

# Death and Burial

## Learning Objectives:

- To understand Greek and Roman practices and beliefs surrounding death and burial



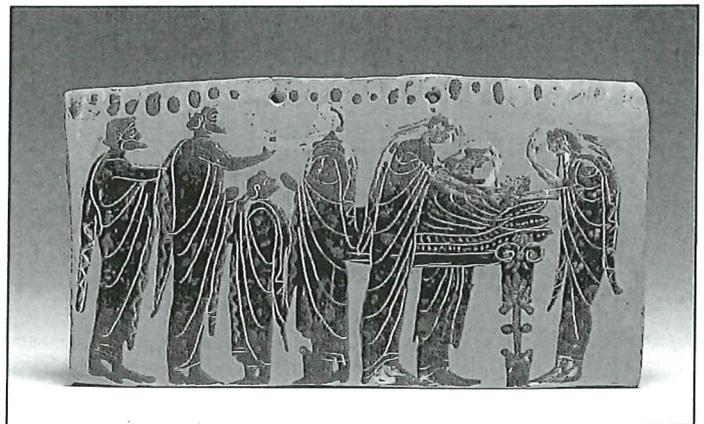
## Introduction

For the ancients, death was not the end but part of the journey, and just like any journey it had to be prepared for if the destination was to be reached successfully. While this applies mainly to their beliefs about the afterlife, it also covers how they believed the dead needed to be treated in order to be able to reach the afterlife in the first place. The soul could know no rest or reach the afterlife if the body was not properly buried and the correct rites performed. In addition, an unburied body was considered to be an offence to the gods. It was a grave crime to deny burial, especially in war, whether to an ally or an enemy. Anyone who came across an unburied body was expected to throw some dirt over it.

## Death and Burial in Ancient Greece

### The preparation of the body

The body of the recently deceased would first need to be washed and anointed by female members of the family. A wreath would be placed on the chest and sometimes a coin would be placed in the mouth. This was to pay Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, to ferry the deceased across the River Styx and so into the underworld. After the body was prepared it was laid out for viewing on the next day in a process caused *prothesis*. This would involve family members coming to view the body with the women chanting and tearing their hair; this part would usually be led by the wife or mother of the deceased.



Greek illustration from the sixth century BC depicting prothesis.

### Funerary procession

Before dawn on the following day the procession – or *ekphora* – took place. The deceased would be transported by either pall bearers or a horse-drawn carriage through the streets to the cemetery. It would be accompanied by family and friends as well as musicians, who would all express their grief through physical expressions or song. Public grieving was encouraged. Of course, the lavishness of this procession would depend on the wealth of the individual.

### Burial of the body

Upon reaching the cemetery, the body would be prepared for burial. It would first be placed in a small box, which could be carved with various images. It would then either be buried whole or cremated first; this would often depend on the traditions of the city in question. The graves themselves were marked by *stelai*, stone slabs that commemorated the deceased. This could, as in the example to the right, show the craft of the deceased.



Greek stele of an Athenian shoemaker, depicting his craft, from the fifth century BC.

### **Festivals for the dead and the ancestors**

In the immediate aftermath of the burial, a feast would be held in honour of the departed. This was a way of expressing thanks to those who had participated in the funerary rites. The tomb would then be regularly visited on specific days after the burial, with offerings left at the tomb. Throughout the year the dead would be commemorated at festivals. One such event was the *Genesia*, which means 'anniversary' in Ancient Greek. This was a public festival of the dead held in Athens, where families would honour their departed ancestors. Originally it had been a private family affair, but it was turned into a public city-wide event due to the belief that caring for the dead was a responsibility of all citizens. During the *Genesia*, which would be held on one day in September, special vases were left at graves. These vases would often be illustrated with depictions of funerary practices.

## **Death and Burial in Ancient Rome**

### **The preparation of the body**

When a person died, their family members would gather around the body and the closest relative would give a kiss because the Romans believed that the breath was the spirit and so by this method the final farewell to the spirit was made. Then the lamentations began and the body was placed on the ground, washed, and anointed. How the body would be dressed depended on the rank of the departed: if a male citizen he would be dressed in his toga, if he had earned a wreath (for instance, for a military accomplishment) one would be put on the body.

### **Funerary procession**

The body would then be taken in procession to the cemetery and the retinue that would accompany it would depend on the status and wealth of the individual. From perhaps just a few musicians and the family for a poor person, to a large retinue including freedmen (former slaves), clients and hired professional mourners if the person was influential and wealthy. Therefore, the size of the funerary procession was a good indication of the power of the departed.

### **Burial of the body**

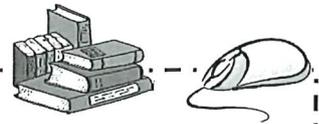
If the body was to be cremated, the body was taken to the city of the dead and put on a funeral pyre. The ashes would be placed in an urn. If it was to be buried, it would be placed inside a coffin, which could be decorated (again depending on the deceased's wealth). No possessions would be placed with the body. The Romans believed that until the body was somehow interred, its spirit had not yet crossed over to the afterlife and so remained in the vicinity. Therefore, people would avoid negative statements about the deceased as this would anger the spirit. Similar to the Greeks, the Romans would commemorate the deeds of the departed on their tombstones, which could depict their profession in life, for example. Due to the importance, and expense, of burial, Romans joined burial or funerary clubs. They would pay to join and then pay monthly membership fees to remain a part of the club. The benefit of this was that if a member of the club died, the rest of the club would pay for the funeral. These clubs had their own rules; for instance, specifying the requirements for the funeral depending on whether the member had died within the city or far from it. Not all forms of death were covered, and if someone committed suicide they waived their right to a funeral. Funerary clubs were not exclusively concerned with paying for funerals, and they would also hold feasts on occasion that would be paid for partly from the membership fees, though these feasts would be in honour of the dead. In some cases, clubs would use their funds to buy a mausoleum (a grand building housing tombs) for the members of the club.

### Festivals for the dead and the ancestors

The Roman state set apart specific times of the year to commemorate the departed. The *Parentalia* (literally 'ancestral days') was one such event where people would remember and honour their family ancestors. Beginning on 13<sup>th</sup> February, it would last for nine days, during which no official business was conducted. Courts were closed, magistrates took off their official togas, and marriages were postponed due to the association with death these days carried. While the first day would include public ceremonies (which demonstrated the importance of family to the Roman state), the *Parentalia* would primarily be a family affair conducted in private, and, as it was believed that the dead rose to mingle with the living, offerings and gifts would be left by families for their ancestors. Another such event was the *Lemuria*, which took place on three different days in May. It was supposedly established by Romulus as atonement for his killing of his brother Remus. Like the *Parentalia*, it was a private family rite, and these 'days of the dead' saw the Romans give offerings to their ancestors to ensure they were placated and didn't haunt them. Business came to a halt, with even temple doors shut on these three days. The *lemurs* were a type of restless spirit in Roman mythology from where this day gets its name. Unlike the *Parentalia*, the *Lemuria* was more about warding off malignant spirits, rather than honouring dead ancestors. On top of these shared events, different families would have their own days when they would remember their ancestors as well.

### Death and Burial in the Sources

The importance of burial in the ancient world is attested in the sources. Even when burial might not be a key part of the subject matter of the source, we can see that it was important. A good example of this is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where in Book 10 he tells the story of Orpheus entering the underworld. As Orpheus travels he passes ghosts 'that had received proper burial'. It seems an odd thing to specify when discussing ghosts, but this reference would have been clear to his Roman readers. Only those who had received a proper burial were guaranteed entrance to the underworld, and so only the ghosts of these people could be present in this scene.



## Independent Research

Research one or two of the following examples of Greek and Roman tombstones, or *stelai*, and write what they tell you about the deceased in question and also what it reveals about Greek and Roman culture and tradition. Can you identify any similarities or differences between the two?

### Greek

1. Stele of Vespasian, Georgia
2. Stele of Aphrodisia, Daughter of Theudotos, Demetrias
3. Stele of Aristonantes, Athens

### Roman

1. Stele of Urbico, Milan
2. Stele of Aurelius Hermia and Aurelia Philmatium, Rome
3. Stele of Turia, Rome

## Consolidation Questions

- a) Why might a coin be placed on the mouth of the dead in Ancient Greece?
- b) Why would Romans avoid speaking ill of the dead during funerals?
- c) Were there more similarities or differences between Greek and Roman burial traditions?

## Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Now answer the following question:

**What can this source tell you about how the Romans used tombstones?**

- 2) Read the source below.

*Eteocles, who fell fighting on behalf of our city... they shall entomb and heap up every sacred offering that descends to the noblest of the dead below. But as for his brother, Polynices, I mean, who on his return from exile wanted to burn to the ground the city of his fathers... it has been proclaimed to the city that no one shall give him funeral honours or lamentation, but all must leave him unburied....*

*Sophocles' Antigone, 223–235. King Creon speaks of the fate of the brothers who fought and died over who should be King.*

**What does this source tell us about the significance of proper burial?**