Transactions in stone: making sculpture in Athenian society in the sixth and fifth centuries BC
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V Epilogue

Who were the people who ‘made’ Athenian sculpture in the sixth and fifth centuries? Who contributed what to this art world? This study set out to investigate the communication between those who participated in the art world of Athens’ sculpture, and how their identities and activities are reflected in the material record. After so many centuries it is surprising just how close the evidence can bring us: to sculptors who signed their work and to patrons who had messages inscribed to the gods or to their fellow-Athenians. But in addition to these written testimonia, the production of sculpture has left physical remains: ruts and post holes along *lithagogia* roads, hearths used for forging dowels, styli to work models, troughs for making statue–paint, and the results of all these efforts, the monuments themselves.

Numbers of sculpture and bases in the sixth and fifth centuries show trends which at first glance may seem to be caused by historical events, notably the destruction of the city by the Persians in 479 BC. However, it was argued in chapter I that the sculpture from the Akropolis may represent what was produced in the sixth century to a much higher degree than is usually assumed. The simple reason for this is the fact that one cannot presuppose an unproved disappearance of archaic votives. If this is accepted, the material reflects the actual patterns of changing preferences, in which small treasuries dropped out of favour with wealthy Athenians to make way for marble statues. In the fifth century, large quantities of marble reliefs attest to the lasting popularity (and the greater uniformity) of sculpted votive and grave monuments, despite a temporary and partial lapse after the Persian wars.

These patterns in the record offer an indication of developments in the art world of Athenian sculpture. Over time, the participants of this art world, sculptors, quarrymen or other support personnel, or patrons, changed some part of their contributions. For example, in the course of the fifth century sculptors seem to have settled more in Athens. Fewer of them came from the islands than in the early decades of marble sculpture in Greece. This is connected to a growing distance between quarrymen and sculptors: where the early sculptors had had strong ties with the islands, often their places of birth, in the fifth century quarrymen and sculptors were more likely to be different men altogether. This applies not only to the quarries on islands like Paros, but also to those in the Pentelic mountains. More elaborate infrastructure and increasing specialisation among those who worked these quarries lies at the root of this differentiation.
There is little evidence to suggest that such changes in work practice were in any way forced. On the contrary, the reasons mostly seem either practical or personal. The shift from island marble to Pentelic marble in Athenian sculpture might have been a matter of the patrons' aesthetic preference or even one of their political loyalties. But it has turned out to be more likely that the improvement of transport facilities from the Pentelic quarries to the city made this marble available in large quantities and thus cheaper for the inhabitants of Athens. Not only could marble easily be ordered from there, but pieces which were left over from building projects were also eminently suited for the stelai and reliefs which were so common in the later fifth century. Thus it was practicalities rather than high-minded political considerations which determined to a large extent where and how the Athenians obtained the materials for their votives and gravestones.

Evidence from workshops shows a similar pragmatism. The Street of the Marble Workers and the Residential–Industrial district were in all likelihood set up to provide for the construction programme on the Akropolis. It was argued in this study that in the fifth century, various trades were practiced here which delivered supplies for the sculpture workshops in the area, as well as the necessary craftsmen for specialised jobs. Each could assist the others with his expertise, either in exchange for payment, or for free. This interpretation of the evidence suggests that there was a considerable degree of vertical specialisation in sculpture as early as the fifth century, as craftsmen from various trades worked jointly on individual monuments.

Craftsmen often mentioned their profession with pride in the inscriptions on votives and gravestones which they commissioned for themselves. Some of them were metics, some citizens, but all must have been successful in their work to be able to afford such gifts or memorials. The suggestion that they owned large workshops rather than working in them may be true for some cases, but it certainly does not explain all of them. Especially women who offered a percentage of what they had earned to the gods are unlikely to have been wealthy proprietors. Athenian law was quite restrictive in this respect, although probably more in the fifth century than earlier. Metics are another group of relatively low social status in the inscriptions. Yet their ethnica are regularly mentioned, apparently without any self-consciousness. It is remarkable that the inscriptions on the votive and sepulchral monuments show little evident concern for the patron’s social status. In this sphere of life in ancient Athens, it simply does not seem to be an issue whether one is a citizen or not.

Connected to this is the paucity of monuments which can be attributed with certainty to the elite of, for example, the pentakosiomedimnoi or hippeis. Sculpted dedications or
gravestones of the aristocracy were not subjected to legal restrictions in the sixth and fifth centuries: neither tyrants nor democrats seem to have intervened. In fact, the question is why they would have wanted to limit sculptural display. The evidence does not suggest that the Akropolis of the late sixth or the early fifth century was an arena for such use of sculpture by the upper property classes of Athens. This elite had to share sanctuaries and burial grounds with carpenters, fullers and washerwomen, whose dedications and sepulchral monuments were sometimes large and impressive. In such an environment, it would be practically impossible to bring aristocratic rivalry to the fore. If people from such varying groups in society participate in a phenomenon, it can hardly be a vehicle for exclusive display of power. On the other hand, a secretary of a cult would certainly have belonged to the landed elite of Athens; and his basin is rather modest. This apparent indifference with regard to social competition in the private sculpture of Athens would explain why it was unproblematic to carve one’s (foreign) ethnic in a dedication or grave monument. Sculpture was simply not the place where such things mattered.

On top of this, the inhabitants of Athens had other things on their minds in the late–archaic period. It was the time of the democratic reforms by Kleisthenes, followed soon after by the first rumblings of the Persian wars. A new sense of unity among the Athenians is conveyed by the choregic monuments, beginning in the second quarter of the fifth century: despite the supposed rivalry between tribes in dramatic contests, a few winners with multi-tribe choruses emphasised their combined effort in the votive inscriptions on their sculpted memorials. These, at least, are clearly directed at the Athenian public, at those who attended the occasion and remembered the victory, even if the formula involves a deity.

Dedications were first and foremost a means of communication with the gods, and perhaps this was one reason why social aspects were of lesser importance. Yet votives, like gravestones, were also visible to one’s fellow Athenians. That this mattered is implied by repairs or additions to certain monuments. Some votives address both deities and the patron’s contemporaries. The two questions of who was the more important party (living mortals or the divine ones) and how precisely this combined form of address worked, are beyond the scope of this study. The connection between patrons and their public is an interesting topic for future research, especially in light of public and private rituals practiced in Athens. An expansion of the material evidence would offer possibilities for such a study. Comparing the urban Athenian evidence with that of the Attic countryside would shed some light on the behaviour of the participants of this art world. It would be interesting to see whether in rural Attika, patrons and sculptors made different choices than in the city.
The Athenians certainly had their preferences for sculptural genres in different periods of the sixth and fifth centuries, but there is no evidence that these preferences expressed the patrons’ social status or their membership of elite groups such as property classes. Individual cases show individual motives for dedicating marble or bronze sculpture, and the record offers no quantifiable group trends in this respect. The Athenian upper classes did not choose specific types of sculpture to reflect their elite status, and there were no exclusive genres which were looked upon as conveying this message particularly well.

What defined the social interaction in the sculpture world, then, was not so much political status, tyranny or the rules of citizenship, nor even democracy. Evidently, sculpture was not nearly as much of an arena for confrontation in this sphere as might be expected. Instead, the choices which patrons made, like those of the sculptors and other craftsmen, were highly individual. The fact that no laws specifically limit the expenditure on gravestones in the sixth or fifth centuries supports the lack of importance of sculpture as a vehicle for political status. Not even Plato is explicitly negative about sculpture, sepulchral or votive, despite his generally low opinion of crafts and craftsmen.

The transactions of the art world of Athenian sculpture were no more, nor less, than the personal communication of many individuals through the sculptural monuments of each patron’s choice with deities or with the dead; and with the passing public, which echoed the acts of dedication or commemoration by looking at the statue or by reading the inscription. Most importantly, they are the outcome of the patrons’ discourse with the craftsmen from whom they ordered their monuments. These were small encounters, based on private preferences, and only to a very limited extent prescribed by external circumstances, such as legislation or social pressure. And if the choice was the patron’s, the main restrictions left were the amount they were able and willing to pay, and the availability of craftsmen and materials. Thus, the most clearly discernible group in the sculptural art world of sixth and fifth-century Athens is that of the sculptors. The votives and gravestones which they made bear witness to their status and to their work.