



Research Article

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Funerary Rituals in Greece: From Antiquity to the Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Fotios Chatzinikolaou¹, Kalliopi Chatzinikolaou^{2*}, Aspasia Deliligka and Polychronis Voultsos¹.¹Laboratory of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Faculty of Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.²Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.***Corresponding author:** Kalliopi Chatzinikolaou, Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.**Received Date:** August 26, 2024**Published Date:** September 12, 2024

Abstract

Background: Handling the body of the deceased is a social event which is almost solidly connected with the Orthodox Christian tradition in modern Greek society. In the last few years handling the body of the deceased was mainly constricted to the Orthodox funeral and burial until recently and that collides with the practical commands which reinforced the issue of cremation/ burning of the body of the deceased.

Methodology: The term "funeral" generally addresses the ensemble of the care and the ceremonies that are organized after a person's death by his family and his community. The Greek term "kedeia" (*kedeia*=funeral) derives from the Greek verb "κείδομαι" (*keidomai*) and it generally means attending to and caring. Even since Homer's times, the funeral for ancient Greeks included the prothesis (the laying out of the body), the *ekphora* (the funeral procession), the burial and the funeral supper. The funeral is ruled by the religious beliefs of the population much more in ancient times than modern times in Greece because there was no division between the political state and the official religion in ancient times unlike today. In most cases this procedure is diligently followed in Greece until today with some differentiating tensions however. Aims: The present study presents the funerary customs that are applied nowadays as they are dictated by the religious, political and legal framework in Greece.

Conclusion: The study also emphasizes the unbreakable connection with the past and the peculiarities that were dictated in each case by the prevalent circumstances.

Keywords: Funerary rituals in Greece, Burial, Grave, Nowadays, Past, COVID-19.

Introduction

Handling the body of the deceased is a social event which is almost solidly connected with the Orthodox Christian tradition in modern Greek society. In the last few years handling the body of the deceased was mainly constricted to the Orthodox funeral and burial until recently and that collides with the practical commands which reinforced the issue of cremation/burning of the body of the deceased. The cultural origins of Greek people, who are a native nation and live in the same land for centuries, depict an unbreakable connection to religion since there can be religion without a city

(polis) but there cannot be a city (polis) without religion during the Greek ancient period. The concept of sacred inspires, legally validates and generally defines the political and social life. On the contrary, today the official State and the official Church in Greece are two separate and independent –if not completely– entities.

This study connects the past and the present in the same country, whose distant past is important both for the country itself and for humanity in general. Peculiarities such as natural disasters, wars, and epidemics have existed and continue to exist. Dealing

with them was and is a necessity, but its management may differ. This is the main objective of this article.

From burial customs during the Antiquity to funeral and burial practice in Greek Orthodox Church and cemeteries

The term “funeral” generally addresses the ensemble of the care and the ceremonies that are organized after a person’s death by his family and his community. The word “funeral” derives from the Greek verb “κῆδομαι” (kedomai) and it generally means attending to and caring in modern Greek language. The words “κηδεμών” (kedemon), “κηδεμονία” (kedemonia), “ἐπικήδειος” (epikedeios) are derivatives of the word “κῆδομαι” meaning the same caring.

In ancient Greece, the funeral was a ceremony originating from the beliefs in the existence of life after death and the Underworld (Hades), (Homer, *Od.*, 24), [1-3, 7-9,11] and it included the prothesis (the deposition of the embellished body of the deceased in the death bed and the threnody of his beloved ones (Plato, *Leg.*, 959); the ekphora (the process of transport of the body of the deceased from his house to the place of the burial which took place after the prothesis and according to the ancient laws the burial procession had to pass silently through the streets of the city); the burial (the ceremony of interment or the burning of the body and the deposition of the bones in a tumulus) and the perideipnon [1,9]. The abovementioned stages according to the law of Solon in the 6th century B.C., which remained in force for a long time passing in the Roman law, are remarkably described in the Funeral Oration of Pericles about Classical Athens [12]. Usually, favourite objects of the deceased were placed in the casket for him to take with while in some areas coins or pounds are placed on the hands or the eyes of the deceased or simply inside the casket as fares to Charon. In most cases this procedure is diligently followed in Greece until today with some intense differentiating tensions, however. Funerary practices in ancient Greece were influenced both by the contemporary beliefs on the afterlife and by them on pollution, but also by the desire to decrease the cost of a funeral. The idea that death included a form of religious contamination for those involved was general during the Antiquity. Thus, deaths and births were not permitted in holy places like temples in order to prevent their contact with the gods until a proper purification had been undergone [9]. The Roman attitude towards the dead was also determined mainly by religion and by views on the concept of the pollution of death [10].

In archaeological research, it is a long-established fact that the material remains of graves inform us of only a small part of the processes relating to death in ancient society. Many aspects of the funeral ceremony remain unknown or difficult to interpret. But even accepting these limitations, it remains a fact that the cemeteries are an inexhaustible font of information about the cities in Antiquity. The manner of burial, the types of tombs, the kind and quantity of grave offerings, the funerary inscriptions and the reliefs speak to us of the society living in a typical Greek city.

Throughout the Hellenistic, Roman and early Christian years, the cemeteries spread, in accordance with ancient practice, to a large region, outside the city walls and the gates which led to the

major highway. The disposal of the dead was an ongoing problem, especially in Rome due to high population and epidemics. Only in exceptional cases, the burials or cremations could take place within the bounds of the city [10].

The Christian cemeteries developed in the same region, beginning in the mid-fourth century A.D. In the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the particular difficulties caused by the barbarian incursions and a new form of interment adopted, namely the transport and placing of the remains of martyrs in a city’s churches, led to the gradual abandonment of the cemeteries outside the city walls. The prohibition against burials within cities was lifted, and sporadic clusters of tombs sprang up in select areas within the walls.

The ongoing use of the same space for centuries, with the appearance of consecutive and multiple graves, is one of the main reasons for the destruction of many of the older graves of Hellenistic and early Roman times, with the result that these periods are less represented in the overall image of the cemeteries that we have today. The variety of burials, arranged loosely, with no general orientation, according to the possibilities offered by the available space, records information about social stratification and the financial means of the residents at various points in time. Research will usually connect the choice of one grave type, or the quantity and quality of grave goods, with the financial means or social status of the deceased, disregarding other parameters which are very difficult to determine, such as funeral rites, local custom, and ethical or religious beliefs.

Modern Greece embraces the practice of a simple burial. The deceased, who is properly dressed and embellished, is placed in a casket that is open according to tradition, unless it is not possible because of the condition of the body. The burial takes place 24 hours after the actual death in order to avoid cases of apparent death. The deceased is guarded by his beloved ones all night before the burial and that is a ritual which was dictated by folk thought, and it is maintained until today (vigil). The wailing, which was an important part of Greek tradition, was sad mourning songs sung by the beloved ones of the deceased and a professional mourner, a profession that no longer exists.

Nowadays, the body of the deceased is carried by his relatives or friends as an expression of their appreciation towards the deceased. During the exequies a Sanctus (trisagion) is chanted to confess the faith of the deceased. The church is a way station where a special funerary mass takes place in front of the casket. The deceased is placed in the church with his head facing the East. After the mass, the people present pay their last respects to the deceased in the church.

A short funerary mass is chanted once more before the burial. The deceased’s beloved ones kiss him for the last time before the casket is closed at the cemetery. The deceased is buried with his head facing the East (in hope of resurrection) and this is maintained since early Christian times. Wine is poured in the casket (in commemoration of the ancient libation) and then earth is thrown firstly by the priest and secondly by the people present.

After the burial, the mourners return to the deceased's house for the *perideipnon* which is the supper of consolation and it is accompanied by the coffee of consolation (Turkish/ Greek) along with cognac and rusks. Two days after the burial, ancient Greeks used to organize a memorial service called "ta trita", which is called today "ta triemera" and they symbolise the three-day stay of Jesus in the grave. Eight days after the burial, another memorial service which was called "ta ennata" took place at the place of the burial and today they are called "ta enniamera" (since the body of the deceased decays usually in nine days). Moreover, nowadays there are memorial services in 40 days (Jesus appeared resurrected 40 days after his death), in three months, in six months, in nine months (symbolisms of the Holy Trinity), in one year and afterwards, every year on the date of death. The deceased's relatives are in mourning for an indefinite time which is their decision and at that time women wear black clothes and men wear a black armband (at least until lately) [14].

The Canon Law of the East Orthodox Church renders great honours to the ceremony of church burial of Christians according to the doctrine and it forbids this ceremony to be performed by a priest without permission (decision for church burial) in certain cases: unchristened babies, excommunicated people, non-Christians in general, people who died in a duel or from wounds caused in a duel and people who committed suicide [14].

However, in cities of modern Greece nowadays there is a completely new image of the funeral compared to the abovementioned one which is mostly kept in the countryside. After his death, the deceased spends the night in the freezer of a hospital's mortuary or a cemetery without anybody waking at his bedside and usually he is not buried the next day. The neighbours refuse to participate in the procedure and most of the times they are not present at the funeral. The exequies does not take place at the deceased's house anymore but at a special place of a public cemetery near the place of burial. The place of the last goodbye is a faceless public cemetery and thus the event loses its uniqueness. The carriers of the body and the chanters are strangers. The deceased's relatives, friends and acquaintances are passively attending the proceedings. The priest is just as tired and indifferent as everybody. Therefore, the funeral in modern Greece ended up being a ceremony to support the deceased's relatives rather than an expression of prayer to the deceased himself. This whole scenario creates a traumatic emotional experience that everybody wants to forget. Nowadays, the *perideipnon* takes place at restaurants near the cemeteries [15].

Burial Places in Greece – Ancient and Modern Cemeteries

Graveyard or Cemetery is a place where the dead are buried. Apart from the early Historic times (9th-8th century BC) which was a period when the dead were buried in and out of the city walls, during the ancient Greek times, the nekropoleis (cities of the dead) were areas out of the settlements or the city walls since the dead were considered as impurity (*miasma*) that had to be

put at a special place. Ancient flat cemeteries depicted a special zoning which was destabilized from time to time according to what was needed (i.e. wars, invasion by enemies, epidemics [10]). The marking of the tombs was made according to the religious, social, economic and aesthetic habits and the prevalent legislation of that time (i.e. the law of Demetrius of Phalerum banned lavish tombs in Late Classical Athens [9]).

The Roman conquest and the incorporation of Greece into an enormous empire brought about a lot of changes in the administrative and economic organization of the province, accompanied by the influx of many new cultural elements, which came in contact with local customs and helped to form new social realities [24-25]. Thus, the condition seems to change drastically when Greece becomes a Roman province and then the Roman Law is applied to burial conditions as well. A very distinctive example is the case of fines that are inscribed on the Roman stone sarcophagus with punishments for tomb despoilments, the use of the tomb by others, etc. [10, 18-22].

At this period settlements are expanding adopting a more urban character and therefore the complex Greek society is impressed on the burial places and the burial customs. In nearly the entire Roman world, we find a preference for cremation in the first century A.D., while in the second and chiefly the third centuries, burial becomes the dominant practice. Each grave usually contained a single burial, but there were also double and multiple burials which, if concurrent, were probably due to violence. Where the burials were not concurrent, the more recent ones would displace the earlier ones, or these would be removed. Wooden couches or stretchers were often used to transport and place the deceased, as attested by the presence of nails and by the grooves caused by the funerary bed in the four corners of the floor of pit and cist graves [4-6, 19-20].

Alongside the common burial types, i.e. pit graves, which were shallow rectangular trenches dug in the ground, usually covered with slabs, and tile-covered graves, which were built out of roof tiles and comprise the most prevalent category, the Roman imperial period saw an increased preference for built cist graves, as well as for lavish marble sarcophagi and stone burial altars [13,18,21-22]. Children were sometimes buried in pointed-toe vessels (*enchytrismos* burials), while cremated bones were placed in urns. The most painstakingly produced monuments were the cist graves, used both for burials and as cremation pits. They were usually painted on the inside with a coat of colored plaster. The built cist graves were built out of rectangular bricks whitewashed on the interior. Later on, they were lined with marble slabs. In that case, they also included a marble or tile headrest. They were covered with slabs of marble or schist, and whitewashed, unworked stone. We also find a few cases with niches in the walls, in which grave goods were placed.

In the late Roman imperial period, and especially in the early Christian era, the vaulted or chamber tomb appeared. These graves had mixed masonry, and they were arranged in clusters of two or three, with partitions and, in some instances, a shared enclosure

(for family burials). From the late second to early sixth centuries A.D., a number of semi-underground funerary monuments appear, known as cubacula, with arches which cover the graves of entire families. Placing burials in lead sarcophagi was a practice common in some parts of the western empire, though not in the Greek world. In one of these sarcophagi coming from Thessaloniki in Macedonia, the deceased woman, aged 50-60, was wrapped in a gold-embroidered purple garment, which has been well-preserved. Of her body, certain portions of soft tissue, as well as part of her hair, remain. Chemical analysis has proven that an effort was made to embalm the body with plant substances. An isolated attempt at the mummification of bodies using calcium sulfate dihydrate (gypsum) was discovered in the eastern cemetery of Thessaloniki. This custom may be connected with the presence of foreigners who had settled in the city [23].

Today, the building of these places is not far from the last phases of Late Antiquity. According to the Codification of Basic Planning Legislation of Greece, issues concerning the foundation of cemeteries and restrictions on building around them are defined in the chapter "RESTRICTIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE NATURAL, CULTURAL AND RESIDENTIAL ENVIRONMENT", in Article 190 (Article 1 Compulsory Law 445/1968, Article 1 paragraph 1, 2 and 3 Compulsory Law 582/1968, Article 1 and 2 Presidential Decree 1128/1980). Generally, the manner of foundation and operation of cemeteries concerning issues of hygiene and planning is defined by Presidential Decrees that are issued after propositions made by the Minister of Health and Welfare and the Minister of Environment, Town Planning and Public Projects [16].

Usually, three years after the burial, the tomb is opened, and the bones are placed in a bone case at a charnel house which is at the cemetery.

In many European countries military cemeteries have been built and army officers who died in World War I and World War II are buried there. In Greece there are allied and German cemeteries. German cemeteries are in Maleme in Crete and in Dionysos in Attiki. Allied cemeteries are: "the Military Cemetery of Thessaloniki" (burials 1914-18 with British, French, Serbian, Italian and Russian sectors), "the British Cemetery of Mikra", "the Phaleron War Cemetery", etc.

The cemetery Yeni Mahala (new neighbourhood) is in the north part of Komotini, in North Greece, and Muslims who die in Greece are buried there.

12-05-2010. In the meeting of the Holy Synod of Greece on 12-05-2010, hierarchs resumed the previous decision of the Holy Synod, according to which the Church acknowledges burial as the only way of decomposition of the dead body of Orthodox people. The Church has no objection to the burning of the dead concerning heterodox people and people of other religions. In order to help the high priests, Hierarchy decided that a special committee of hierarchs, consisting of a few members, should define the basic criteria that have to be considered in order for them to deal with special cases and these criteria shall be discussed in the next Hierarchy [17].

In modern Greek society both church burial and cremation demand documents that define these procedures. Church burial demands the issuance of the next documents: Medical Death Certificate, Registry Death Certificate and Burial Licence (they are issued by the respective departments).

Burial Customs during COVID-19 Pandemic in Greece

The worldwide pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has also affected Greece and has brought about dramatic changes in all aspects of life [26]. At the beginning of the pandemic the Greek authorities announced restrictions for a number of activities including funeral and burial customs [27]. These restrictions have changed considerably to date [28-30].

The National Organization of Public Health (EODY) announced Instructions for the management of dead bodies with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 in order to minimize the transmission. Persons who may handle deceased persons with COVID-19, such as funeral directors and morgue attendants, must comply with the guidelines. All staff involved in the management of the dead must use appropriate personal protective equipment. The dead body is placed in a durable, waterproof, plastic bag with a zipper, if possible, and the surface of the bag is suggested to be disinfected with chlorine solution. Any aesthetic intervention on the body of the deceased such as washing, hairstyle, shave etc. is prohibited [31].

The family, if they wish, can see the deceased without touching and / or kissing him/her, always observing the basic precautions, including the minimum distance of 2 m from the deceased and between them [27-30].

Funerals continue to take place but there are differences such as the closed coffin during the ceremony and the limits on the presence of people to minimize the risk of infection. The maximum number of people who may attend a funeral or memorial service is specific and from one hundred at the beginning of limitations, it has been reduced to twenty. Funerals at outdoor public places are subject to the same limits. The gathering following a funeral or memorial service is prohibited. Burial grounds are open to the public within all local restriction tiers and only the closest relatives can attend the burial [27-30].

Conclusion

Death is not dealt with as the natural continuation of life but as a mere fact in Greek society like in any other western-type modern societies. Modern Greek people are not familiar with the phenomenon and fear of death and that results in modern funerary procedures being hasty and thus the feeling of grief cannot be experienced: everybody wants everything to be over quickly and without their participation.

Bringing out the religious element can prove to be very soothing for the group of mourners, since religion provides an answer to

the questions about blame, eventuality and meaning of death, questions that are always implicative with the questions about the meaning of life. Realizing the cycle of life and its implicative relation to the cycle of death is an important discovery that the mourners do and religion can help very much in this case. Naturally, all the above apply only to groups who have religious dedication, otherwise, the tap answers of religions to the questions about existence cannot have any effect at best or they can emotionally and morally hurt the mourners at worst.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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