

Death and Burial - Greek

Key Terms

Prothesis - During the preparation of the body in the Greek world, the deceased would be laid out for two days to receive mourners

Lament - A passionate expression of grief or sorrow

Ekphora - The funeral procession in ancient Greece

Kerameikos - An area of Athens that included the main burial ground outside the city

Stela (plural: stelai) - An area of Athens that included the main burial ground outside the city

Anthesteria - A Greek festival to Dionysus and the dead held over three days in late January or early February

Genesis - A Greek festival to the dead ancestors celebrated in late September



Preparation of the body

Death was an important issue to the Greeks. It was incredibly important that the dead were treated with respect and that everyone, no matter their social status or wealth, received a proper burial. Once the person had died, their eyes and mouth were closed. The body would be washed, perfumed and wrapped in a long white shroud. When this process was complete a coin would be placed on the deceased's mouth. This was payment for Charon, the boatman who ferried the dead from the land of the living to the underworld.

After the body was prepared the prothesis, or laying out, took place. The prothesis lasted two days and gave the friends and family of the deceased a chance to come and pay their respects. As a death automatically polluted the house, a bowl of water was placed outside for people to wash themselves as they left. Once respects had been paid, the women of the family would start their lament. To do this they would cut their hair, dress in shabby black clothing and wail beside the deceased, beating their chests and flailing their arms.

Festivals for the dead and the ancestors.

Beyond private funerals Athens also celebrated other festivals to the dead, as it was vital that their memory be maintained. If grave stelai were left to become overgrown or damaged, the memory of that person would be damaged.

The first, called the Anthesteria, took place in late January and lasted three days. The festival celebrated the maturing of wine and was held in honour of Dionysus. The first day was believed to be a day the dead rose from the underworld and roamed the earth. During this day, the wine from the previous year was opened and libations were poured to Dionysus. On the second day, groups would gather for drinking contests and families would pour libations on the graves of their ancestors. The final day was dedicated to the dead. Families of the dead would make offerings to the god Hemes, as he was the only god, along with Dionysus, who could travel in both the world of the living and the world of the dead. Unlike normal offerings, the living were not allowed to eat any of the food. The ceremony marked the period that the dead had to leave Athens and return to the underworld.

The second of these celebrations was the Genesis, which took place in late September. During this day, the Athenians would decorate the graves of the deceased with ribbons and offer food and blood sacrifice in honour of all their dead ancestors.

Key Knowledge

Funeral Procession

Before dawn on the third day, the ekphora took place. This was the funeral procession from the house of the deceased to the burial ground. Depending on the wealth of the family and distance they travelled, the deceased would either be carried on a wagon or carried by pallbearers. The procession included women, children and men from the family,



Burial of the body

It was vital that the final resting place of the deceased was outside the city to remove the chance of religious pollution. Additionally, burial outside the city reduced the spread of any disease. In Athens the main burial ground was in Kerameikos, an area just outside the northwest walls of the city. Once the body reached the burial ground, it was either buried or cremated. In a cremation, a pyre would be built and the deceased laid on top. It would then be lit. After the body had burned, the ash would be collected in an urn and given to the family. This would then be placed in a shrine or grave. To assist the deceased in their journey to the underworld, the family would add burial gifts to the grave.

This may be an item that was important to the deceased in life or food for their journey. Depending on the wealth of the family, a stela may be set up for the deceased. This was important as it was vital that the deceased be remembered. If a family neglected the deceased's grave, they would dishonour their family memory. A stela may be equated to a modern gravestone and acted as a monument to the dead. The family of the deceased would employ a sculptor to carve a relief on the stela that reflected the deceased in life. This could be a display of the family's wealth and status as much as a commemoration of the deceased.

Once the deceased had been buried or cremated a sacrifice would take place. This differed from a normal sacrifice, as the blood of the victim was released on the earth as an offering to Hades and Persephone. Maintaining respect was very important to the Greeks. Once the deceased had been buried a period of mourning began that lasted for thirty days. There were three days in which the family were obliged to visit the deceased: the third, ninth and thirteenth. After this, the family visited the grave on an annual basis.

Possible Questions

- Source A** depicts a funerary procession. Identify two types of participants in the this procession. (2)
- State Two things that happened during the preparation of the body before the procession took place. (2)

Sources

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| Prescribed | Further |
| None | Greek Funerary stela |