
INTRODUCTION

Funerary beliefs and practices varied a great deal from one city-state to another, and from one age to another. What follows is a summary of the most common beliefs and practices intended to suggest possible modern rituals. It should be kept in mind that each person's experience with death is highly personal and priesthood is not allowed to participate in more than an advisory manner. Also, divine law does not permit the Immortals to look at the dying.

Most of the ancient Hellenes did not spend much thought to what happened after death and were more concerned with what was necessary to live a good life, in harmony with others and the world around them. Throughout most of the Hellenic period, the spirits of the dead were not feared for what they could do but for their influence with the chthonic deities and with the spiritual pollution associated with them.

THE PROCESS OF DEATH

Much of funeral ritual practices make more sense when taken in context of the process of death. When a person dies, their psyche begins to leave the body. This is not an instantaneous process and is only completed when the physical body is destroyed by cremation or decomposition (assumed to take thirty days).

The amount of power wielded by the dead varies from merely messengers to chthonic deities in the Archaic period to returning and effecting the physical world in the Classical and Hellenic periods. The ability to communicate with and influence chthonic deities has always been granted to the dead and makes it safer to respect their needs and accord them proper burial.

PREPARATION FOR DEATH

If there is time for a person to prepare for their death, several steps are commonly performed:

- 1) The ritual bath.
- 2) Committal of one's children to the safe care of others.
- 3) Settling of one's affairs (if you commit crimes on earth you must pay for them down below).
- 4) Prayer to Hestia.
- 5) Prayer for safe passage to Hades.
- 6) Farewell to family and friends.

If there is no time for the deceased to perform these steps, the steps must be performed by relatives or friends before they can inherit.

Κηδεῖα - THE FUNERAL

The actual funeral consists of three parts: laying out of the body (προθεσις), its conveyance to the place of interment (εκφορά) and finally the deposition of its cremation or inhumed remains.

Upon a person's decease, the eyes and mouth are closed to allow the psyche to leave the body. A coin can be placed in the mouth to pay Charon for passage across the river Styx but this is a later practice that is not universally practiced. After the body is bathed and clothed, it is laid out on a bed with feet pointed toward the door.

On the way to the place of interment, mourners sing improvised dirges in memory of their lives shared and the bitterness of their loss. The purpose of these dirges is to honor the dead, satisfy claims of duty and to appease the soul of the departed. It is not necessary for these to be sung but they must not be prepared in advance as that would not show proper respect.

Hellenic Funerals



**"Do not beget children
when you are come back
from ill omened burial, but
after a festival of the gods."
Hesiod**

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Περιδειπνον - FUNERAL REPAST

At the gravesite, a small libation is made and offerings of baskets of food, a ὕδρα (waterjug), a ληκυθος (oil flask) and the libation vessels are placed on the grave. These, and all other offerings to the dead, must be destroyed to send them on their way.

Returning from the gravesite, the relatives and friends who have participated in the funeral bathe to remove pollutants. These people are not allowed to enter any sacred site until the cleansing at the thirty-day rite. The house is cleaned with sea-water and other substances to make it safe for others to enter for the funeral repast.

On the third day after the death (or upon return from the grave site) a feast is held hosted by the deceased. The bereaved wear garlands and deliver eulogies on behalf of the dead.

Τριακοστία - THIRTY DAY RITE

The process of dying lasts until the thirty-day rites are performed to mark the end of the mourning period and the severing of contact between the psyche and the physical body.

Prior to this feast, all feasts and libations honoring the dead are not shared, with portions set aside for the living and the dead. At this feast, and any afterwards, food and drink is shared to mark the transformation of the psyche into a wind-spirit (spirit who travels the winds).

Before the feast, all areas that have been polluted by the dead are once again thoroughly cleaned, physically and spiritually. The sweepings are then offered to Hekate at a crossroads or gravesite.

TOMB VISITS

It is vitally important that any heirs make regular visits to the gravesite to make libations and keep the psyche informed of what is happening in the world. A person who doesn't make these visits, when they are otherwise able, is not allowed to hold public office and their right to inherit can be questioned.

On the other hand, it is also vitally important that a person arranges while they are living for an heir who is willing to perform the proper funerary rites, to satisfy any unfinished worldly business and make these tomb visits. The only ones not deserving of funeral visits are suicides.

Tomb visits include offerings (which are destroyed to send them on their way), expressions of grief, greetings, requests for aid or advice, acts of devotion, libations and graveside feasts. Offerings are transported to the grave site in a wide, shallow basket known as a κάβειον. Acts of devotion consist of wreathing, be-ribboning and anointing the στήλη (grave stone). Relatives are allowed to share the libations and graveside feast but separate portions are set aside for the living and the dead. Libations to the dead consist of mixed or unmixed portions of honey, milk, water, wine and oil.

Graveside prayers consist of a request for the assistance of chthonic deities or δαίμων in contacting the spirit of the dead. This is followed by a request for the spirit to be kindly disposed toward the family, for them to send bounty to the world and for them to grant more personal requests. Finally, the libation vessels are destroyed to send them to the dead.

Τριτοπατορες - THIRD FOREFATHERS

When a psyche has "traveled the winds" for three generations, they completely lose their previous identity, becoming pure psyche, and are available to begin a new life. This makes them especially interested in helping with fertility problems when asked at the Anthesteria.

CONCLUSION

While one must atone for their acts in life or while in Hades, punishment (or rewards) for misdeeds (or honorable acts) in life do not wait for the afterlife as Olympic deities bring punishment (or favor) more immediate to the acts that deserve them. In the Archaic period, spirits of the dead were thought to be able to influence the chthonic deities and, during the Classical period, the dead were thought to be able to effect real changes in the world so the proper funeral rites and maintenance is a type of self interest with equal amounts of fear of retribution.

SOURCES

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