Dexiosis: a meaningful gesture of the Classical antiquity

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Abstract

Dexiosis is a modern term referring to the handshaking motif appearing in ancient Greek art, which had specific meaning and symbolism. Though it was a characteristic iconographic element of the Classical antiquity, its roots can be traced back to the Archaic period. Dexiosis was not merely a compositional element connecting two people, but carried a deeper meaning. Most often, the motif was associated with funerary art of the Classical Athens. On funerary monuments the deceased were depicted in the circle of their families, which reflected the ideals of contemporary society. Particularly notable is the contrast between the public character of the funerary monument and the private nature of the depiction. Its meaning should be perceived in terms of both the intimate gesture expressing emotions and the formal presentation of the family. Dexiosis emphasized a permanent bond as the fundamental element of the family in particular, and society in general. At the same time, it was associated with the theme of farewell. The gesture was performed by two people in a dialogical composition, which clearly showed their mutual relationship and the figures were depicted in various compositions regardless of their gender or age. The motif was also used in the Hellenistic and the Roman art.

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1. Introduction

Despite that dexiosis was one of the most common iconographic elements on Classical funerary monuments, its exact meaning remains unclear. Most often it is interpreted as a gesture expressing greeting, or a close bond and relationship, while the combination of all these is generally accepted. It can be found on costly large stelai with architectonic parts and a high relief (naiskoi) as well as on smaller steles with a low-relief panel placed in the upper part (Clairmont 1970, p. 62-4). The motif was also attested on other funerary monuments of the Classical period which involved reliefs, such as marble lekythoi and loutrophoroi, and appeared, albeit rarely, on painted funerary vases such as the white-ground lekythoi as well. To the most common grave markers of the Classical period with dexiosis belong marble lekythoi, dated back to the beginning of the fourth century B.C., showing only multi-figural images where the dead were depicted within the family circle. They were followed by naskoi and stelai with low relief, dated between the last quarter of the fifth and the end of the fourth century B.C. Iconographic scope was wider in terms of the composition, themes and the number of figures, while the scenes with the handshaking motif belonged to the most common type.

In the Classical period, clay lekythoi did not exploit the motif as well as the relief depictions, since their scenes were rather related to the burial rites than to the previous life or expected afterlife of the deceased. Besides on private funerary monuments, dexiosis appeared on public funerary reliefs depicting soldiers shaking their right hands. Since these public reliefs preceded the white-ground lekythoi (Oakley 2004, p. 17-8.), the classical series of steles, and the marble vases, they are thought to have served as models. The motif first appeared on public monuments with relief decoration (Urkundenreliefs), where dexiosis symbolized the sealing of a political bond, and probably was later adopted on funerary stelai (Meyer 1999, p. 141). The fact that dexiosis appeared on a variety of art forms significantly broadens its interpretation.

Figure 1: Left to right: *Grave stele from Chalandri, dated cca 410 B.C. Grave stele from Piraus, dated 420-410 B.C. Another grave stele from Piraus, dated cca 420 B.C. The figures may be identified as Rhodilla and her daughter Aristylla, mentioned in epigram below the relief panel.* National *Archaeological Museum* of *Athens.*

Photo: *Lucia Nováková*

Written records attest the use of dexiosis on public monuments and sculptural groups with a clear ideological message as well, while similar scenes also appeared on mural painting.

The beginnings of the handshaking gesture as a common iconographic feature in the Greek art go back to the vase painting scenes, which depicted stories from both mythology and everyday life. Since their variety was huge, also the occasions for shaking hands were different. For the interpretation of motif, several factors should be taken into the consideration, as the time when the vase was produced, whether the theme was mythological or genre, who were the participants, what was the background of the scene, and others (Matheson 2005, p.26; Mertens 2005, p. 299-300). Based on the Athenian vase paintings, the motif had been known since the Archaic period. It became more common during the fifth century B.C., while later turned into the integral part of non-mythological portrayals, as the handshaking gesture was spreading gradually and taking roots in the everyday life scenes (Neumann 1965, p. 49). On the classical vase paintings of mythological character the gesture usually symbolized a greeting, while in the scenes of everyday life is understood as parting and

on wedding vases as part of an engagement act (Xagorari-Gleissner 2011, p. 78-9; Smith 2005, p. 3; Mason 2006, p. 7).

Since the clay and marble lekythoi appeared later, the first carriers of the dexiosis motif in necropoleis were stelai with relief decoration. On the basis of rare finds, they are dated back to the early fifth century B.C, but did not occur in large numbers until the second half of the century. In the Archaic period, only the figure of the deceased was normally carved on stone monuments. Two figures appeared quite rarely, what greatly restrained the usage of this gesture. One of the first depiction of dexiosis on a funerary stele, and in funerary art in general, is the stele from Aegina dated to around 500 B.C. The fragment carried a visibly preserved image of handshaking and of the lower part of two figures – a standing man on the left and a woman sitting opposite him (Himmelmann 1999, p. 23). It is noteworthy that on funerary stelai dexiosis appears to be associated with the motif of a seated woman since the beginning. The appearance of the handshaking motif was a crucial in funerary iconography not only in terms of its later popularity, but also because it represented a new thematic trend on grave markers. After the archaic series of funerary reliefs representing the deceased individual through mostly his social status (as a citizen, soldier, young man or old man), the combination of a woman and man was striking.

2. Funerary vases

In the first half of the fifth century B.C., i.e. prior to the voluminous series of classical funerary steles, the handshaking gesture can be identified on funerary vases. Since red-figure vases with the scene of a parting soldier were used for funerary purposes, they might have helped develop concept of dexiosis in funerary art. A similar portrayal of a soldier shaking hands with an older man or woman appeared on white-ground lekythoi, the so-called Kriegerlekythoi from the second quarter of the fifth century B.C. (Stupperich 1977, p. 183; Matheson 2005, p. 26; Mertens 2005, p. 299-300). In this case, dexiosis presumably symbolized the last touch before separation, or homonoia of soldiers. When the meaning was parting, the scene was not necessarily associated with a soldier fallen in the battle for his native land; it may have been used as a universal iconographic type. The other type of scene with dexiosis on lekythoi is the image of a man and a woman, or of two men – an older and a younger one – at the grave. Lekythoi seem to

have depicted death as an ultimate event, and only sporadically showed the dead with the bereaved, usually as separated by a funerary stele (Davies 1985, p. 629; Maderna 2011, p. 66). Marble lekythoi had mainly decorative functions in ancient cemeteries; less commonly they marked the borders of the grave precinct and began to appear after the first monumental clay lekythoi, around 420 B.C. (Breuer 1995, 23). The reliefs on marble vases significantly differed from the painted scenes on the clay lekythoi (Schmaltz 1983, p. 90; Gex 2014, p. 321). Closer parallels with funerary stelai can be found in iconography, since they both fall under the category of relief art. Depictions with a higher number of figures were typical for the early marble lekythoi, while the single-figure portrayals were few. Their priority was to show the deceased in company with their family and the closest relatives. The theme was not related to death and the afterlife, but to the time that the deceased spent with their family members. The marble lekythoi did not display scenes showing care for the grave. The motif of dexiosis was as rare on the white-ground lekythoi as it was common on their marble counterparts. The popular handshaking motif was related exclusively to the closest relatives, symbolizing thus family bonds and particular relationships, a situation similar to the funerary stelai. The most common images were those of a peaceful encounter of two or more figures, with the compositional element of shaking hands. The figures were not anonymous; the names of the deceased were usually given. The selection of figures did not follow any specific criteria, all age groups and both genders being represented on the reliefs.

The setting probably did not play an important role, since it was rarely indicated. As with the stelai, the scenes probably had an indefinite setting, which could be interpreted as oikos in the case of the seated female figures. Commonly depicted pairs were man and woman, most often spouses, or two men, likely father and son. Two women, either sisters or mother and daughter, were also portrayed. As with the steles, the figures varied in arrangement and posture. Women and older men were often depicted seated. The relationships, combinations of different postures, and minor figures resembled those on stele reliefs, but were characterized by a greater variety. An example could be a man shaking hands with a little child, or two older men shaking hands in the presence of two women (Schmaltz 1983, p. 90). Despite the parallels between the marble lekythoi and the funerary stelai (peaceful scenes of encounter, figures with specific names, and the same choice of figures), the motifs were not necessarily simply

copied. The handshaking gesture occured almost simultaneously in both cases (Breuer 1995, p. 23; Schmaltz 1983, p. 92).

3. Funerary stelai

After a half-century lasting absence, funerary stelai started to appear in increased numbers in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C. The reasons for their sudden revival together with new concepts, and the abolition of laws against luxury are still being discussed. Several factors may have played an important role: the additional erection of costly grave markers after the Plague of Athens, the availability of many sculptors after finishing the work on the Parthenon, and the will of self-presentation of the rich social classes, also known as civic elite (Kaltsas 2002, p. 23; Schmaltz 1983, p. 192, Grossman 2011, p. 11-2). The necropolis itself acquired a new look after several stelai were incorporated into one grave precinct, so that relief grave markers no longer stood alone as single funerary monuments but presented the family as a whole. The grave precincts (temenoi, periboloi) contained various types of grave markers (Breder 2009, p. 29-44). Figurative scenes appeared on naiskoi, simple stelai with relief decoration, stone vases in the form of lekythoi and loutrophoroi and on bases. Most of the scenes showed family relations. Other types of grave markers contained only the epigraphical part. These were usually the so-called rosette stelai, and served for a written presentation of family lines of more than one generation (Closterman 2007, p. 634-5). Funerary steles did not form one unit within the precinct and should be understood in the context of the other grave monuments. All structures together expressed specific family ties, yet they were neither a simple nor a complete presentation of family genealogy. Not all relationships between family members were recorded epigraphically and ichnographically; predominant were the married couples (Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 147).

Dexiosis became a common part of the iconography of family portrayals, which dominated the stelai. It connected the figures regardless of their age and gender, the most common being the combination of a standing man and a seated woman. As the gesture was associated exclusively with images of families, it symbolized family unity and emphasized its importance for society. The same was probably true for the marble lekythoi and loutrophoroi, which showed a greater variety of dexiosis depictions. To begin with, these depictions often showed soldiers. The early marble

lekythoi and loutrophoroi also showed soldiers shaking hands (Stupperich 1997, p. 183). For this reason the iconography of state grave markers should be considered, which may be closely related to the depictions of soldiers on private stelai. Parallels can be found also with paintings on lekythoi. A common image on state grave reliefs were two soldiers shaking their right hands, whose early specimens are also known from areas outside of Attica (Stupperich 1994, 96- 9). Since the gesture, presumably symbolizing homonoia, was strongly connected not only with a public burial (tafé demosia) but with the funerary monument itself, it quickly spread to the private sphere. Common types of dexiosis with a soldier on private relief stelai were a soldier leading a horse and shaking hands with a man or a woman, and a soldier with a woman (Grossman 2001, p. 15-7; Matheson 2005, p. 26; Mertens 2005, p. 299-300). A less frequent depiction on private grave markers was a soldier shaking hands with another soldier.

According to the number of figures, the reliefs with the dexiosis motif can be divided into two-figure and multi-figure reliefs. Another important aspect is the composition of the figures, i.e. their placement in space in relation to the other figures. An important criterion for interpretation is the combination of gender and age categories. The nature of the motif requires two figures, who served as the main actors of the scene. For this reason it can be assumed that the motif appeared on funerary stelai at the same time as the two-figure scenes, which were common from the end of the fifth century B.C. (Scholl 1996, p. 93). Funerary stelai of Attica with multi-figure reliefs started to appear at the turn of the centuries, but their use subsided and was not revived until the late fifth century B.C. The restrictions could be associated with the laws against luxury. In Ionia, their presence is attested almost continuously (Himmelmann 1999, p. 22). There is also the stele from Pherai, which shows a draped woman with a bearded man, connected by the dexiosis gesture. This Thessalian stele and a few others are thought to be possible forerunners of the two-figure stelai of Attica and early examples of dexiosis on these types of grave markers (Breuer 1995, p. 17).

3.1 Behind the family scenes

During the fourth century B.C., the depictions with the most common compositional scheme of dexiosis – two men – were replaced with the portrayal of a couple, which flourished in the second half of the fourth century B.C., constituting approximately two thirds of all dexiosis

depictions (Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 153; Breuer 1995, p. 26). These scenes showed figures of all ages except children. Children shaking hands occurred sporadically on marble lekythoi, but did not appear in this form on stelai until the Hellenistic period. The figures on funerary monuments were either standing or seated. They appeared in different combinations of postures: both standing, one standing and one seated, but never both seated. The motif of a seated figure was not common until on classical stelai and could have several meanings. Sometimes it is understood as an indication for the deceased or the main figure in the scene. While gender plays no role in interpretation of the standing figures, with the seated figures it is otherwise (Stupperich 1977, p. 88). A seated female figure seems to express a deeper meaning than a seated male figure.

Figure 2: Left to right: *Grave stele from Psychiko, Athens, dated back to the first quarter of the fourth century B.C. Grave stele from Kerameikos in Athens, dated 410-400 B.C. The mirror held by the woman in her left hand points to her young age.* National *Archaeological Museum* of *Athens.*

Photo: *Lucia Nováková*

On the relief depictions on stelai with two or more figures, always only one figure is seated. At first sight, therefore, this figure draws attention to itself, and it also occupies more space. The most common dexiosis depiction with a seated figure was the one showing a seated woman and a man standing opposite her, which comprised as much as two thirds of all depictions. It was followed by the combination of a seated woman shaking

hands with a standing woman (Breuer 1995, p. 26). A seated female figure was typical for dexiosis scenes until the late fourth century B.C., but it also appeared alone on grave markers. It became a common image-type with a deeper meaning, symbolizing a married woman responsible for the oikos and the family's stability (Burton 2003, p. 20-35). Funerary reliefs of the Classical period often showed multi-figure scenes. Since the fourth century B.C., additional figures appeared more often on half of the dexiosis depictions (Meyer 1999, p. 116; Scholl 1996, p. 167). The minor figures represented not only relatives, but also servants, i.e. members of one oikos, which was typical for this period (Davies 1985, p. 628). These figures appear as minor with regard to the composition of two partners shaking hands, but for the deceased they may have been just as important.

The most dominant among the multi-figure scenes are the three-figure ones, with a female figure in the background (Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 146). The reliefs with three or more figures often show two generations (Bergemann 1997, p. 87). The woman might have represented a mother, a wife or another family member, for instance a sibling. The figure of a female servant was also common. Another common minor figure was a bearded man in the role of a father. Less common were a young girl standing away from the main figures, and a little boy. The third figure was usually placed either next to or behind one of the main figures, or in the middle of the scene in the background of the handshaking motif. It may have participated in the scene through a communicative gesture, for example it may have been touching the shoulder or the chin of one of the figures. As for the relief technique, the background figures may have been sculpted in lower relief, and their silhouettes often overlapped the foreground figures. Preserved depictions with more than three figures are also numerous and even more varied. Besides the two partners who shake hands they show women, men, older members of the family, boys and girls, and even small children. The handshaking couple dominates the whole group, the seated figure being the most expressive. The handshaking gesture showed relationships between people of both genders and in different combinations. The development of family images on the reliefs of luxurious funerary naiskos stelai culminated in the mid-fourth century B.C., when they commonly depicted four and more figures. Votive reliefs, which in this period contained multiple figures, presumably served as models (Grossman 2011, p. 13).

3.2 Gestures and attributes

Besides the dexiosis motif, iconography of funerary stelai is rich in other gestures. Especially from the second half of the fourth century B.C., they showed other gestures of the couple or of the minor figures (Breuer 1995, p. 32). These accompanying gestures are understood as expressions of affection and tenderness (Xagorari-Gleissner 2011, p. 79). They showed personal feelings of the figures without disturbing the handshaking motif itself. Typical for them was that they were initiated by one of the figures, and regardless of the other person's reaction, they retained their purpose. Not only the bereaved communicated with the dead by intimate gestures (touching the forearm or the chin, a hand on the shoulder, an outstretched hand, a tilted head) but also the other way round. Time and space were only suggested, mainly by the composition of figures, their attributes, clothes, etc. (Sholl 1996, p. 166). The frequently occurring seated figure emphasizes the deceased person as the one who was in charge of the oikos. The chair on which the figure is sitting (most often on a klismos) and the foot rest belong to interior furniture and represent household (Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 66).

The depictions also show objects of everyday use, which the female figures often hold in their hands (jewel cases, mirrors or small boxes). The figure of a female servant is another identifying element; she might hold these accessories for her lady, because as a member of the household she specified the space, and her presence suggested the family's wealth. The woman often holds a child. The above said indicate that the studied depictions were clearly connected with the domestic sphere. By contrast, the private grave markers from the late fifth century to the mid-fouth century B.C. were dominated by female figures, since the oikos as the basic social unit was emphasized also in the funerary sphere (Osbourne 2010, p. 262). Male figures started to prevail on stelai again from the second half of the fourth century B.C.

Figure 3: Left to right: *Grave stele from Kerameikos in Athens, dated back to the second quarter of the fourth century B.C. A mature woman seated on the stool bids farewell to her daughter, witnessed by bearded man, presumably the father.* Grave stele in the form of naiskos, dated back to the second half of the fourth century B.C. National *Archaeological Museum* of *Athens.*

Photo: *Lucia Nováková*

Older funerary reliefs were even remade to contain more male figures. Male figures became the most numerous also among the seated figures, which until then represented exclusively women. This can be observed also on marble vases (Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 116-7).

4. Depiction in the following periods

The handshaking gesture did not belong to the common repertory of funerary depictions in the Hellenistic period. A certain exception are finds of funerary stelai from Ionia and the Cyclades attesting genre continuity from the Classical period onwards. The most common combination was still a couple, while same gender pairs were rarer and rarer (Breuer 1995, p. 32-6; Schmaltz and Salta 2004, p. 103). On multi-figure stelai, the most common minor figure was a servant, who was depicted in small dimensions and was never connected with the dead through dexiosis gesture. The fact that the depictions of couples predominated and that all age categories were portrayed, indicates the continuing importance of

family bonds, the portrayal of the marital relationship being the most frequent. However, the motif ceased to express deeper relationships, and was reduced to the level of images presenting civic virtues, known also from the previous period. Unlike on the finds from the Classical period, the motif was not restricted to citizens. The figures were portrayed frontally and their posture had certain stiffness. The seated figures depicted in profile, common in the dexiosis scenes of the Classical period, became rare.

The dexiosis depictions did not radiate harmony and liveliness as they did in the fourth century B.C. The pair was usually turned towards the observer, while their heads were turned towards each other, which looked bit forced and unnatural. All the classical traditions associated with the motif, such as the sitting position, the profile view and the physical closeness of the figures were disappearing. The context of the image was more abstract and the figures were no longer set in a harmonious scene. The handshaking motif found its way to the south Italy and Sicily at the end of the Classical period (Zanker 1976, p. 169; 210). This motif usually connected a man with a woman, but various exceptions existed. Occasionally the motif in funerary depictions signified parting, as the funerary painting of a leaving soldier in Paestum (Nicolet 1962, p. 474-7; Fig.1,5) or a greeting (Davies 1985, p. 630). In Etruscan funerary art (fourth-first centuries B.C.), dexiosis usually appears on ash urns of tuff, terracotta or alabaster, on stone sarcophagi, and occasionally on funerary paintings. Its meaning (wedding, parting and meeting again) points to parallels with the Greek art.

The fact that the dextrarum iunctio occurred in various fields of Roman art, for instance in mural painting, numismatics and relief sculpture, clearly shows a wide range of meanings it could express. Besides the themes of meeting and parting, the handclasp signified harmony, affinity, friendship, and loyalty. As the right hand was consecrated to the deity of fidelity, in scenes of a political nature the handclasp represented political concord at the conclusion of a contract. The gesture appeared on funerary reliefs as early as in the first century B.C., and in the early Imperial period became a common motif displayed on urns and funerary altars. The number of sarcophagi considerably increased in the second and third centuries A.D. The scenes were more varied and contained a higher number of figures than those of stelai and altars. Dextrarum iunctio was used, above all, to join man and woman, what is generally understood as a symbol of wedding and the marital bond (Ricks 2006, p. 431-6).

Presentation of marriage was of great importance to the Roman society, as the main purpose could have been to present the legitimacy of the marriage, i.e. to show that the wedding was accomplished in line with the valid legal norms, to depict a particular ceremonial act (Hersch 2010, p. 200) which included shaking hands, or to emphasize the permanence of the relationship even after death. Another possible explanation for similar scenes might have been the allegory of marital harmony as the embodiment of the virtue of concordia. In the Antonine period, dextrarum iunctio became a symbol of the harmony of the imperial couple (Reekman 1958, p. 35-6). A huge number of researchers prefers the depiction of virtues to the narrative illustration of the wedding ceremony. Virtues were an ideal presentation of the proper Roman citizen who followed them during his life, and in this way, marriage showed domestic joy, happiness, and harmony in the private emotional sphere (McCann 1978, p. 126). The motif denoting a family relationship (one among parents or siblings) and friendship was less common (Davies 1985, p. 634, Stupperich 1983, p. 145).

5. Conclusion

In its basic meaning, valid in all art forms, the gesture of shaking right hands connects two people and symbolizes a specific relationship either at a formal or private level, in various situations and from various reasons. On the funerary stelai of the Classical period, the motif was frequently used for its characteristic symbolism, which met the criteria valid in both funerary art and in contemporary thinking. The handshaking gesture was used in depictions of all family members regardless of their age and gender, and in various combinations. Relatives in the direct line – parents with their children and married couples – were the most commonly presented relationships. Dominant was the depiction of man and woman representing a married couple (Smith 2005, p. 285), as the sealing of the marital bond meant that the basic pillar of society was laid. A prevailing figure in the dexiosis scenes throughout the Classical period was a seated female as a conventional image-type symbolizing oikos, basic unit of the Greek society.

Female figures on grave markers represented an ideal image of the woman in the Classical period, reflecting above all private virtues, beneficial for the polis as a whole. A thriving and harmonious household contributed to the prosperity of the state, which is why women on funerary

reliefs were associated with the public sphere (Leader 1997, p. 689; Burton 2003, p. 28-30). The dexiosis motif on funerary reliefs occurred in various figurative combinations and compositions, while conventional as well as less preferred depictions existed. From the start of the classical series of stelai in the last fourth of the fifth century B.C., dexiosis on grave markers took place between family members. Family depictions were compositions consisting of two to five figures. The most common depiction was that of a married couple, represented by a seated woman and a standing man. Quantitatively speaking, this portrayal culminated in the second half of the fourth century B.C. Another conventional depiction was a standing man with a seated man in the presence of a female figure, representing the parents and their son. Single men without other figures were, from the start of the classical series of stelai, depicted mostly standing. Later there were generally two men displayed, representing usually father and son, one of whom was seated. Two women were less common; they typically represented mother and daughter, one of them was usually seated. The most common were displays of man and woman in their middle age, while the least common were depictions of young, single family members.

Family might have been the preferred theme on funerary monuments because it showed the ideals of society, but also for practical purposes. Situations which required a proof of descent, frequently occurred, for instance for the purposes of dokimasia (MacDowell 2005, p. 79) or other legal matters- thus funerary monuments could provide such proofs the most reliably. From the fourth century B.C., the proof of descent was required also from the mother's side, which was likely one of the reasons why female figures and married couples prevailed on grave markers. In addition, citizens were assessed also according to their oikos, and commemoration of the bereaved was one of its basic obligations. Dexiosis on funerary reliefs symbolized a permanent bond, whether it depicted the deceased with the bereaved, or two deceased. The scene did not take place in specific time, because it did not portray only physical bonds, but also relationships that endured after death. Handshaking symbolized a strong bond between the portrayed figures which existed in the past and will last in the future. The bond was not portrayed only between two figures but at the level of the entire community which they were part of. Such an idea symbolized family as the basic unit of society.

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