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Stele for Medeia

Circa 375-350 B.C., Attic Greek

Marble

H: 65.5 cm, W: 57.0 cm, D: 10.0 cm

A finely carved fragment of an Attic marble grave stele carved in high relief, depicting a female figure in profile within an architectural frame. The figure of the young woman faces towards her right, with her right hand raised towards her shoulder. The fingers of the raised hand are curved, as if holding an object – Clairmont suggests that she may originally have been holding a painted object that has since worn away. Her long, wavy hair is parted in the centre and held back in a long braid over her neck and back. She wears a chiton buttoned on the upper arm under a peplos of heavier material, belted around her waist, and a back mantle fastened with large circular brooches at the shoulders. Her clothes identify her as a parthenos, or unmarried young woman. The figure is framed by antae supporting a horizontal architrave with staggered antefixes surmounting the tiled roof. The architrave is carved with a single line of inscription recording the name of the woman to whom the stele is dedicated: Medeia.

Within ancient Greek society, parthenoi occupied a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Being unmarried, they were not seen as having fully transitioned into their adult roles as wives and mothers. Their importance is attested by this fine funerary monument, and Rocco theorises that the death of a parthenos represented both a personal loss and a societal one – preventing any possibility of their future children furthering the Athenian cause. Surviving stelae representing parthenoi are comparatively rare, comprising only 4% of Clairmont's extensive corpus of Attic funerary reliefs.

Literature:

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