

## Gravestone of Pollis

The Gravestone of Pollis is a funerary monument commemorating a young warrior named Pollis who died about 480 B.C., during the Greco-Persian wars. This guide can be used to teach about Greek funerary practices and the relations between the Greeks and Persians that led to war, with severe implications for both cultures. The guide contains information for teachers, suggested discussion questions, and activities for students that can be carried out in the Getty Villa's galleries or in the classroom.

## Background Information

### Greeks and Persians

The Greeks were not unified as a country or nation, although they shared a common language and cultural ideals. They lived in small, self-governing city-states; these could found colonies, make war against one another, and build alliances to combat fellow Greeks or external enemies. In the late sixth and fifth centuries B.C., many Greeks, most famously the Athenians, were debating how best to run a state and were starting in their small communities to reject rule by kings. The Persian king, in contrast, ruled multiethnic, multilingual populations living throughout a vast empire. In his presence, all bowed down. Conquest by the Persians and their all-powerful king was a terrifying possibility for the Greeks in the fifth century B.C.

### The Greco-Persian Wars

The Persians first came into serious conflict with the Greeks in the late sixth century B.C., when Cyrus the Great incorporated Ionian Greek colonies on the coast of Turkey into the Persian Empire. These colonists, with the help of Athens and Eretria, revolted from Persian rule in 499 B.C. In 490 B.C., the Persian king Darius I invaded Greece to stop—from his perspective—the troublemakers there who were helping the Ionians endanger his borders. In a famous battle at Marathon, the Greeks defeated a far greater Persian force.

A decade later, in 480 B.C., Darius's son Xerxes I invaded Greece a second time. He famously defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae and sacked Athens. However, the Greek allies then won a famous naval victory over the Persians at Salamis the same year and a land battle at Plataea in 479 B.C. Their victories over a foreign superpower were of enormous significance to the self-image of the Greeks—especially the Athenians, who had taken a lead in the battles. They saw themselves as having saved the Greek world

# Gravestone of Pollis: Teacher Guide

from the Persians, and the victories brought them prestige and political power. The Greek fear of a takeover by the mighty Persians continued for generations and served as Alexander the Great's excuse for invading the Persian Empire.

## The Gravestone of Pollis

War is brought down to an intimate, private sphere by this gravestone erected by a grieving Greek father for his son. The funerary monument, broken at the bottom, commemorates a young warrior named Pollis who died about 480 B.C., during the Greco-Persian wars. The alphabet used to write his epitaph (funerary text) at the top suggests that the gravestone was erected at Megara, one of the allies of Athens. At right, the young man is depicted in low relief.

An English translation of the inscription reads:  
*I speak, I, Pollis dear son of Asopichos, not having died a coward, with the wounds of the tattooers, yes myself.*

Greek males were regularly identified as "son of" their fathers, and here Pollis's father, Asopichos, describes him as "dear son." Pollis died at the hands of "tattooers," probably Thracians, who lived in northern Greece and at this time were allies of the Persians. Persian armies included many peoples with different dress and military equipment. The Thracian practice of tattooing seemed especially strange to the Greeks. Pollis's father carefully records that his son died "not... a coward" (meaning he fought bravely). Although Pollis's age is not provided, he may have been a young soldier, new to war, and his father was perhaps concerned to record his bravery against a daunting foe.



Gravestone of Pollis  
Unknown artist  
Greek, Megara, about 480 B.C.  
Marble  
60¼ x 17¾ x 6¼ in.  
90.AA.129

# Gravestone of Pollis: Teacher Guide

## The Image of Pollis

Painted details, now lost, would have made the original image (especially the helmet) easier to understand. Below the inscription, a nude Pollis is shown as a hoplite infantryman (a heavily armed foot soldier) moving cautiously from left to right. In the fifth century B.C., nudity symbolized heroic status, and death has heroized Pollis, since real soldiers did not fight naked.

Pollis wears a helmet and carries the shield, sword, and spear of a hoplite. Advancing together against an enemy, hoplites overlapped their shields to form a protective wall during attack. Pollis's shield is raised almost into a fighting position, but it rests for the moment on his left shoulder. He holds his spear horizontally in his right hand, ready to throw. Spears were often shortened in art—or only partially depicted, as here—since they were up to nine feet long. The sword at his left side hung from a painted strap (now worn away); he would have thrown the spear first and then used his sword for close fighting.

Students will understand Pollis more easily when they compare him with a hoplite on an earlier amphora (see student guide). This hoplite is not heroized by death, so he is fully dressed. He wears a "muscle cuirass," a breastplate with a swirling decoration simulating pectoral muscles. The metal base of the cuirass protrudes in a circle around the hoplite's waist. The "skirt" below is made up of leather straps that protect his groin, and he wears metal guards (greaves) on his legs from knee to ankle. He holds a rounded shield, painted white on the exterior, that would have been decorated with a symbol in the center. This hoplite's crested helmet has white feathers on either side; similar painted feathers may have embellished Pollis's helmet, but the paint on the gravestone has worn away.

## Questions for Teaching

- Describe the figure of Pollis on the gravestone. What is he holding? What is he wearing? What does it look like he is doing?
- The Greeks went fully armed into battle, with a sword, helmet, shield, and cuirass (metal breastplate). Discuss with a partner why Pollis is nude. (Ancient Greeks often depicted gods, heroes, and athletes nude. The nudity of this warrior ["heroic nudity"] alludes to his heroism in battle.)
- Compare the gravestone and the vase painting of a hoplite in the accompanying student guide. How does the second image document the armor Pollis would have worn in combat?

## Related Content Standards for California Public Schools

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

#### Grade 6–12

##### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

##### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### CALIFORNIA STATE CONTENT STANDARDS FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES

#### Grade Six

6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush.

6.4 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Ancient Greece.

### CALIFORNIA STATE CONTENT STANDARDS FOR VISUAL ARTS

#### Grade Six

Historical and Cultural Context 3.1: Research and discuss the role of the visual arts in selected periods of history, using a variety of resources (both print and electronic).

Aesthetic Valuing 4.1: Construct and describe plausible interpretations of what they perceive in works of art.

#### Grade Seven

Aesthetic Valuing 4.2: Analyze the form (how a work of art looks) and content (what a work of art communicates) of works of art.