

Images and ambiguities. Interpreting identities in the tomb art of early Achaemenid western Anatolia

Catherine M. Draycott | British Institute at Ankara

A picture is worth a thousand words, so the cliché goes. Anyone with some experience of art history, though, might call that a low estimate. Images not only communicate in ways words do not, they are not necessarily made with the same aims. Some images are made for particular purposes, to convey specific ideas; but even if an artist or the person who commissioned the image had very clear intentions these may not come out clearly in the work. Intent may never have been well formulated to begin with or the image may not have been made to convey any particular message at all, at least not consciously.

Such issues complicate attempts to use images as historical sources, and impact my research on images used to adorn tombs in non-Greek areas of western Anatolia in the early years of the Achaemenid Persian empire. These images, which accompany an increase in monumental tombs after the Persian conquest of Anatolia in the 540s BC, allow precious insights into the ways that Anatolian elites were memorialised, and, considering the limited indigenous inscriptions from the period, they constitute important sources of local self-expression with which one might offset the reports of Greek writers such as Herodotus.

While Herodotus' descriptions of Anatolians and other peoples are concerned with their ethnic identity, which he defines with reference to ancestry, distinctive customs (often gender specific) and sometimes dress (usually military panoply), the tomb images generally describe the deceased in different terms. 'Describe the deceased' is not the right way to put it, however, because it makes it sound as though the images were intended to convey messages about the deceased in a direct way, even functioning as portraits, documentaries or visual biographies. Things are never so simple.

Take the so-called 'funerary banquet' – depictions of a single man or a couple on a couch, usually drinking – one of the most common tomb images both at this time and later. As the term 'funerary banquet' implies, the theme has been seen as directly related to the sepulchral context, either a depiction of the afterlife or a depiction of banqueting at a funeral. Due to a lack of evidence for compatible afterlife beliefs or the regular staging of funerary or mortuary feasts, as well as some later inscriptions which suggest a focus on life rather than afterlife, most now see the theme as a depiction of 'the good life'. These images do not necessarily depict *real* life, however. Rather, multiple motifs such as drinking, luxuries and marriage may be combined into one seamless but artificial image. Further, although perhaps not the norm, there *is* evidence for funerary drinking and feasting, and for laying out the dead on couches in the tomb; so the ideas of reclining, drinking and death could have become entwined quite early on. The images themselves are ambiguous; they

do not provide information which allows one to determine whether they were intended to be (and normally) read as images of life or death, or both.

Even more perplexing are images of myth. The sacrifice of the Trojan princess Polyxena on a sarcophagus found in the north Troad could have several intended meanings – with tragic death and local myth history foremost among them. But why Perseus beheading Medusa would be chosen for monuments such as a sixth-century painted tomb at Kızılbél in the upland plains of northern Lycia is not at all clear. Some have seen 'life after death' (Pegasos and his brother Chrysaor were born from her blood) while others, in the case of later uses of the same myth, want to read political messages (Perseus, a Greek, was ancestor of the Persians). Rather than specific intentions about what such images should mean, however, they may have been chosen because they were polyvalent – they could be meaningful in many ways – something which might not be consciously understood, but which made them resonant and attractive.

The inability to fix intended meanings to such images might seem to be an impediment for using them as sources for identities. If the sample is rich enough, though, even images with quite nebulous meanings become meaningful within larger patterns. The use of myth in the Kızılbél tomb in the Lycian highlands, for instance, can be contrasted with the lack of myth on contemporary tombs from coastal Lycia. In some regions there is a notable absence of the 'banquet' motif in favour of other themes. Such patterns reflect not ethnic cultures *à la* Herodotus, but various conditions of landscape, climate, materials, economic connections and social structure, and practices and mentalities shaped by these. In these terms, as indications of practices and mentalities and not *necessarily* as intentional statements about the self, images can be used as sources for the assorted identities that criss-crossed Achaemenid Anatolia, without getting stuck on overly specific interpretations.



A 'funerary banquet' on a stele from near the Persian satrapal seat of Dascyleum, now in Istanbul, ca 460–450 BC.