

Olympian and Chthonian? The cult of Hermes Chthonios in Thessaly

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This paper looks at an epigraphic dossier from Thessaly: funerary stelai bearing dedications to Hermes with the epithet Chthonios and/or depictions of the same god. It is an extensive corpus which spans almost six centuries (4th century BC-2nd century AD) and comprises around 200 items distributed all over Thessaly. In spite of their highly unusual character, these inscriptions have not received much attention and have most commonly been understood through reference to the common funerary figure of Hermes Psychopompos. Furthermore, a most intriguing aspect of the Thessalian material is that through the use of dedicatory formulae, it blends the funerary and dedicatory. The question of how these inscriptions worked as dedications (who precisely was gifting what, to whom, and why?) has never been directly addressed. If Hermes is indeed the recipient of the deceased, as a first glance indicates, how can we fit this into the strict taboo stipulating that a god should never be close to the death of a mortal man?

Our project seeks first to chronologically and topographically order this material and assess more precisely its popularity within the corpus of funerary inscriptions from Thessaly. Through the close observation of diachronic patterns, giving attention to the gender and social status of the dedicator/deceased as well as observing the subtle variations in the epigraphic and representational formulae, and the combinations of text and image, we will provide a reading of the changing meanings these inscriptions could encompass over the long time frame. The study will also contribute to a discussion concerning the interplay between inscription, iconography and monument.