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Roman Funerary Stelae from Egypt – An Overview

Abstract

Stelae have played a part in Egyptian art since its very beginning and have been used for a variety of purposes. In general, they are records of public or private affairs. Aly Abdulla divides Roman Funerary stelae from Egypt into five categories according to function. The first category is royal, containing official notes and records. The second group contains ritual scenes, similar to those seen on temple walls. The third category includes records of land, donated by private individuals, to a temple. The fourth group consists of praise to gods, and prayers of a dedicator for welfare. The fifth group, the most common one, is funerary stelae. In Ancient Egyptian funerary practices, stelae were used to mark the place of offering for the deceased. They were erected at the actual place of burial, but also in other locations where the deceased could benefit from offerings made to a deity. Greco-Roman funerary stelae continued to play the same role. However, they show some characteristic elements. In Greco-Roman Egyptian stelae, architectural borders were commonly used to enclose scenes such as: the deceased being led or introduced to Osiris, the deceased raising one or both arms in a traditional gesture of adoration, the deceased burning incense or pouring a libation before Osiris, the deceased standing without gesture, the deceased with members of his or her family, and banqueting scenes. These scenes were also sometimes displayed in a small box or without borders. All of these themes are connected with rituals for the deceased, hopes for the afterlife, or easing the journey to the after life. Other common imagery on Greco-Roman Egyptian funerary stelae includes representations of Anubis, the god of the dead. These representations usually take the form of dogs or jackals flanking figures. His images dominate not only the hundreds of Terenouthis funerary stelae but as well, the decorative ensembles represented on the frescoed tomb-facades. Greco-Roman Egyptian stelae are also often capped with a winged sun disk, a symbol of Horus or Behed.