

Epitaphs and Αγγειογραφία

An Illustrated History from the Cemetery of Kerameikós

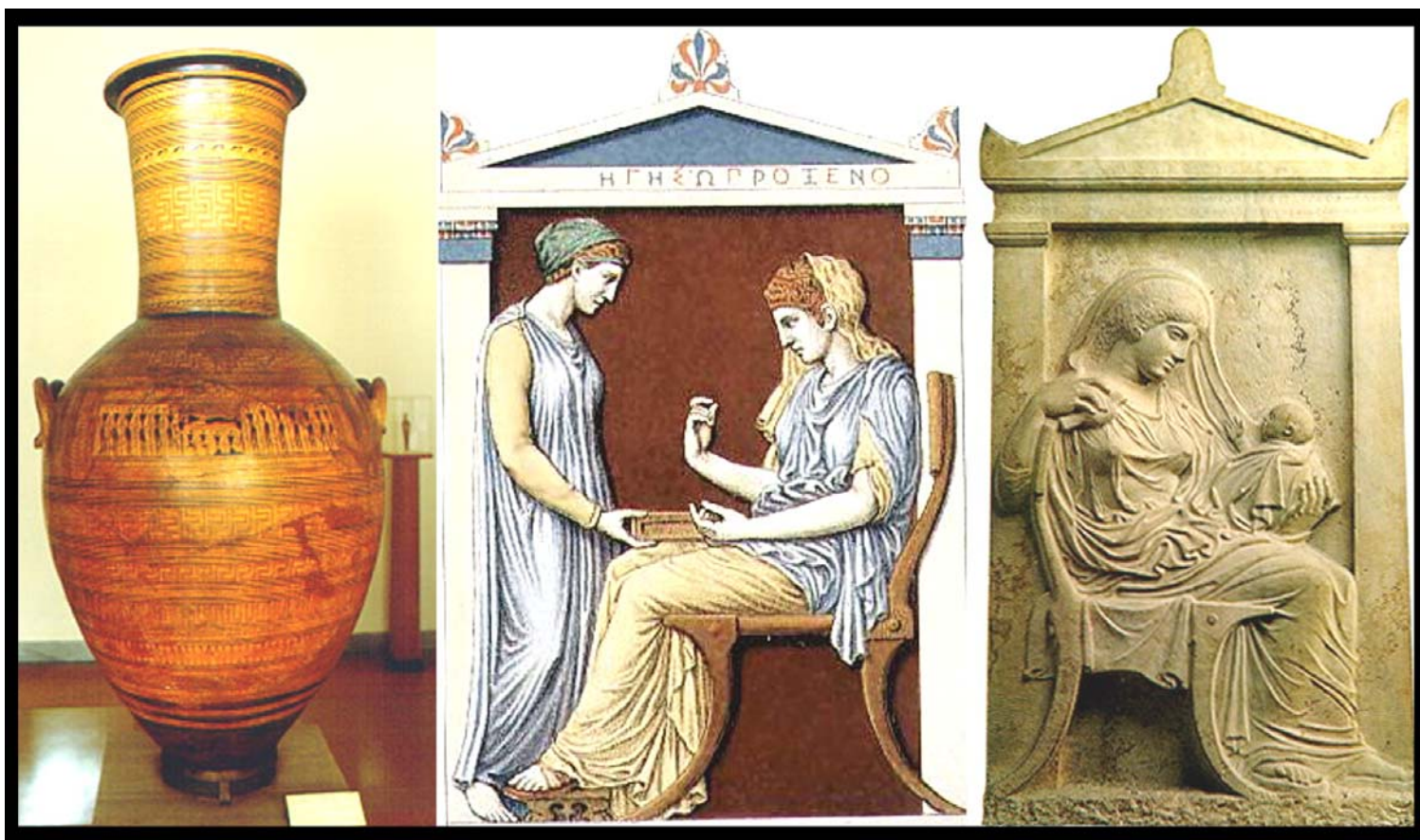
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Northwest of the Akropolis, along the banks of mythical Eridanos River lies **Kerameikós**. Kerameikós is for Greece what *Arlington National Cemetery* is for the USA, with the major distinction being that Kerameikós got started 3000 years earlier! The area was named after the **potters** (*ΚΕΡΑΜΕΙΣ*) who worked there. Public and private tombs, many artifacts, inscriptions, and funerary vases transfer us to the myths and history of the great city of Athens. The cemetery features the graves of great political pioneers such as wise **Solon** [*governance by laws*], innovator **Kleisthenes** [*governance by democratic voting*], amazing **Perikles** [*governance by Democracy*], and many other giants of the Golden Age of Greece and of modern times.

In addition, there are unmarked graves of those who had fallen in war. During the official ceremony of burial, honors of immortality are given to the fallen heroes whose bones are brought to Athens from the field of battle. During the burials sport games are held, the city promises to take care of their families, and, speeches are given. Pericles delivers his most **famous speech** in defense of Democracy, in such an occasion! [*Pres. Lincoln's most famous speech, the **Gettysburg Address**, is at a burial ceremony and civil war, also*]. **Alexander the Great**, in a gesture of respect for the contributions of Athens to the Glory of Greece, **himself** brings the ashes of Athenians from the battle of Chaerónea in 338 BC.

There is also in Kerameikós a burial pit with the bodies of the thousands who perished during the **2-year plague** that devastated the city of Athens besieged by the **Spartan** legions in 430 BC. Pericles himself was a fatal victim of the plague. **Thucydides** [*the greatest historian of ancient times*] describes in detail the plague, which modern scientists identify as a typhoid fever.

To the south, on the Street of the Tombs and the Sacred Way that lead to Eleusis [*where the celebrated **Eleusinian Rites** were held*], there are the sepulchral monuments belonging to private families, which give us a glimpse of their personal lives and beliefs.



One of the most famous vases of the ancient Greek art comes from Kerameikós. A large, 5-feet tall funerary amphora [pic. L] that used to mark a tomb that was built in the 9th century BC is extraordinary in its beauty and in the great details in the scene depicted on it. The dead lies on a couch in the middle of the scene; family and friends mourn him on each side. Scholars say that the doleful scene is that of the burial of **Patroclus**, Achilles' inseparable friend. It is prominently displayed in the entrance of one of the main halls of the Archaeological Museum in Athens.

The earliest tomb stele, late 5th century, is the amazingly beautiful relief of young girl named Hegeso. She sits on an elegant chair and holds in her right hand a **jewel**, which she has taken from a box held by her servant [pic. C].

A poignant grave is that of Ampharete [pic. R]. The melancholic inscription on the tombstone reads: “I am holding the child of my daughter, **my love**, which I held on my lap, while we looked at the light of the sun when we were alive; now I am holding the dead child being dead myself”.

Pottery [κεραμική=ceramic], of course, is one of the **first crafts** invented by man, out of necessity to serve his culinary needs, as is pointed out poetically by 1979 Nobel Laureate, **Odysseas Elytes** [Ελύτης]:

*“Στην αρχη το φως και η ωρα η πρωτη που
τα χειλη ακομη στον **πηλο** δοκιμαζουν τα πραγματα του κοσμου”.*

What is extraordinary with the pottery of Kerameikós, a poor section of Athens, is the emergence out of a craft **pottery art**. Potters begin to add style to their clay pots, at first as entertainment for themselves, but later in competition with each other, once demand for their vases skyrockets. Colorful vases were being placed inside tombs. Potters begin to paint with dexterity and artistry scenes from Greek mythology, from Homer's epos the **Iliad**, and of ordinary life, such as the harvesting of olives [pic].

Painted vases and amphoras become the new medium of propagating the culture and history of Greece, the way bards do it with words and songs. [“One picture is worth 1000 words”]. One vase from that epoch can demand millions of dollars in the art market today. Greece has claims for the return from private and public collections around the globe of hundreds of pilfered amphoras and vases.

The Cemetery of Kerameikós remains a unique witness to the glory of Athens. The modern visitor can get there on the subway. There is a station at the site. Some of the findings from the excavation are on display inside the station. Of course, the originals of the priceless steles, tomstones, and vases from Kerameikós are in museums all over the world. The metropolitan Museum in New York has one of the richest collections. However, walking through the monuments along Eridanos River, one has the unique opportunity to mingle with world history giants and with ordinary citizens of Greece since **time immemorial**.

