Athens, enveloped within the Roman Empire after 31 BCE, illustrates the complexity of defining center and periphery in the ancient world and calls into question the categories (Greek, non-Greek, Roman) and processes (Hellenization, Romanization) which are so frequently invoked by scholars. After Rome gained control of the region, previously clear-cut legal definitions (citizen, foreign resident) had become destabilized. Just as the political boundaries had changed, so too, in art, architecture and literature, the lines between Roman and Greek were blurred. In Athens, residents utilized competing modes of affiliation (Roman and Athenian citizenship); some participated in both a local civic structure and even held offices at Rome. At the same time, the Athenian population had grown increasingly diverse with immigrants from many areas of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Athens' own position within the Mediterranean had evolved. No longer politically or militarily relevant, the city nonetheless retained its aura as an intellectual and cultural center primarily by drawing upon its Classical heritage. So meaningful was this connection that the Roman emperor Hadrian designated Athens as the capital of the Panhellenion, a new league of ancient Greek cities he formed in the early 130s CE. In the literary and artistic output of the era, Athenians and non-Athenians alike struggled to define Greekness and Greek culture in a rapidly changing environment heavily informed by Roman rule. Yet debates continued over the retention of Attic culture and language, and anxiety over immigrant populations can be seen in textual sources.

Against this background, the increasing visibility of the foreign populations of Athens is intriguing. Inscribed funerary monuments that preserve the "ethnic", an adjectival form of the name of a foreigner's native city, allow us to trace relative numbers of these populations. Foreigners from cities like Miletos and Herakleia were far from hidden—their funerary monuments were often large and proudly displayed their non-Athenian origins. The sons of these foreign families were also active in the ephebate, a training program for young men which likely led to the acquisition of citizenship; intermarriage between citizen and non-citizen families also increased. Thus, despite legislation limiting the rights and privileges of non-citizens, the material record shows that individuals and families from foreign cities were proud of their origins and their roles within the city.

Thus, a small group of gravestones from Roman Athens provides a stepping-stone for considering how one defines "center" in the ancient world when borders and populations were continually in flux.