

Funerary Stele Sold in France Traced to Ancient Greek City of Zeugma

By **Nisha Zahid** November 18, 2025



Excavations in [ancient Greek city of Zeugma](#), present-day Turkey. Credit: [Dosseman](#) / [Wikimedia Commons](#) / CC BY-SA 4.0

A funerary stele sold at auction in France on April 11, 2024, has been identified as originating from the ancient Greek (and later Roman) city of [Zeugma](#) (Greek: Ζεϋγμα) in southeastern Turkey. The limestone marker is now held by an antiquarian in Alicante, [Spain](#).

The identification comes from a study by Maria-Paz de Hoz of Complutense University of Madrid. Researchers examined the object's inscription, stone type, and carving style. Their analysis links the piece to the Roman-era cemeteries of Zeugma, a city known for its distinctive funerary traditions.

Carved epitaph and eagle relief

The stele is carved from yellowish limestone and measures roughly 55 by 45 by 20 centimeters. Its front face carries a short Greek epitaph and a detailed carving of an eagle shown head-on with outstretched wings.

The Greek inscription runs across two lines and reads, Ἀπολινάρι ἄλυπε χέρε, “Apolinaris, free from sorrow, farewell.” The phrase reflects the funerary formula *alype chaire*, common in the region’s mortuary texts.

The lettering is uneven, suggesting it was cut by a non-professional hand. Below the inscription, a niche holds the eagle relief, with feathers carved in clear, deliberate strokes.

Gendered symbols in Zeugma’s cemeteries

The motif aligns closely with Zeugma’s funerary art. Across about 70 known male stelae from the site, the eagle appears as a near-standard symbol. Women’s stelae typically show a basket, often with wool. Researchers describe this contrast as a gendered visual language rooted in the city’s necropoleis.



Ancient mosaic showing Zeugma art. Credit: Dosseman / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

Some stelae replace the emblem with a bust of the deceased, but the underlying inscription formula remains consistent across examples.

Placement within rock-cut burial grounds

Archaeological evidence from Zeugma’s rock-cut cemeteries helps place the stele in context. These burial areas included entrance galleries, *arcosolia*—arched recesses—and narrow *loculi* designed for coffins. Stelae were usually set at the entrance of a tomb or positioned in front of a burial recess.

In several parts of Zeugma, reliefs and [inscriptions](#) were carved directly onto the walls of tomb chambers. Many of these features now lie underwater following the creation of the Birecik Dam.

Meaning of the funerary formula

The phrase “*alype chaire*” has two recognized meanings in the Greek epigraphic tradition. It can wish the deceased to remain “free from sorrow” in the afterlife. It can also praise someone who “did not cause grief” during life.

Zeugma’s inscriptions accommodate both readings. The study notes that similar consolatory farewells appear in nearby cities, showing that the formula was widely shared across the region.

Symbolic weight of the eagle motif

Scholars have described it as a protective emblem, a marker of male identity, or a symbol linked to local cults. In Zeugma, the bird also carried strong imperial associations, as two Roman legions were stationed there for much of the first to third centuries A.D.

According to the [study](#), the eagle on this stele likely identified the male deceased and symbolized protection and continuity after death. It may also have served as a civic marker tied to the identity of Roman Zeugma.

Provenance confirms Zeugma origin

Provenance records trace the stele from a French private collection to its sale in Saint-Cloud in 2024, before its transfer to Spain. Despite this modern journey, researchers say the stele’s features leave little doubt about its true origin.

Its stylistic and epigraphic parallels match work produced in Zeugma’s cemeteries at their artistic peak, shortly before the Sassanid invasion of A.D. 252–253 disrupted life in the region.