

“Phraskleia in Footnotes, or Twelve Notes on Death and Grammar”

Savannah Sather Marquardt

Σῆμα¹ Φρασικλέας² κούρη³ κεκλήσομαι⁴ αἰεὶ,⁵
ἀντὶ⁶ γάμου⁷ παρὰ⁸ θεῶν⁹ τοῦτο¹⁰ λαχοῦσ'¹¹ ὄνομα.¹²

I am the grave of Phrasikleia – maiden, I will always be called,
This name I am allotted by the gods, instead of wife.

¹ What is a σῆμα? A sign, that which represents the signified. This is fine as a starting point, but perhaps a more specific definition would prove more useful: τό σῆμα – a grave, a burial mound, a funerary stele, a portent, an omen, a constellation, a trace. These various possible definitions each reflect a certain fascination with relationality. A trace is an imprint of something, a rotating wheel of constellations describes the precisely choreographed dances of the stars. These relationships are physical – not just abstract meaning-making, and certainly not arbitrary. In the spirit of specificity, historical context for this poem can help us decide on the most precise English translation. This inscription appears on an archaic funerary marker (defined as such in part by this word). So, we can take σῆμα as

‘grave marker.’ But one more definition is offered. A conjugation of the verb εἰμί is absent, but the first-person singular indicative active is implied by the conjugation of καλέω later in the line. Σῆμα is positioned as a predicate nominative, bound in mutual definition to an implied “I.” So, our definition: “I am σῆμα.” I am the trace. I am the omen, the constellation. I am consubstantial with the dead and with the living who remember them, tucked away and folded into relation with these others in the same moment as I am defined as an I. A fundamental question: have I become something different from what I was? Who am I (am “I”) if I am Phrasikleia?

² Enter Phrasikleia, in the genitive. Enter Phrasikleia’s ability to possess, to hold the world in relation to herself. She is the heroine of this little drama playing out on the side of a road somewhere in archaic Attica (in the galleries of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, on these very pages). What is a Phrasikleia? This inscription is on the base of a statue, so perhaps this stone woman is Phrasikleia – ornate folds of a gown that will never be moved by the wind, a crown of flowers that will never wilt. But this statue is a funerary monument, and the inscription leads us to believe that Phrasikleia is a dead girl, a corpse. I am not a stone woman. How can I locate human grief, the loss of a daughter, a sister, a friend, in the stone woman’s smile? Does the inscription invite me to enliven the stone Phrasikleia, to turn her into a Galatea of grief? I don’t think so. I am not, she reminds me, the sole keeper of the spark of life. You know, Phrasikleia always makes me think of another unbridled girl who would never be called γυνή. Instead, she was called Gorgon.

³ Another nominative. Another name: ἡ κόρη – girl, maiden.

Q: How is a maiden like a stone?

⁴ The first-person singular, future perfect passive indicative of καλέω. This is the moment where it is well and truly confirmed that Phrasikleia is the one we are to understand as speaking. Consequently, this may be the right time to mention the reader. As we know, reading in the ancient world is done aloud. And so, for someone to read this inscription is to speak in the voice of Phrasikleia, to claim her first person voice, and in doing so, animate her lyric persona. This is a text inscribed in stone. When you read it out loud, you reproduce the stone-text (screen-text) as a flesh-text; the soft tissue of your mouth, your strong vocal chords, your wet lungs pushing air through you into sound remake the text in a new material. We can think of language as abstract, but it does not, cannot, exist outside of a medium, the matter used to express it. I used to think translating stone-text to flesh-text meant reanimating the

dead girl, but now I'm not so sure. Is she dead? The girl's flesh has long since decomposed, given back to the ground, and in place of a girl is "Phrasikleia." She is not a human girl anymore, she is a *σῆμα*.

⁵ Now this is interesting. Not grammatically, of course, *αἰεί* (always) is just an adverb. But here enters the antagonist of the story: time. Time is what allows for the possibility of change, for something to slip over the edge of life into death. Now Phrasikleia cannot age, cannot 'bloom' into womanhood, but something is offered in return. *Αἰεί* translates the spatial relationship between the statue, the dead girl, and the person who passes by her grave to read this inscription into a temporal relationship. This is a proposal, more aspirational than descriptive, that the web of relationships will continue through the ages. "I am the constellation of Phrasikleia," and so death becomes immortality, the glory of the girl. The twin tools of art and language do not create, and thus cannot preserve, this constellation, but they offer us a means of bringing it flickering into focus.

Please, I'm trying, I'm trying to understand -- how long is one exhalation of a lotus blossom?

Please, Phrasikleia, how long will I remember the taste of your words?

⁶ See n.8.

⁷ A: They do not change. Or rather, we have decided that they do not change – in this, they are just like the dead.

⁸ Grave markers, Phrasikleia's included, are about prepositions and propositions. A preposition is a relationship, how something stands in relation to something else. The prepositions in this poem work together: they draw the dead girl into relationships by defining her against things. One evokes a wider social web by describing what the girl did not get, the relationships she doesn't have (*ἀντί*); Phrasikleia will be called something else *instead of* a woman, which tells the reader something about both Phrasikleia and women. The other describes division, defining the mortal and the immortal against each other by describing the relationship between them (*παρά*). These prepositions describe Phrasikleia in relation to her own alternate future, imagining how she would have been woven into the fabric of her society by the powers that govern her world, the gods.

This is the proposition: something other-than-human can negotiate and maintain social relationships. For being a stone, this *σῆμα* is remarkable flexible – it can testify to the wealth of the deceased's family, confirm gendered social roles, even promise the living that their community will care for them after they are gone. The stone is also remarkably soft – a site of mourning, providing in some way a satisfying experience of remembrance for those who have been left behind. When I speak her words, her name, I join them (the statue, the dead girl, the voices that

speaks her inscription). The girl who was Phrasikleia is dead, and in the place where she was is all of us, holding each other in place.

⁹ Time cannot affect the gods like it can Phrasikleia, can it? They seem quite a bit like Phrasikleia's statue, gods and stones both unaffected by time. I suppose that's not entirely true. Gods and stones just live on a different scale of time – divine time, geologic time. Beings that experience fundamentally other-than-human time join the dead girl and the reader in a dance performed in multiple time signatures. “I am the constellation of Phrasikleia.” I am part of a cosmological ecosystem. If Phrasikleia is an ecosystem, the gods are perhaps its strangest inhabitants.

¹⁰ A refreshing moment of specificity in the middle of all of this.

¹¹ Feminine nominative aorist participle of λαγγάνω, modifying Phrasikleia herself? There is the speaker who declares herself Phrasikleia, and there is the decaying body of the dead girl, and there is the statue, the sign of Phrasikleia. The monistic quality of the named, signified being snaps into focus not by asserting itself, but through mutual acknowledgement. What is the difference between Phrasikleia (gen.) and Phrasikleia (nom.)? *Phrasikleias*, rather than *Phrasikleia*. The slippage here between translation and transliteration becomes useful, fracturing subjecthood into a kaleidoscopic multiplicity, a cubist “Phrasikleia” in so many mediums. Look how she holds her skirt out just so, stone fabric in stone fingers; there's no material division between them. What is the material division between Phrasikleia and myself?

¹² This story ends in a name. How shall I gloss a name, since “names are not subjects of definition: they are what they are,” (Johnson 1998). This one is named Phrasikleia.

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