Transactions in stone: making sculpture in Athenian society in the sixth and fifth centuries BC
Hochscheid, H.K.

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SUMMARY

The sixth and the fifth centuries are in the sculpture of Athens a time of remarkable change. The marble dedications and gravestones which the inhabitants of the city had made show an extraordinary development, both in appearance and in genres. This study has investigated how and by whom these sculptures were made, and how all those who contributed in some way to the process of sculpture manufacture communicated.

The idea that sculptors are not alone among the makers of sculpture in a wider sense is derived from Howard Becker’s theory of *art worlds*. Besides sculptors and those who ordered statues and stelai, the support personnel constitute an important group. Support personnel is a very wide term, in the sense that it encompasses anyone who in some form or manner contributed something to the final appearance of the sculpture.

Social rank in archaic and classical Athens was based on property, notably of land. The property classes were introduced by Solon in the early sixth century and were probably adapted to the rising democracy in the centuries after. In the social upheaval which occurred at several moments in this period, establishing one’s social status – whether this was in politics, in citizenship or in wealth – was of great importance. The large dedications and gravestones set up in the public places which sanctuaries and cemeteries were, would seemingly offer a perfect platform for a patron to display his wealth and power. Nonetheless, this is an assumption which should be investigated. The idea that sculpture was used for conspicuous consumption in ancient Athens might be anachronistic; it requires to be supported by evidence.

In order to be able to answer this question, all published marble votives and gravestones found within the city boundaries of ancient Athens, including the area immediately around the city walls where the main cemeteries were, have been collected. Bases, pillars, columns and other supports of which it is clear what type of statue or stele they originally carried have also been recorded. Subsequently, their numbers have been analysed. In chapter one, the outcome of this investigation was that the material from the Akropolis, for a large part the so-called Persian debris, must be a much closer reflection of what was set up in the sanctuaries on the site than is commonly assumed. For the fifth century, the interpretation of the evidence is more complex, since this is not a closed assemblage. The sepulchral material from the Kerameikos falls somewhere in between, since
much of the archaic sepulchral sculpture, but certainly not all, was built into the
Themistoklean Wall just after the Persian wars.

In chapter II, the provenance of the material of the statues and stelai was analysed. In
the archaic period, a large majority of votive statues was made in Cycladic marble, especially
Parian and Naxian. For the bases of these sculptures, however, already in the sixth century
marble from Attica, Hymettian or Pentelic, was used. Apparently, the quality of especially
Pentelic was known in this period, but island marble was preferred. In the fifth century, by far
the most commonly used marble in Athenian sculpture is Pentelic. This seems to be a
consequence of the great improvement of infrastructure for the transportation of marble in
the mid-fifth century, when large amounts of marble had to be brought to Athens for
construction. As a result, the largest cost of marble, that of its transportation, could be
reduced, and the commercial value and uses of marble went up.

Once the marble was brought to Athens, sculptors and their associates could begin.
In chapter III, it was argued that sculpture in ancient Athens knew a relatively high degree of
vertical specialisation. This means that not only sculptors, but other specialised craftsmen as
well worked on a single statue. The workshops in the Residential-Industrial district, south-west of the Agora not only show traces of marble-working, but also smithies, a possible
installation to produce pigments, and a workshop for bone tools and glass. All these
activities could contribute to the manufacture of sculpture.

Besides this support personnel and the sculptors themselves, patrons are another
important group in the art world of Athenian sculpture. These turned out to be less
consistent in their commissions than is often thought. In other words, sculptural group
behaviour based on social rank or even on citizen status cannot be traced in the
archaeological nor in the epigraphic material of this study. The landed nobility of Athens, for
example, did order sculpture to dedicate to the gods or commemorate a deceased relative;
but the choice of a genre or of the type of marble seems of lesser importance. Equestrian
statues, often considered the epitome of aristocratic expression in ancient Athens, cannot
exclusively be attributed to aristocratic patrons. On the contrary, inhabitants of Athens
without citizen status also set up monumental votives and gravestones, of the same materials
and of the same types. One of the oldest large marble votives with an inscription was
dedicated by a carpenter or builder. Votive and sepulchral sculpture was not an exclusive
affair: it was personal.

Similarly, the communication between the participants of the art world of Athenian
sculpture was one of individuals with each other. The intensity of maintenance of sculpture
once it had been erected varies as well. There are hardly any indications that it mattered what other residents of Athens thought about one's votive or gravestone. Even Plato, an adamant criticist of many crafts, keeps a much more neutral tone where sculpture is concerned. Statues and sculptors appear in his works, but mostly as examples rather than the targets of philosophical invective.

It may seem ironic to finish a dissertation about the social context of the manufacture of sculpture with the conclusion that in the social and political hierarchy of Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries, sculpture cannot really be considered a vehicle for status. Yet this is the outcome of this investigation. Sculpted votives and gravestones were first and foremost personal objects; the patrons' preferences in the material show that they can and often do express very private choices. That despite this, trends appear, for example in genres, indicates that fashion (a public phenomenon) certainly played a part in this art world; but then again, so did prices, or the availability of materials. Regardless, the interaction between sculptors and other craftsmen, between patrons and sculptors, and between these groups among the public of ancient Athens have produced a sculptural summit which reverberates to the present day.