

Greece

Practices

Proper burials—along with appropriate rituals—were very important in order for the soul to go into the afterlife. A typical burial had three parts.

1. The prosthesis (wake / laying out of the body)

The first thing that occurs is that the eyes and mouth are closed. Coins were placed either in the eyes or mouth to pay Charon for ferrying the soul of the dead across the river Styx. The women of the household would wash the body, normally using seawater, and then dress the person in a plain white or gray ankle length shroud. If the deceased was a soldier he would be dressed in a traditional military cloak. If it was a woman she was adorned with modest earrings and a necklace. Most bodies were also adorned with a diadem or crown on the head.

The body was laid out on a bed with its feet facing the entry way. The body remained in the house for 48 hours so that respects can be made to it.

During this time the friends and family of the deceased would take part in a lamenting song and dance called the threnos. The threnos is an improvised lament that is started by a professional mourner and then finished by the family.

2. The ekphora (procession)

The body was transported to the grave site by either horse drawn carriage or pall-bearers. The funeral procession to the burial site was always led by men and with women in the back.

The funeral party would make many stops along the way to cry out in order to attract attention and while walking women would tear at their hair and clothes as an expression of their grief.

3. The cremation / internment

Once the body was interred a simple ceremony was performed over the grave to sow the earth with the fruits of its bounty, thus assuring the deceased a peaceful rest and allowing them to return to the land of the living.

Following the actual burial, friends and family would be invited to leave offerings of food and other gifts either in the grave or beside it. The women would leave the site first in order to prepare the large banquet held in honor of the deceased. The men would complete the funeral by placing a large slab, rock, or a stele over the grave.

Deities and Important Concepts

- Hades



The lord of the dead and ruler of the nether world.

The son of Cronus and Rhea. Brother to Zeus and Poseidon. His queen is Persephone.

Hades sits on a throne made of ebony, and carries a scepter. He also has a helmet, given to him by the Cyclopes, which can make him invisible.

Hades rules the dead and is thus the least liked of the gods. People avoided speaking his name lest they

attract his attention. When they prayed to him, they would bang their hands on the ground. The narcissus and the cypress are sacred to him.

Hades possesses the riches of the earth, and is thus referred to as 'the Rich One.'¹

- Persephone



The daughter of Zeus and Demeter. She was so beautiful that everyone loved her, even Hades.

One day when she was collecting flowers Hades opened the earth and abducted her. This caused her mother, Demeter to go into mourning and refuse to allow anything to grow.

Zeus demanded Persephone's release and Hades reluctantly agreed. However, he gave Persephone a Pomegranate from which she ate some seeds, and was thus bound to the underworld where she rules with Hades 1/3 of the year.

Her name can be loosely translated as "she who destroys the light."

- Hecate

Goddess of the crossroads who rescued Persephone from the underworld. She also has associations with ghost, infernal spirits, the dead and sorcery. Shrines to Hecate were placed at doorways to both homes and cities with the belief that it would protect from restless dead and other spirits.

Yew was considered especially sacred to her.

- Charon

Ferryman who brings the souls of the deceased who had the proper rites performed for them across the river Acheron. Part of the rites for the deceased was a coin to pay Charon for his service.

- Hermes

As the messenger of the gods it was his duty to guide the souls of the dead down to the underworld.

- Cerberus

The three-headed watchdog who guards the entrance to the lower world, Hades.

Originally depicted with fifty or hundred heads, Cerberus permitted new spirits to enter the realm of dead, but allowed none of them to leave.

Modern Adaptations

- As a part of the ceremony cry out an announcement to let people and the gods know that the deceased has crossed into Hades.
- Sprinkle salt water on the body of the deceased to purify it.
- Place a diadem or crown on the deceased to show the high regard held for the deceased. You can make the crown / diadem or buy a costume crown. A wreath makes a good diadem.
- Create a threnos as follows:
 - Use a simple dance step or have anyone that is able walk slowly around the coffin or cremation urn.
 - Sing a song (create a chant) with words like "When I remember __, I think of ____". Give an example. Then either let people use the same phrase filling in words or sing "When I remember __, I think of ____" and let a person fill in a phrase or word.
- Have people plant seeds of a food plant on the grave or if an urn is being used in pots.
- Have fruit that each person can leave at the grave site or put in a basket for the grieving family.
- Invoke Persephone as one who has seen the underworld and returned.

¹ "Hades." N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Dec. 2013. <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hades.html>

Sample Readings

Poem by Praxilla of Sicyon

Loveliest of what I leave behind is the sunlight,
and loveliest after that the shining stars and the moon's face,
but also cucumbers that are ripe, and pears, and apples.

Lament of Thetis and her sisters Nereides for Achilles : Homer, Iliad, XVIII, 52 – 64

Listen, sisters, daughters of Nereus, that you may hear the burden of my sorrows. Alas, woe is me, woe in that I have borne the most glorious of offspring. I bore him fair and strong, hero among heroes, and he shot up as a sapling; I tended him as a plant in a goodly garden, and sent him with his ships to Ilion to fight the Trojans, but never shall I welcome him back to the house of Peleus. So long as he lives to look upon the light of the sun he is in heaviness, and though I go to him I cannot help him. Nevertheless I will go, that I may see my dear son and learn what sorrow has befallen him though he is still holding aloof from battle.

Chrysa Kalliakati's Cretan lament for her deceased mother in Dzermiades, Crete²

Oh slowly, oh mournfully, I will begin lamenting shouting out your sorrows mother—one by one!
Oh slowly, oh mournfully I will begin lamenting
Singing about your sorrows, mother, crying for them,
Because at the prime of your youth, you clothed yourself in black
And then the darkness of your heart matched that of your dress;
Because at the prime of your youth fate had written
That you should lose our father, you should become a widow . . .
Ah how many times at midnight, after the roosters had crowed
Wouldn't you be coming down the road—pale and tired out! . . .
How many times at midnight, on nights steeped in darkness
Wouldn't you come home from the road—lips saddened and embittered!
There is no one else who knows your sorrows, the plight of your life.
I, alone, am left here, mother, to stand up by your side.
Women of Dzermiathes come, decked out in your best clothes
And give her your forgiveness now, from inside your heart.

I'll go to Argolia no more. Whom should I visit there?
My mother has traveled far away. To whom can I call out?

Eustathios : Hysmine and Hysminias

My son Hysminias was a welcome harbor to me, and I, like a ship in port, enjoyed calm, and was unruffled by the waves. But now the harbor is nowhere to be seen, and I, the ship, am driven out into the ocean— and overwhelmed by the waves.

Resources

- Ancient Greek Burial
<http://greekburial.webs.com/ceremony.htm>
- The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition
http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Ritual_Lament_in_Greek_Tradition.html?id=UW8pteWTc9oC

² A Fishman, Andrea. "Hrênoi to Moiróló gia: Female Voices of Solitude, Resistance, and Solidarity." Pg 271., n.d. Web. 24 Nov. 2013. http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/23ii/07_23.2.pdf