larger public civic monuments with similar pigmentation in their friezes (Harrison 1988: 339–340). Most iconically, a similar use of blue background is evidenced in the background of the long frieze on the Temple of Hephaestus in the Athenian Agora (Marconi 2009: 162).

As far as the relationship between votive and funerary reliefs is concerned, it is interesting that blue pigment is preserved more frequently on the latter. Of the sample of fifty votive banquet reliefs excavated from the Athenian Agora, only three retain pigment traces (two of which are fragments): one with red in the antefixes of its architectural frame, one with red on its background, and one with blue on its background and red in its figures' hair (Lawton 2017: Plates 36.121, 22.77, 14.49). On contemporary Athenian funerary reliefs, by contrast, as well as in later Hellenistic grave monuments and *stelai*, blue appears frequently as a background colour (Posamentir 2006, 2011). Such monuments, together with the three painted votive banquet relief fragments noted above, suggest that the architectural elements of the Brooks Relief could have been painted red. If red is added, the juxtaposition of two primary colours, red and blue, would have increased the visual impact of the relief even further, connecting it with the presumably polychromatic surfaces of the Parthenon on the Acropolis and the attested polychromic surfaces on the Hephaestion (where red pigment was painted along the edges of the architectural frieze: Harrison 1988).

The use of blue in the Brooks Relief and in votive banquet reliefs more generally appears to be an aesthetic choice valued not only for its allusion to monumental buildings, but also for its bright, eye-catching effect on passers-by. Such Late Classical colour convention became synonymous with the sacred, and this relationship continued with funerary banquet reliefs throughout the Hellenistic period.

Inscription

The final component of the Brooks Relief that contributes to its visual aesthetic is its dedicatory inscription. In ancient Greece, inscribed architraves on sculptural reliefs are well documented as early as the sixth century BCE.

The practice of inscribing an individual dedicant's name seems to have been an appropriation of an individual's rights emphasising piety and benevolence (Umholtz 2002: 261). Such dedications in the architraves of both public civic buildings and the banquet reliefs mimicking *naiskoi*, were predominately votive in nature, most recording gifts given by an individual. Like smaller scale reliefs, they carefully included the name of the dedicator as a record of veneration and testament to personal piety (Umholtz 2002: 262–263).

Dedicatory inscriptions in votive banquet reliefs are relatively rare, with, by way of estimate, fewer than fifty out of the corpus of two hundred reliefs displaying any such text (Dentzer 1982: 344; Lawton 2017: 92). The discovery of bases inscribed with dedications 'to the hero' suggests that some of these dedicatory monuments had inscriptions on plinths and on columnar shafts for mounting rather than in the architectural frame, which may account for the low numbers (Thompson 1968: 36–38; Walbank 1989: 71–75). In such cases, the name of the hero is seldomly identified. A hero's identity would have been made clear instead via the relief's display context in a sanctuary associated with a particular Athenian deme (Klöckner 2017: 120–121; Rotroff 1978: 206). This mode of collective identification, that is, the recognition of a hero based on their display context, helped to establish common relationships amongst citizens.

Adding an example to the inscribed corpus of known votive banquet dedications (see U.S. Epigraphy Project), the Brooks Relief's inscription is crudely scratched into the architrave at the top of the relief's architectural frame. It reads: ΧΡΥΣΙΣ ΜΟΣΧΙΩΝ ΗΡΩΙΕΥΔΩΤΕΙ (Chrysis [and] Moschion [dedicate this relief] to the hero Eudotei; Dr. Stephen Tracy, personal correspondence) (**fig. 8**). Eudotes is a heroised minor divinity mentioned only in one other inscription on a stone from Brauron that reads: [Τ]ελέστης Εὐδώτηι εὐξάμενος (Telestes to Eudotei in fulfilment of his vow) (Themelis 1998: 77–78). According to Tracy, this is the only other attestation of Eudotes known in ancient Greek tradition. The presence of the hero's name on the Brooks Relief, then, gives insight into the origin of the relief within the larger topography of Attica as well as further indication of how such an object would have been interacted with by ancient viewers.

Looking to topography, the appearance of the name Eudotes outside of Brauron occurs in three reliefs from Laurion documenting mining leases titled or called 'Eudoteion' (meaning 'well-endowed' or 'bounteously giving': Stephen Tracy, personal correspondence) (**fig. 9**). As there were prosperous active silver mines in Laurion, Eudotes seems to have been a local hero intimately associated with economic activity, overseeing the essential provision of silver wealth to the Athenian empire (MacDonald 1961: 19–21). Approximately seventy-five document reliefs excavated from the Athenian Agora refer to or record the silver mines in the Attic peninsula, the majority dating from the fourth century BCE (Crosby 1950: 180–190). This documentation could support the idea that the Brooks Relief was a product of Attica and not one of the secondary workshops. One might even imagine that the standardised format of the relief could have been produced in bulk in the newly available marble material, painted according to sacred monumental convention, and quickly inscribed to a dedicant's specifications.

Given the display contexts and the interactive imagery on votive banquet reliefs, the inscriptions usually serve as secondary loci of information. Primary information is relayed sensorially, through iconography, material, and polychromy, rather than relying on identifying text. In the case of the Brooks Relief, however, the inscription may have been more important as indicated by the visual interest seemingly added via the 'aesthetic mismatch' between the crude form of the inscription and the high quality of the marble and Egyptian blue pigment. Rather than blending in, this inscription stands out, creating a kind of visual tension that draws the eye more forcefully to the text and, by doing so, to the dedicators themselves, and to their piety. The inscription ultimately affects social praxis—on the one hand enhancing the collective identification of a deme with clear identification of a regionally specific hero, and simultaneously socially differentiating individuals within a deme as dedicators and non-dedicators.

Epilogue & Conclusions

It is the social practices established through these aesthetic choices combined with a flexible narrative that allowed for the long-standing visual tradition of the banquet scene. By shifting the display of reliefs from a sanctuary to a cemetery, the qualities of a hero were conflated with the qualities of a good 'middling' Athenian citizen: prudent, intelligent, self-controlled, moderate, and orderly (Boardman 1995: 132; Stewart 2008: 240). It is worth reiterating that the production of votive banquet reliefs was a relatively short-lived phenomenon from the late fifth to late fourth centuries BCE in Athens and that by the late third to second century BCE the funerary banquet had completely subsumed the tradition of the hero votive. In this new context, scenes likening an individual to a hero after their death became popularised, the corpus of banquet reliefs being so flooded with these funerary models that scholars still struggle to distinguish the votive from the innumerable funerary examples (Fabricius 2016: 33–35). It is all too easy to imagine that the hero's adorants and attendants were instead family members mourning the deceased at an eternal death feast, and subtle late Hellenistic variations like the removal of the sacrificial pig in conjunction with this largely standardised iconography only served to reinforce the new narrative (Dentzer 1982: 1–2; Thönges-Stringaris 1965).

The definition of a Greek hero was also inherently fluid, that is, there were varying types of heroes as well as varying means of becoming a hero. When heroising imagery was used in the funerary tradition, its function was to distinguish an individual from the "ordinary dead" (Ekroth 2007: 102). Given this understanding and the fact that the aesthetic aspects of the relief remained a constant, it seems likely that the use of material, colour and inscription supported, if not, demanded the long-standing tradition of banquet reliefs. Athenian society found a quality in the imagery, marble, blue pigment, and custom text that was worth continuing, whereas the narrative meaning was flexible, interchangeable, and mutable.

As such, these aesthetic choices alter the way we might think about production and consumption more generally in antiquity. It is often the case that

we think of aesthetic choice in terms of normality, acceptance, and inclusion, when perhaps we should be thinking of aesthetic choice in terms of exception: the small corpus of some two-hundred votive reliefs that founded a tradition of banqueting scenes credited almost exclusively as funerary. This pattern of perpetuated social values has a clear underlying motive of elevating and relaying social status, and yet despite the shift in narrative from hero to heroised, the continuity of the raw material and pigment remained intact. This is significant because it shows the value Late Classical Greek society placed on status, power, abundance and control, being willing to borrow and reuse material and imagery originally reserved exclusively for gods, heroes and the deified. Such contextualisation reveals the importance of aesthetic visual cues as a means of establishing a universal mode of clear and concise comprehension.

Votive banquet reliefs employed a common iconography that was on one hand contextually specific and yet flexible enough that it was suitable for any sacred location. The image of a banquet easily translated to other social situations and allowed viewers to create their own narratives for the scene. The fact, however, that such narrative was so easily reinterpreted gives agency, more so than originally acknowledged, to aesthetics and the perception of the material world. It is an interest in and preference for certain physical properties, that is material, colour, and text, that shaped the perception of such objects and established the long-standing tradition of the aesthetics of banquet reliefs, both votive and funerary. In the Late Classical period, the collective aesthetic of votive banquet reliefs—materially superior, eye-catchingly painted, and personalised via inscriptions—allowed for a forthright visual experience. It is this legibility, emphasised by aesthetic choice, that popularised the banquet relief and allowed for its continuity and adoption in subsequent periods. As illustrated by the Brooks Relief, the physical properties of such objects provide valuable insight into human perception in a period often defined by its political and religious norms, rather than its social praxes.

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Fig. 1. The Brooks Relief, unknown maker, Athens (Greece), votive relief, late 4th–early 3rd century BCE, Marble (MBMA LI.90.3). Original museum label: "Unknown Maker, Greek (Athens) Grave Relief, mid-4th to early 3rd century B.C.E. Marble (MBMA LI.90.3)" (permission granted by Shannon Perry, Registrar for Exhibitions and Loans, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art).

Fig. 2. The Brooks Relief (verso) (permission granted by Shannon Perry, Registrar for Exhibitions and Loans, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art).

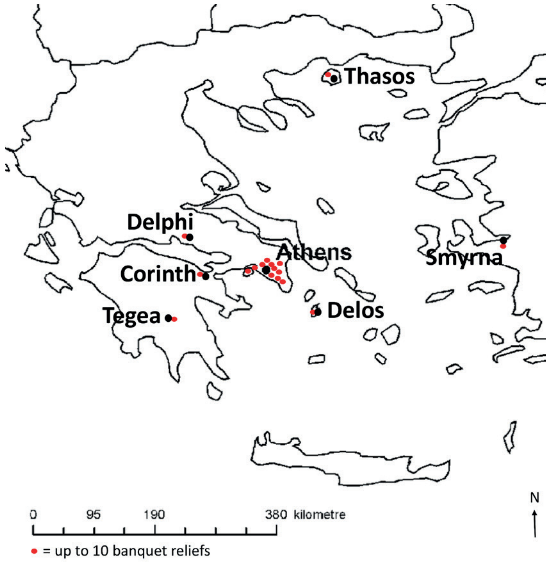

Fig. 3. Distribution map of votive banquet reliefs in ancient Greece, ca. 5th–4th centuries BCE (by the author).

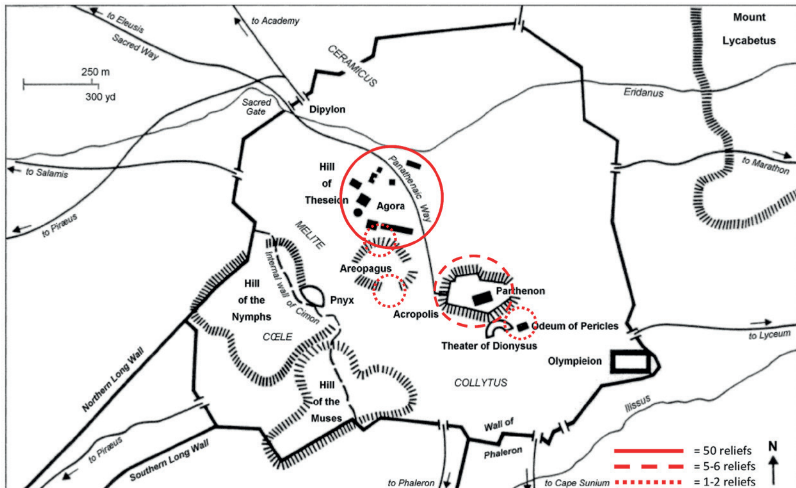

Fig. 4. Map of votive banquet relief distribution in Athens, 5th–4th centuries BCE (adapted by the author from a map available in https://www.plato-dialogues.org/tools/athensim/htm).

Fig. 5. Vestiges of polychromy on the Brooks Relief, by the author. Left*: ambient light image with burial accretions concentrated around the head of the seated female companion.* Right*: visible induced luminescence light (VIL) image with vestiges of Egyptian blue, highlighted in white, preserved in the burial accretions concentrated around the head of the seated female companion.*

Fig. 6. Details of the vestiges of polychromy on the Brooks Relief, by the author. Top*: detail, ambient light image of burial accretions around the head of the seated female companion.* Bottom*: detail, VIL image with Egyptian blue pigment highlighted in white around the head of the seated female companion.*

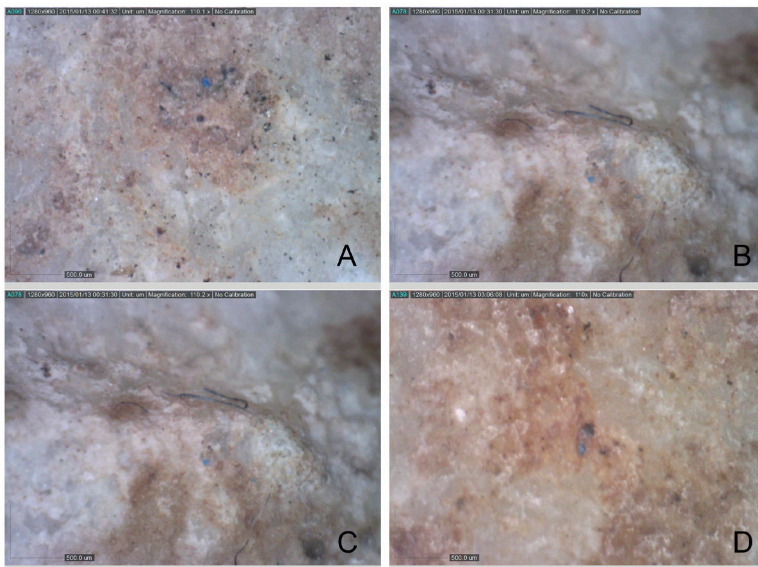

Fig. 7. Microscopic images (x110) with Dino-Lite Digital Microscope showing Egyptian blue pigment particles on the surface of the Brooks Relief, by the author. A. Background surface of the relief, behind the shoulder of the seated female companion. B. Background surface of the relief, beneath the bun/hair of the female companion. C. Raised surface of the relief, on the hand of the seated female companion. D. Background surface of the relief, above the head of the first male worshipper.

ΧΡΥΣΙΣ ΜΟΣΧΙΩΝ ΗΡΩΙΕΥΔΩΤΕΙ

Fig. 8. The Brooks Relief inscription followed by a drawing of the text and a transcription by the author. It translates "Chrysis Moschion to the hero Eudotei".

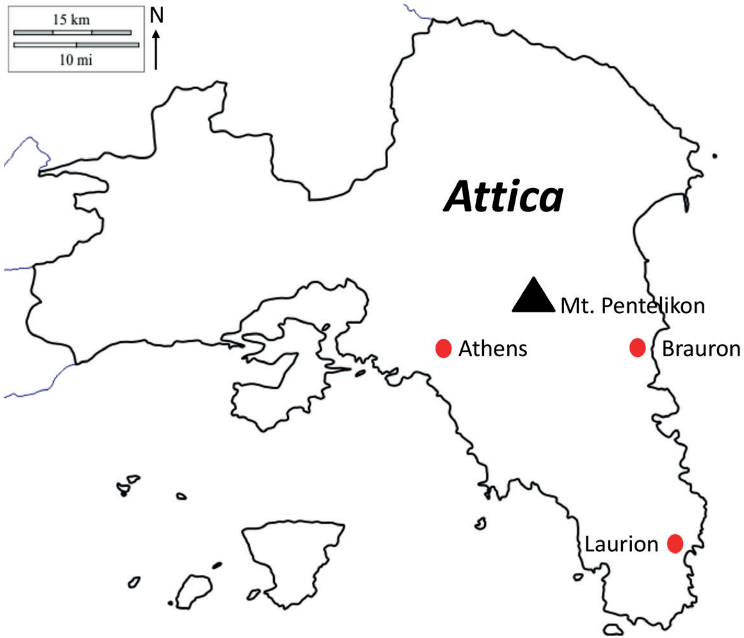

Fig. 9. Map of Attica showing Athens, Laurion and Brauron (adapted by the author by a map available in d-maps.com).