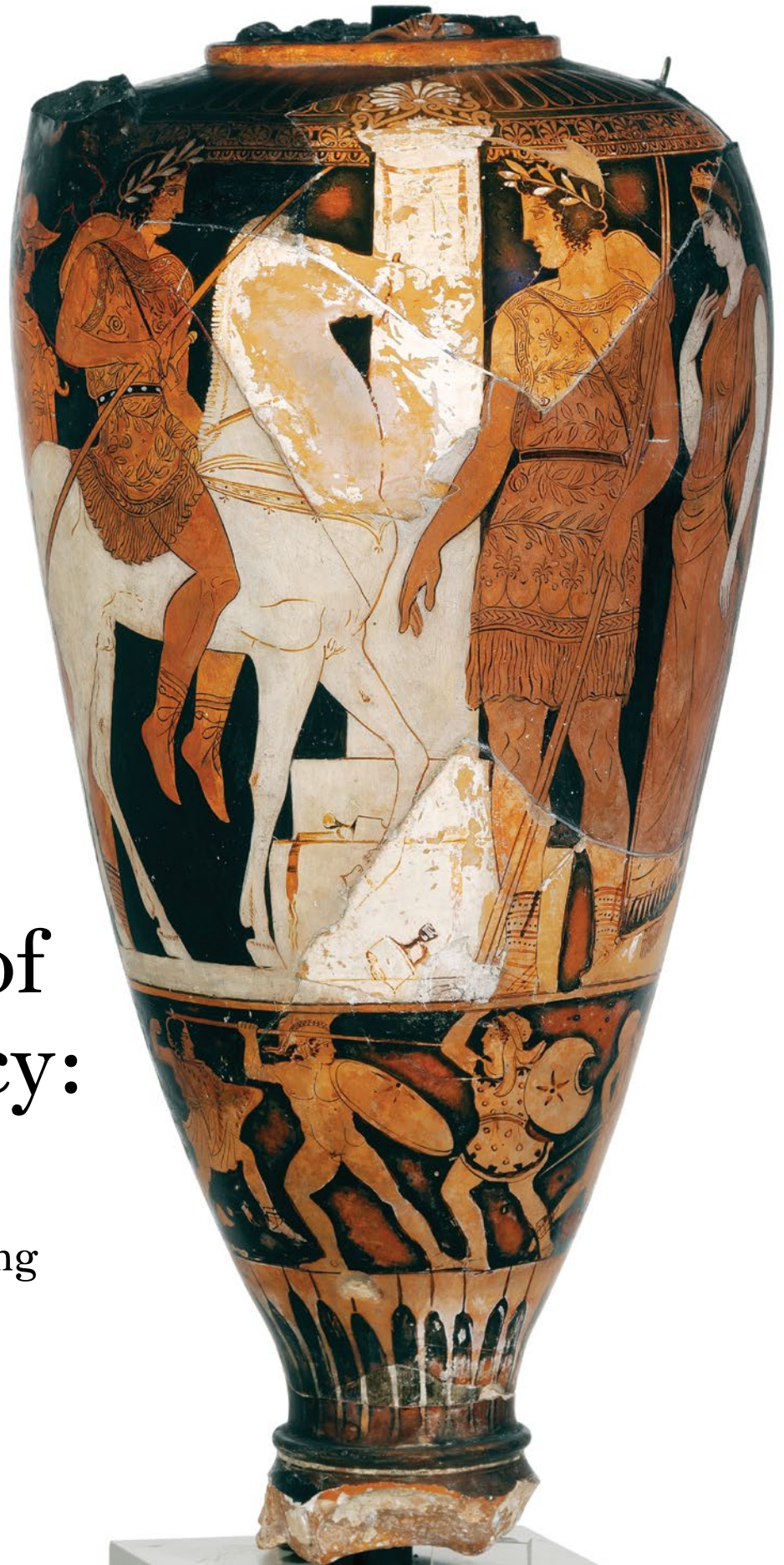


Ashes, images and the survival of democracy:

Nathan Arrington
searches for meaning
in ancient Athens'
public cemetery

By Catherine Zandonella



IT'S AN OVERCAST AND WINDY DAY, cold for June, but a strawberry stand across the road reminds us that summer has almost arrived in New Jersey. Nathan Arrington, an assistant professor of art and archaeology, sometimes visits the cemetery near campus to think. "Archaeologists tend to be comfortable with death," he says.

I walk with Arrington past pitted, moss-stained headstones, wondering if any of those buried here died fighting for a fledgling democracy in the Revolutionary War's Battle of Princeton. Arrington is an expert on another burial ground, thousands of miles away and 2,500 years in the past, in Athens, Greece, where another fledgling democracy — perhaps the world's first — was fighting for survival.

The cemetery is an appropriate place for a mystery, and Arrington is exploring a mystery that has captivated him since he was an undergraduate at Princeton in the early 2000s. Back then, he became intrigued by how ancient Greek art included portrayals of Greek defeats as well as victories. For example, several of the marble carvings on the Parthenon showed Greeks being speared, trampled and otherwise humiliated in battle. In contrast, Arrington says, "The ancient Assyrians would never portray their warriors as anything but victorious."

The portrayals of Greek defeat would eventually lead him to the larger question of how a young democratic society, at first fighting for survival against foreign aggression and later waging war for territorial expansion, convinced its citizens to sacrifice its young men to war. This topic would become the subject of a several-years obsession and eventually a book, *Ashes, Images, and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in Fifth-Century Athens* (Oxford University Press, 2015). It's a mixture of art, archaeology, history and modern neuroscience, tackling questions of how Athens in the fifth century B.C. developed rituals that helped its citizens accept the war dead as a necessary sacrifice to the survival of the state, rituals that influence us even today.

Mapping Athens' ancient cemetery

When Arrington was an undergraduate, these findings were still far in the future. He wrote his senior thesis, a major work of scholarship required of all Princeton undergraduates, on the portrayal of defeat in classical Greek art, graduated in 2002 and then departed — first to the University of Cambridge, where he earned a master's degree, and then to a doctoral program at the University of California-Berkeley. During that time, he spent a year as a Fulbright scholar at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

One day in 2008, amid the sound of cars honking and the smell of chestnuts roasting in a street vendor's cart, Arrington followed Leda Costaki, a

research archivist at the American School, on a tour of Athens' ancient city walls. Most of the walls lie in ruins beneath the concrete and asphalt of the modern city. We know the location of the walls due to the work of government archaeologists who hastily catalogue the historical treasures — crumbling walls, roadbeds, even statues — uncovered whenever the urban landscape is peeled back during the construction of a commercial building or apartment house.

This type of archaeology — the examination of artifacts exhumed from beneath existing development — is considered so hard that a lot of people don't want to do it. Instead of digging in dirt, urban archaeologists delve through stacks of papers or scroll through computerized reports. But as Arrington traipsed in and out of basements where parts of the walls had been preserved, he realized that it might just be possible to use the reports of these urban archaeologists to learn more about Athens' ancient public cemetery.

Inspired by Costaki's tour, Arrington undertook the task of mapping Athens' ancient cemetery, the *dēmosion sēma*. Scholars already knew a bit about it from funeral orations and gravestones, but until Arrington, no one had conclusively mapped it or catalogued the locations of the large public graves for the war dead.

Arrington's map revealed more mysteries. For one thing, the cemetery wasn't exactly where you might expect a public graveyard to be — it was a little off the beaten path and outside the city — and the graves were not placed in neat rows the way they are in modern veterans' cemeteries such as the Arlington National Cemetery. Instead, the graves were spread out over an area nearly a mile long that also housed a pottery manufacturing area.

"Sources speak of the [cemetery region] as a quiet place of solitude, or an ideal spot for a walk," Arrington wrote of what the region would have been like in the fifth century B.C. in his doctoral thesis. "The wide road created an appealing, open space, with many paths leading off to the sides. The public graves did not dominate the edges of the road in a strict line but, like family plots, created smaller, inviting precincts. Such layouts of the monuments encouraged the pedestrian not to stroll by or between memorials, but to pause, experience, explore."

The mapping of the *dēmosion sēma* and study of casualty lists earned Arrington his doctorate degree in 2010, acclaim for his scholarship, and a job the same year as Princeton's newly hired expert on classical Greece — filling the shoes, incidentally, of his senior thesis adviser, William Childs. Childs, professor of art and archaeology, now emeritus, is impressed with the scholar that Arrington has become.

"He is extraordinarily sensitive and very intelligent," Childs says when I meet him in a windowless

Left: A vase known as a *loutrophoros* that carried water for ritual cleansing and was often placed at the graves of young, unmarried men. *Loutrophoros* in the manner of the Talos Painter. Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

room above Princeton's Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology. The room is crammed with filing cabinets and the walls are lined with faded black-and-white photos of Princeton archaeologists from a time when men on expedition dressed for dinner. "He covers just about everything — I disagree with him on a few points, but it is first-rate work, and he is a first-rate scholar."

As an assistant professor at Princeton, Arrington began to piece together the story of what the public cemetery, together with the art and texts of the time, tells us about the lives and customs of a young, militant democracy.

The story starts about 508-507 B.C., when the citizens of Athens set up what is considered the first-ever democratic system of government. The city had hardly gained independence when it faced the threat of Persian invaders. Banding together with other Greek city-states, Athens triumphed over the Persians in 480 B.C. and waged many more battles — not only for survival but to gain power and territory. But the cost of these victories, and also some defeats, was high.

"There was an obvious problem with the war dead," Arrington says. "You had to convince a society that these wars were worth the risk. And if you are a young democratic community, you need to honor the dead, but you cannot elevate the dead above the rest of society."

The public cemetery was one way that city leaders sought to make the sacrifice more acceptable, Arrington found. Prior to the *dēmosion sēma*'s construction, the mourning of family members killed in battle was a very personal experience. Families would go to the battlefield to collect the body. Once home, they'd wash the body and invite extended family and friends to honor the deceased. Those who could afford to do so erected statues and monuments to commemorate the dead.

Once the public cemetery was created, however, the building of private monuments ceased, according to the records and artifacts that Arrington studied. Instead, officials cremated the war dead at the battlefield or somewhere else outside the city, then brought the ashes into Athens by the cartload to display in the burial ground. "This would have been a startling and disturbing sight," Arrington says.

Individual monuments were replaced by tall slabs of marble called *stelae* inscribed with lists of names of the fallen. The carvings appear to have been done with some haste, probably in time for an annual celebration that would include speeches and funeral games.

"This was a way to honor people equally," Arrington says. "You were elevated to the same level as your rich neighbor across the street. Death in battle was the great equalizer."

Death was also the great anonymizer, he says. Only first names were carved on the *stelae*. "The anonymity of the lists encouraged a view of dead as a collective instead of individuals. These were fundamental changes in the way that people viewed their dead."

Coopting the war dead for civic purposes

As Arrington learned more about these customs by studying the *stelae*, the works of art of the period and surviving funeral oration texts, he began to understand how the Greek battle scenes that had so puzzled him as an undergraduate fit into the picture.

These battle scenes were prominently on display on the crown of Athens' largest building, the Parthenon, which, with its marble sculpture, was the Times Square of the ancient world. There, for all to see, were carvings of an Amazon spearing a Greek soldier, a centaur trampling a Greek and a Greek soldier turning to run or crawl away. These mythical foes, carved between 447 and 438 B.C., represent real-life



As an undergraduate at Princeton, Arrington was intrigued at how the ancient Greeks portrayed their own defeat in works of art, such as this marble sculpture created around 447-438 B.C. of a centaur trampling a Greek warrior situated on the Parthenon. London, British Museum. Photo credit: Album/Art Resource, New York.

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battles. The Amazons, for example, wore Persian dress.

The location of these scenes on a sacred building — the Parthenon is a temple to the goddess Athena — suggests a deific stamp of approval. The images of flight, loss, defeat and death are a means of catharsis, creating an emotional connection between the viewer and the defeated, Arrington argues. Long after the funeral orations and games were over, the monuments posed the question to the living: What will you do?

How did the Greeks respond to coopting of their war dead for civic purposes? With their private traditions supplanted by public rituals, families over time shaped new customs. One such custom was to place in the cemetery offerings of decorative oil-filled bottles called *lekythoi*.

At the Princeton University Art Museum in the center of campus, I meet J. Michael Padgett, curator of ancient art. At a back entrance, a security guard checks me in, and Padgett takes me to a room lined with shelves of Greek antiquities where Arrington once worked as a student, and where in turn his students come to study *lekythoi* and other artifacts in the classes he teaches.

Padgett hands me a smooth vase about the size of a soda bottle. If I drop it, I would destroy an object created thousands of years ago. Holding it makes me feel somehow closer to understanding how a grieving mother might revere such an object, which served as a way of connecting the living and the dead. “Vases are a window on the past, although they are a smudged and cracked window,” Padgett says.

On one of the *lekythoi* described in Arrington’s book, a woman stands facing a tall grave marker, her outstretched hand holding a *lekythos*, possibly

purchased at the nearby pottery works. A warrior looks at her from the other side of the grave.

From his armor, it is clear that he is a ghost; people didn’t go to graves dressed like that. The image carries a reassuring message for the grieving survivor who held this vase in pre-Christian Greece: Your dead son is here in spirit, and he knows that you visit his grave.

Arrington examined this and other *lekythoi* as snapshots — the selfies of everyday life and loss in ancient Greece — and started to see how the Athenians used the vases in combination with the public cemetery to make sense of their losses. “What you actually see is the variety of responses to the war dead, to the point of almost being subversive. I wouldn’t call it an antiwar movement, but these were reactions against the city’s claims to the dead, to the bodies or to the endless wars.” Eventually the monuments to individuals returned, paid for by the families who could afford them, around 430 B.C.

Padgett takes the *lekythos* from my hand. He has clear memories of Arrington as an undergraduate. Just after graduation in 2002, Arrington worked as an intern in the art museum, helping Padgett prepare an exhibition. “Of course I remember Nathan,” Padgett says. “He stood out even then as an extremely bright and motivated student. He has great powers of concentration — and he was already multilingual by then. I and others were delighted when he came back.”

During his undergraduate years at Princeton, Arrington met his wife, Celeste, who is now an assistant professor of political science specializing in the Koreas and Japan at George Washington University. A few years later, while they both were working on their doctorates, Arrington found himself living in Japan. When not sifting through piles of



Disallowed from building individual monuments for their loved ones who died in battle, Athenians honored their war dead in the public cemetery by placing small vases called *lekythoi* at the mass graves. On this *lekythos*, dating from about 460-450 B.C., a woman carrying a basket with grave offerings on her head offers a *lekythos* to a striding warrior, probably the deceased. Berlin, Staatliche Museen. Photo credit: Johannes Laurentius/ Art Resource, New York.

photocopied Athenian archaeology documents, he would visit the Yasukuni war shrine. (“I was the strange tourist just sitting there watching people come and go,” he says.) Here, soldiers who gave their lives for Japan are revered as deities. Around that same time, the U.S.-Iraq war was going on, yet U.S. government policy forbade news photography of the coffins arriving home from Iraq and Afghanistan. He began to think about how our ways of remembering the dead — even today — influence our willingness to accept the personal cost of war.

Crossing the centuries

The sprawling cemetery, the anonymity of the grave markers, the funeral orations, the objects of art from the small *lekythoi* to the massive marble friezes — all were clues that pointed to ways that societies shape how their citizens view death.

And that led to the last piece of the puzzle: Exactly how did these material objects influence the thought processes of Athenians? Arrington found himself turning to modern neuroscience to learn how our environments and past experiences influence what we remember. We don’t remember everything that happens to us, but rather only those things that have some importance or value. And our biases or mindsets can influence what we remember. The public nature of the cemetery with its ashes on display, funeral games and speeches, plus the anonymity of the markers, carried strong messages that the war dead should be perceived and remembered for their contribution to the state rather than as good sons or dedicated husbands.

Few scholars today could have put together such a comprehensive look at how the objects of art and archaeology revealed something about the culture

of ancient Athens, says Matthew Sears, a historian who studies classical Greek warfare at the University of New Brunswick in Canada. “Nathan’s work crosses boundaries between disciplines,” says Sears, who first met Arrington when they were students at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. “The objects of art that Nathan describes in his book are very well known. They’ve been studied for, in some cases, centuries, but they’ve only been studied in isolation from each other. Nathan brings them all together, as parts of the same story, and he brings in advances in memory and cognitive studies, things that have nothing to do with classical scholarship, in a way that sheds light on how Athenians lived,” Sears says.

A truck rumbles past the strawberry stand outside the cemetery in Princeton. Arrington is leaving for Greece in a few days, where he’ll lead students in an excavation of an ancient trading port on the north coast of Greece. The financial uncertainty in Greece is a worry. Celeste will go with him, and they’ll be bringing their young child (with another on the way), to the dig.

Arrington is musing on how modern society has coopted Greek classical art and architecture to make grand statements. For example, near campus on the Princeton Battlefield stands a neoclassical monument consisting of four Greek columns. “We use classical style as a way to elevate things, but to do that is to not understand the full complexity of Greek art,” he says. “I think we adopted some of these practices without understanding where they are coming from.”

The issues of the treatment of the war dead, the state support of war veterans and the place of

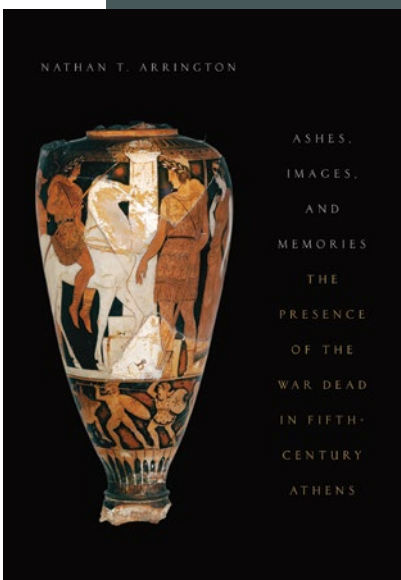
war in society are issues that we are still grappling with today, says David Pritchard, a senior lecturer in Greek history at the University of Queensland who is familiar with Arrington’s work. “All of these questions are still being asked. Athens is a very rich point of comparison for thinking about pressing issues of democracy, citizenship and military participation.”

He adds: “Ancient Athens was democratic, but it was a state that was constantly at war. It was a state that prioritized military spending over social security spending, and it was a state that picked fights with other states all the time. So I think that Athens stands as a warning to the modern world that we shouldn’t be complacent in thinking that democracy protects us from warmongering or that democracy means that we only fight just wars, and we only fight necessary wars.”

Western-style democracies, in other words, have much in common with the ancient Greeks when it comes to the war dead: What do you do with the bodies? How will you memorialize them? How will you portray them in images? And will you honor the dead as a way to glorify war?

Arrington is not sure we honor our war dead particularly well. “We as a culture tend to ignore death as much as we possibly can,” he said. “It is difficult for society to come to grips with the cost of war because death is not part of our visual culture on a regular basis, the way it was in the ancient world. Yet these ashes, images and the memories they create are needed if we are to have national healing.” **D**

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Arrington explores how a young democracy coped with the sacrifice of so many of their young men to war in his book *Ashes, Images, and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in Fifth-Century Athens* (Oxford University Press, 2015). On the cover of the book is a vase known as a *loutrophoros* that carried water for ritual cleansing and was often placed at the graves of young, unmarried men. The vase, which dates from about 410 B.C., shows a deceased man looking at an equestrian statue of himself. The vase represents a way that families commemorated their dead and hints at a backlash against the practice of burying soldiers’ ashes en masse in Athens’ public cemetery.