

## Between Hypnos and Thanatos: Teaching Greek Death

For most, death is an uncomfortable subject that can trigger intense feelings of grief and unsettling thoughts of one's own mortality. Yet, much of what we know about ancient societies comes from funerary contexts, making discussions of death in the classroom unavoidable. As archaeologists we are aware that our 'classroom' extends beyond the walls of the university. Much of our teaching takes place in museums, where we study death-related objects, and on archaeological sites, where human remains are excavated and analyzed. Whether we are teaching in the field or a lecture hall, our challenge remains the same: how do we, as stewards of Greek culture, effectively convey the Greek experience of death to our students?

This panel, consisting of five speakers, emerges from current archaeological research conducted at the University of Virginia. Its focus is on approaches to teaching the Greek experience of death. Since the modern western experience of death is markedly different from the ancient one, Greek funerary customs are often foreign to students and difficult for them to grasp. The general aim of these papers is to offer pedagogical strategies that make the subject of ancient death both accessible and relevant to our modern student audience.

Although the subject of Greek death is multifaceted, the panel will present five thematic case studies. The first, *Teaching Death On-Site* addresses the difficulties surrounding instruction outside of the classroom. Although much of our excavated material comes from burials, it is often stripped of its context in museum exhibits. How do we help students to connect object and meaning (e.g., lekythos to funeral ritual)? How do we bring the excavated cemetery back to life? Or navigate the necropolis of an ancient site? The second, *Perceptions of Death and Disease* endeavors to familiarize students with the ways in which the ancient Greeks conceptualized health and disease. The Hippocratic corpus describes diseases that commonly afflicted the

ancient Greeks and suggests methods for their treatment. Evidence of both diseases and associated treatments are present in the skeletal remains of ancient Greeks, and these indicators provide us with a glimpse of what life was like for Greek peoples. Modern students live in a world where severely disease-stricken individuals are typically confined to hospitals and the process of death itself is sterile and institutionalized. How do we help students to understand and relate to the realities of death and disease in the ancient Greek world? The third, *Greek and Etruscan Death and the Afterlife*, examines the relationship between Greek and Etruscan beliefs regarding the deceased. What was the Etruscans' relationship to Greek culture, and to what extent did the Greeks influence Etruscan mortuary practices and funerary iconography? It is often difficult for students to understand that cultural influence does not imply cultural duplication. Through the examination of iconography and other archaeological evidence from Greek and Etruscan contexts, strategies for the identification of areas of influence and cultural individuality are provided. The fourth, *Representations of the Athenian 'Wedding in Hades'* introduces students to a funerary concept that is uniquely Greek and was an important tradition in Athens during sixth and fifth centuries BC. What is the 'Wedding in Hades,' and who are the brides, grooms and other participants? In Greek tragedy, such 'brides' and 'grooms' of death are easily identifiable, but are we able to recognize such figures in the Attic visual sphere (i.e., sculpture, vase-painting)? This presentation will demonstrate the importance of teaching both the details of an object and its overall archaeological context in order to avoid misinterpreting the evidence. Finally, *Hero Cult: Reconceptualizing Death* tackles Greek cosmology. Hero cult provides the perfect example of how Classical Greeks restructured their belief system to fit the 'Mycenaean' dead into their worldview. Drawing on evidence of heroes from Homeric epics

and hero-worship from Archaic and Classical material culture found in Mycenaean tombs, this paper explores the ways in which we can make this 'invented tradition' accessible to students.

## Teaching Death On-Site

Material culture is a fundamental part of understanding ancient Greek death. The sites, objects, and images revealed as a result of archaeological exploration (both excavations and surveys) provide information that might otherwise not be gleaned by reading ancient texts alone. Yet, as teachers of the ancient past how are we best to utilize the seemingly endless examples of Greek vases on display in museums, or to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a necropolis? And, perhaps even more importantly, how can students benefit from exposure to them? This paper explores methods for teaching ancient Greek death on-site. It will emphasize both the role of the museum and of the archaeological site as places of learning beyond the everyday Classics classroom. Study abroad, field schools, and other types of ‘travel’ can, on the one hand, build on the cultural basics gleaned from reading the epics of Homer or the tragedies of Aeschylus and, on the other, question or confirm them. Students should be taught to explore the material evidence of death in ancient Greece with such thinking in mind. Furthermore, they should be made aware of the ethical issues surrounding the handling and displaying human remains, whether in the private space of a storage depot or the public realm of a museum. Here a series of case studies will be presented to emphasize the variety of pedagogical settings and possibilities.

The first case study derives from study abroad teaching in Greece. Using the Athenian Kerameikos and its accompanying museum, as well as other museums in Athens, students can be brought directly into a city of the dead and encouraged to recontextualize the associated finds. The importance of funerary ritual becomes immediately evident when students are asked to think

in terms of grave good assemblages and images that portray the treatment of the body of the deceased (e.g. prothesis) or post-funerary rituals (e.g. adorning the grave).

A second case study derives from study abroad teaching in England. Installations at the British Museum (London), Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), and Ure Museum (Reading) reveal different strategies for displaying ancient Greek death as a cultural phenomenon. These can be viewed comparatively, and also discussed in relation to other cultures (e.g. Egyptian, Etruscan). Another London museum, Sir John Soane's Museum, provides an excellent opportunity to consider the modern reception of ancient death in a Neoclassical setting, complete with Greek funerary vases, Roman cinerary urns, and a massive Egyptian sarcophagus from the reign of Seti I.

The third case study derives from excavations and field surveys in Lycia, Turkey. Such hands-on engagement with ancient materials is ideal as it places students in direct contact with uncovering, handling, and interpreting skeletal remains and grave goods. Also from this region come an abundance of tombs, sarcophagi, and inscriptions that can be encountered first-hand, as well as museum displays that recreate the world of the dead in unique ways.

## Perceptions of Death and Disease

The Hippocratic corpus describes diseases that commonly afflicted the ancient Greeks and suggests methods for their treatment. Evidence of both diseases and associated treatments are present in the skeletal remains of ancient Greeks, and these indicators provide us with a glimpse of what life was like for Greek peoples. For example, trephination (the removal of a piece of cranial bone) was a common ancient remedy for head trauma, which could either cure the individual or induce death due to surgical mishap or subsequent infection. If a student, on the other hand, were to incur a head injury, he or she would be placed in a hospital under observation and subjected to a battery of radiographic tests. Furthermore, modern students live in a world where severely disease-stricken individuals are typically confined to hospitals and the process of death itself is sterile and institutionalized. In the ancient Greek world, severely disease-stricken individuals were cared for by their families and the process of death took place in the home where close family members tended to the corpse from the moment of death until the burial of the body. Therefore, through a series of comparisons between ancient Greek and American societies, students can be introduced to the similarities and differences that exist between the deathways of the two cultures. To ensure that students digest and engage with the presented material, these comparisons are ideally followed by thought-provoking writing exercises. Thus, this paper will provide teaching strategies, paradigm comparisons and writing assignments aimed at helping students understand and relate to the ways in which the ancient Greeks conceptualized health and disease.

## Greek and Etruscan Death and the Afterlife

The topic of death, and the related issue of the afterlife, is particularly relevant in a discussion of Etruscan material culture. The majority of extant archaeological Etruscan material comes from funerary contexts and addresses the Etruscans' conceptualization of death and the afterlife. This paper discusses ways to introduce students to Etruscan civilization using iconography and material culture from funerary contexts. Who were the Etruscans and what was the Etruscans' relationship to the Greek world? To what extent did the Greeks influence Etruscan cultural practices and iconography involving death and the underworld? How does an examination of this relationship address the larger issues of cultural identity, change, exchange, and influence?

One of the most important elements in presenting this material to students will involve a discussion of the misconception that cultural influence implies cultural duplication. Exact cultural duplication never occurs. While the Etruscans readily accepted certain mythological stories and specific visual conventions from the Greeks, these elements from Greek culture were adopted for the Etruscans' own purposes. Emphasis here will be on the idea that the Etruscans still retained their own belief system and their own cultural identity, while still remaining subject to influences from external sources. For example, distinctively Greek mythological characters began to appear in funerary iconographic contexts, such as the Etruscan equivalent to the Greek rulers of the underworld, Hades and Persephone, while, concurrently, enough cultural chthonic material remained distinctly Etruscan, such as the inclusion of the unique chthonic underworld helpers Vanth and Charun. Vanth and Charun have no corresponding Greek forms.

Students will be exposed to these topics through the use of various types of Etruscan and Greek archaeological evidence, including engraved mirrors, wall paintings, relief sculpture, and vase painting. Modern students live in an increasingly connected world, where cultural influence extends to areas around the globe, not just in neighboring communities. An examination of Greek and Etruscan cultural interactions will help students to examine ways in which influence and exchange affects their own lives and perceptions.

## Representations of the Athenian “Wedding in Hades”

In Greek antiquity, the rites of marriage and death were closely related. Upon the death of an unwed girl or boy, these two antithetical ceremonies appear to have been celebrated simultaneously, and evidence for their conflation can be found easily in various literary sources. In the early Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the story describes the origins of the Eleusinian mysteries and begins with the original “Wedding in Hades”—the sanctioned abduction of Persephone. The later tragic plays of Aeschylus and Euripides dramatically refer to the Underworld as “the bridal chamber of the earth” (Aesch. *Pers.* 624; Eur. *HF* 107), and, in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the burial chamber for the Antigone is called her wedding chamber (*nymphaion*) (Soph. *Ant.*, 891). Aside from equating nuptial and morbid settings, tragedians also brought many characters to the stage that lamented their fate as brides or grooms of death. Some of these examples include: Iphigenia, Cassandra, Glauke, Antigone, Polyxena, the sons of Medea and those of Megara, and Haemon, the youngest son of Creon. With so many figures securely identified, the practice of marrying in Hades appears to be commonplace in the fifth century BC.

In order to teach this Attic custom and in order for the student to fully comprehend the wedding in Hades, it is critical that the instructor present the archaeological evidence available as well as the literary. Even the most famous visual example of a bride of Hades, the grave marker of “Phrasikleia”, is identified through an accompanying inscription where one reads that she will forever be called a maiden or unwed girl (*kore*). What are the other types of visual evidence available in ancient Greek art? If text is not included or preserved, how can one understand that a figure in vase-painting or sculpture is meant to represent a bride or groom of death? What are the defining characteristics of these figures or the overall scene? Do mythological characters make

an appearance and, if so, how are they identified and how prevalent are they? This presentation will review the types of archaeological material available, demonstrate the importance of utilizing all forms of evidence, and it will emphasize how one must teach the details of an object as well as its overall archaeological context.

## Hero Cult: Reconceptualizing Death

This paper introduces the idea of teaching Greek hero cult to students who primarily come from westernized monotheistic religious traditions. The concept of polytheism and the different ranks of worship within it is a daunting task to comprehend let alone teach. One of the hardest distinctions to make is that between a hero and a god. Too easily students of ancient religion compare heroes to saints. Heroes, like saints, were something between divine and mortal, but meant to be revered with the same amount of deference as gods. A hero was a mortal who then became revered after death. Many heroes were historical figures. Many Greek heroes were figures from the Trojan War; they were figures who lived in Bronze Age Mycenae and Sparta and Troy.

Hero cult provides the perfect example of how Classical Greeks restructured their belief system to fit the 'Mycenaean' dead into their worldview. Greek literature and remains of their physical structures are riddled with allusions and references to hero cult, all of which are valuable teaching tools. Ancient tangible evidence for epic heroes exists in the form of the well-known Homeric epics, which boasted of incredible warriors who were sons of gods, and the massive bee-hive tombs that held the remains of Bronze Age Mycenaean aristocrats and royalty. Hero cult revolved around the hero's tomb, and there is much evidence that Greeks from the Archaic and Classical periods revered the mysterious recipients of Mycenaean graves and offered them votives worthy of heroes. Who were these heroes, and how were they worshipped? What role did the worship of heroes play in the daily life of the Greek citizen? How do we help students comprehend this 'invented tradition'?

Drawing on evidence of heroes from Homeric epics and hero-worship from Archaic and Classical material culture found in Mycenaean tombs, this paper explores the ways in which we can make hero cult and its role in Greek religion accessible to students. Effective tools include comparisons between ancient and modern heroes, which enable students to better understand the reception of the epic hero over time and the creation of hero cult.